

Be Stronger in 2010

Professional Photographer hands out thousands of dollars in prizes to help subscribers revamp businesses

Professional Photographer recently gave away several thousand dollars in products as part of a contest themed “Be Stronger in 2010.” With the goal of helping the readers revamp their businesses, the magazine partnered with GP Albums, LustreColor, Photobiz and Ron Nichols Digital Solutions to offer a variety of prizes specifically designed for pro photographers. The contest’s grand prize winner, Phil Merutka of Memories to Treasure Photography in Chicago, took home \$10,000 in products and services—\$2,500 from each sponsor. Addressing four different areas of Merutka’s business, the prizes have offered the wedding and portrait photographer a chance at totally renovating his operation.

“There is no doubt that these prizes will help improve my sales and help me grow my business,” says Merutka. “Overall, it’s an amazing gift to be given. This is a job I truly love, and these prizes make my job easier. It’s just a good feeling being able to make people happy doing work that I enjoy. “

Online Optimized

Merutka has a new, search-engine-optimized website from Photobiz. The site offers a combination of graphically pleasing Flash animation with searchable HTML code. It also includes mobile-device-compatible versions so that on-the-go customers can view it.

“For a lot of photographers, especially those who don’t have a studio, their website is their presentation space,” says David Hutnik of Photobiz. “It’s critical that this space represents the photographer well and provides a good connection with clients.”

Hutnik stresses that today’s photographers should take into account all the different ways that their clients get information, including traditional websites, mobile-enabled sites, social networking, blogs and other multimedia communications. The key is to present a cross-platform presence that can engage clients on multiple levels.

Hutnik points out that search engine optimization (SEO) is a critical part of any enhanced Web presence. SEO has expanded far beyond the implementation of key words. It's a constantly evolving strategy that relies on website construction, content organization and the infusion of new, relevant content. Many photographers rely heavily on Flash animation to pack some visual punch into their websites. However, Flash isn't picked up well by search engines, so Flash-heavy sites have traditionally been more difficult to locate in key word searches. Hutnik recommends building sites with metatags containing key words on every page so that the page itself is still visible to the search engines' Web crawlers. It's also helpful to index a site's content to help the search engines locate it more easily.

Social networking, too, plays a role in SEO and in connecting with potential clients. The merits of Facebook are no longer a hidden secret, and Twitter is a growing force for driving Web traffic to a main website or blog. Of course, all this social networking can get overwhelming. Hutnik recommends a few applications to help manage it all:

www.tweetdeck.com

www.seesmic.com

www.hootsuite.com

Enhanced Workflow and Sales Processes

If his new website does its job and brings customers through the door, Merutka can service them with a complete workflow package from Ron Nichols Digital Solutions. The package includes Nichols' award-winning ProSelect Pro software and a set of automated palettes designed to make the image processing, enhancement and sales procedure an integrated, linear process.

The key, says Ron Nichols, is to establish a system that's as integrated as possible, where everything works together seamlessly so that all you have to is impart your creative skill. "The problem with most digital workflows is that photographers do the same task over and over throughout the process," he says. "Photographers need a comprehensive system that lets them do a process once, and then the system will carry it on throughout the entire project. Ideally, the

system should culminate in a robust sales presentation so that photographers can show the actual products in real size. Consumers do better with products they can visualize clearly.”

Nichols system uses hard coding to control Photoshop so that photographers just have to click, paint and present. Aside from ProSelect Pro, he set up Merutka with PS Composite Album, Collection I, PS Composite Album Collection II, PS Room View Collection I, PS Room View Collection II, Ron Nichols Studio Retouching Palette, ProSelect Video Tutorial Palette, My Actions Palette, Fine Art Enhancement Palette, Texture Set 1, Texture Set 2, Tim Walden’s B/W, Darkroom Palette, John Hartman’s QP Palette and Life’s Highway Production Music Collection.

Promoted Presentation Products

Speaking of sales, Merutka now has more options to vend. After initial conversations with GP Albums, he is looking to upgrade his album offerings with what he calls “the Rolls Royce of photo albums,” GP’s hand-made leather albums. Based on consultations with GP, he is considering adding an album option for family and child portrait sessions, probably in packages that can be added to over time as the family grows.

To help photographers maximize their profits from every event, every session, Anne Henning of GP Albums encourages photographers to pitch packages based on a central design. For example, rather than just selling a wedding album, a photographer can add smaller books for parent and grandparent albums. The basic design work has already done, so you’re usually just adjusting or subtracting a few pages. And replica albums can be another profitable-yet-affordable option. Many companies offer discounts on replicas. GP Albums, for example, does theirs at 10 percent off.

Regardless of their specific product choice, Henning urges photographers to put some sort of professional-grade product in their customers’ hands. Pro products display the photography much better, and they are a more upstanding reflection on you as a professional. “Keep in mind that your customers associate all of your materials with your business,” she says. “So you don’t want to just hand them a box with a bunch of photos in it; you want something with solid

construction that won't fall apart in a couple of years, something that will not only be a nice keepsake for your clients but a great advertising piece for your business as well.”

Printing Out Profits

With \$2,500 in credit at LustreColor, Merutka is looking forward to augmenting his print offerings. In particular, Lustre's design-print-bind service will allow him to upload images to customized galleries, and then completely automate the image selection and printing process of proof books for his wedding clients.

Ken Wilson of LustreColor points out that professional photography studios can set themselves apart by offering a combination of high-quality products and ordering flexibility. As the lab and printing services have evolved in recent years, online upload and ordering options have become an increasingly vital part of the business. Many photographers also want to offer the ease of online ordering without giving up quality control.

LustreColor's solution has been to develop a proprietary e-commerce system that allows either the photographers or the client to order images for proof books. Once the client is ready for an album, she can select images, and the photographer receives her choices via a notification from LustreColor. The photographer can then establish what kind of album the client wants and place an order with the lab. Lustre's in-house designers produce the book, and customer service specialists ship the product. The system minimizes post-production workflow and streamlines interaction with the client, something many photographers find helpful.

<http://www.photobiz.com/>

<http://www.ronnichols.com/>

<http://www.gpalbums.com/index.html>

<http://www.lustrecolor.com/>