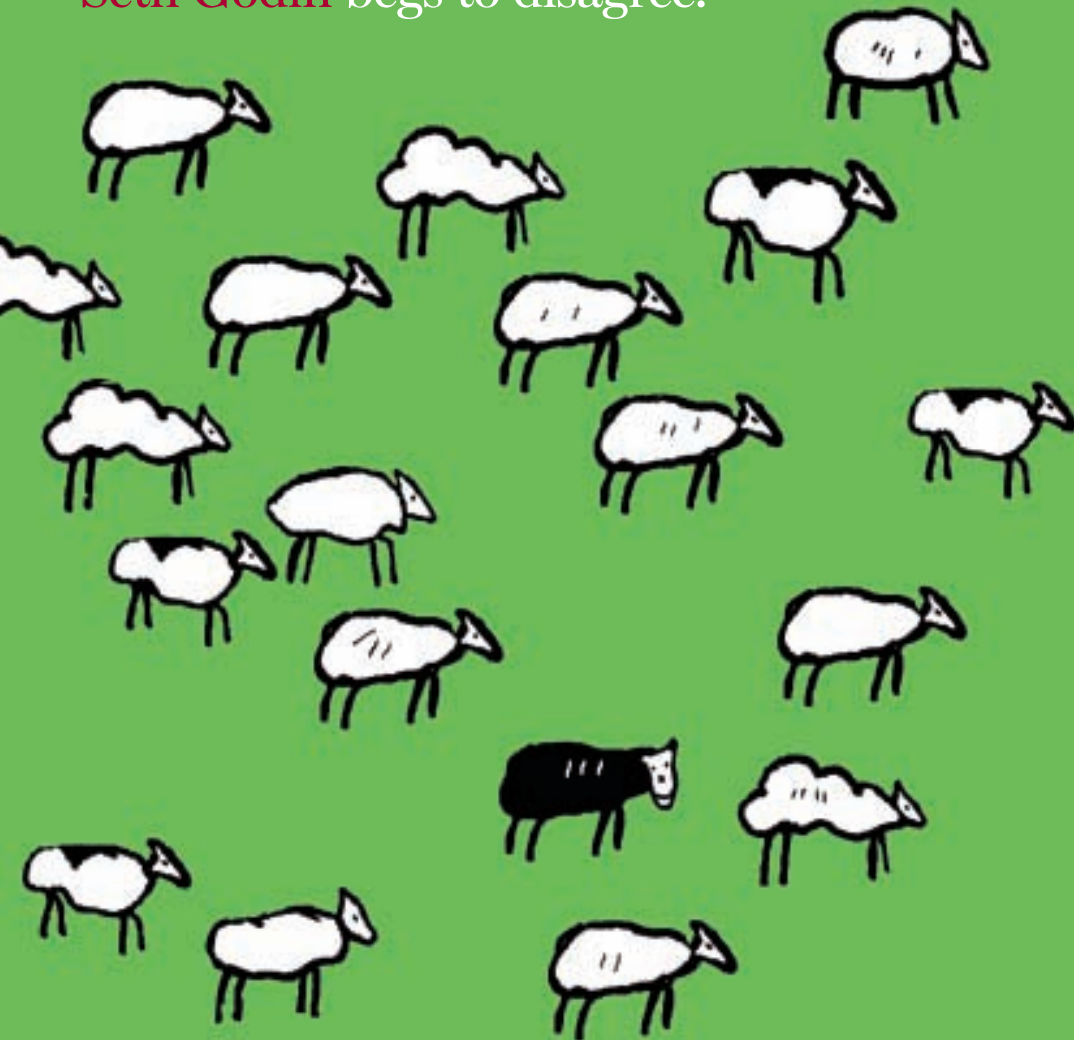


Do you know what you do for a living?
If you answered photography,
Seth Godin begs to disagree.



Be remarkable

MARKETING GURU SETH GODIN ON EARNING YOUR LIVING

INTERVIEW BY SARAH PETTY, CR.PHOTOG., CPP

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have been a big fan of marketing guru Seth Godin since I discovered him a few years ago, so when the opportunity to talk with him for PP's special marketing focus presented itself, I was more than enthusiastic.

To speak to someone who understands what it takes to create a successful business and to ask him industry-specific questions was thought-provoking to say the least. I wanted to throw him some of the questions I hear from fellow photographers: How can I get my new business off the ground? How can I deal with the growing competition? How can a small photography business take advantage of the Web? Not only were his answers better than I had anticipated, but after listening to the interview again later, I realized how insightful his thoughts really are.

What I love about Godin is that he doesn't sugarcoat the reality of business. He doesn't pretend there's a magic answer or that everyone will succeed. My favorite thing he said was, "No one is entitled to stay in business." I wholeheartedly agree. I hope you enjoy his thoughts, and if you haven't read his books on marketing—his latest bestseller is "Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us" (Portfolio/Penguin Publishing Group)—I highly recommend you make that investment. —S.P.

Sarah Petty: *The title of your book "The Dip" refers to the long slog between just starting out in business and attaining success. With digital technology spurring quasi-pro photographers to enter the field, how can a small photography business get through the dip?*

Seth Godin: *Let me be really clear. If you are a mediocre photographer, or you have mediocre skills in dealing with clients ... if what you offer is a service for people who aren't clever enough to take their own pictures, you are doomed. D-O-O-M-E-D.*

S.P.: *What about the good photographers?*

S.G.: Since Matthew Brady—the guy who took pictures of Lincoln—for 150 years, photographers have made a great living when they had no better technology than everybody else. Making a great living at photography has never been about access to the tools. Look at someone like Jill Greenberg, probably the most famous young photographer working today in a commercial space. Jill is making hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars a year using tools that anyone could buy at B&H Photo for \$10,000. So this has never been about access to tools. Just like it doesn't make sense for real estate agents to get all upset when people can search for houses on their own on the Internet, it doesn't make any sense to be distraught because someone can buy a digital camera for \$59.

So it turns out this is good news, in the same way that the presence of desktop publishing tools was good news for great designers. Because in the old days, if you needed typesetting, you had to go to a typesetting shop, and there were plenty of mediocre typesetting shops. It was hard to stand out against that background if you were a very good typesetting shop because some people just wanted the cheapest one.

The designers who could survive were the artists, the brilliant ones who did business in a way that made their clients super delighted. To photographers I say, "Are you doing photography worth paying for? If the consumer's choice is between doing it himself for free or paying a professional hundreds or thousands of dollars, what is it about what you're doing that's worth paying for? I'll tell you this—it's not because you can take a pretty good photo."

S.P.: *I see great photographers doing unique things, but they don't know how to spread the word. Your comments?*

S.G.: Because they are not grasping the fact

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Godin believes in forming tribes, and that photographers are in a unique position to take advantage of that practice.

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—GODIN

yet that their job is to learn how to spread the word, that what they do for a living is not take pictures, because now anyone can take pictures. What they do for a living is create an experience and an approach that is so remarkable people can't help but talk about it. What they do for a living is create interactions between themselves and the people they are taking pictures of. Or to create souvenirs of what they do so that people can't help but talk about it.

S.P.: *In any sizeable market, there are hundreds of photographers listed in the Yellow Pages doing every photographic specialty. How*

can a studio win out over the competition?

S.G.: Once everyone is trying to fit in, doing the same thing, then only a fool would choose to do that. There is nothing written down that says that that kind of photographer is entitled to make a living. Because they're not. No one is entitled to make a living. How do you become somebody who is able to create a different sort of feature, a different sort of environment? How do you become the Tiffany's of wedding photographers? How do you become someone who goes to some edge where there is no one else like you? And that people will cross the street, pay

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extra and wait in line because what you are doing is different, and better, and more remarkable than everybody else in the Yellow Pages? If your strategy is to just have a bigger ad in the Yellow Pages and add more "A"s to the name of your business so you'll be listed first, I don't think that is defensible.

S.P.: *So you make your brown cow purple, and then down the road are 100 other purple cows following you ...*

S.G.: Of course there will be. When I wrote "Permission Marketing" 10 years ago, a lot of stuff I did was breakthrough stuff that had never been done in business book publishing, and now everybody does it. If I had just said, well I'm entitled to go on this forever, I would have lost. The point is that you have to constantly reinvent the work that you do and the way that you are doing it to build a community of people who want to come back to you. The first step is being remarkable. The second step is building a

tribe. Finding a connection to a group of people. If the little league is so blown away by the work you do for them that they keep telling other teams and the teams then make it a tradition to do their photos with you, you have a couple years of insulation before [what you're doing] becomes boring, and then they are going to look for someone else.

S.P.: *In their book "Positioning: the Battle for Your Mind," Al Ries and Jack Trout talk about being first to own a given position in the consumer's mind. Is being first enough?*

S.G.: Jack's a smart guy, but this is something different. There's no doubt that the fourth photographer who tries to claim a position in someone's mind will have a very hard time doing it. What I am talking about is the dynamics and geography of tribal relationships. I am talking about the fact that there are communities out there, countless communities, and photography is this magical tool that gives people a physical object

that lets them connect with people in their community. And if you are the channel for that connection, then they will come back to you to make the connection again. Right?

The engagement ring is a fine example. It has no utility whatsoever, but women use it to tell a story. They say, "He got it at Tiffany's," which is shorthand for "He's crazy enough about me to spend three times more than he should have." Tiffany's was not the first jewelry store. So this isn't a positioning thing as much as it is a souvenir for the tribe, a short-hand way for the tribe to talk to itself, where you are the middleman delivering something of real value that no one else could copy.

The point I am making is about the sense of entitlement. In every industry, when the industry is under stress and changing, people who have worked hard to get there, who have already crossed one dip and have enough money to be in the Yellow Pages, who have enough money to make a living at this, they get angry because they feel entitled to keep their gig. And,

Photo by John Abbott



Godin's "Purple Cow" was a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller.

"Once everyone is trying to fit in, doing the same thing, then only a fool would choose to do that."

other people, the insurgents, come along and change the rules. And the insurgents win.

S.P.: *How does a small studio business use the Web to generate business from the tribe in a limited area?*

S.G.: A lot of what you read and hear about the Web doesn't apply because you don't want the world-wide web, you want the county-wide web. The wrong question to ask is *how do I get the Web to make the business I have defined work*. The right question is *how do I define a business that works well with the Web*. Very different thing.

I heard about a photographer in Chicago who recently offered to make a free portrait, for use online or off, for anyone who was unemployed. In one day he made hundreds of portraits and posted them on the Web if

the person wanted, and e-mailed it to the subject. The act of doing that is an act of generosity, but it's also a way of spreading the word that you know how to take really good portraits, and here are all these examples. You can't *buy* people's attention anymore, so this guy is *earning* their attention.

If you regularly do things that are worthy of becoming viral, connecting to people so that they spread the word for you, that's Step 1. Step 2 is to say we're not going to make the most of our business from strangers, but from friends and the friends they introduce us to.

Let's say I was a wedding photographer. I'd host a club for 10 or so newly engaged women. It would be a place for them to gossip and exchange information about florists, jewelers, venues, caterers, because brides understand that everyone gets bored with them after a

while, but if they could get in a room with a bunch of other brides, that would be priceless. I'd serve coffee in a comfortable setting, decorated with my gorgeous photography, and give advice if asked. Membership would change over time, and alumni of the club would tell any newly engaged friend, "You have to go join. I'm still friends with all of these women who got married at the same time I did."

This way, I would earn permission to talk with 10 or more new brides every month by giving them something without asking for anything in return. And if they were looking for someone they trusted to shoot their weddings, well, there you go. ■

For more of Seth Godin's insights on business and marketing, visit www.sethgodin.com.

For more from Sarah Petty, check out www.thejoyofmarketing.com.