

Josh and Michelle Beller had been successful independent photographers when they decided to join forces to create Mi Belle Wedding Photography. Their complementary talents make for a sum greater than its parts.

WEDDINGS

By Jeff Kent

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Josh and Michelle Beller had been successful independent photographers when they decided to team up five years ago. Now married with a baby, the Bellers own Mi Belle Wedding Photography in Westlake Village, Calif. Creative teamwork comes naturally to them in business and photography as well as in their personal life.

Josh takes the lead in business development, managing the studio and marketing campaigns. Michelle's focus is the studio's image. She makes sure Mi Belle's images, album design and other products remain consistent with the signature look of its brand. She's also the one who deals with wedding blogs, social media, magazines and other media outlets.

At the beginning of their joint venture, the duo exhibited at a local bridal show, and it paid serious dividends. In both of their first two years together, the Bellers shot 100 events with the help of associate photographers. They realized they couldn't keep up that pace, even with associates, but they didn't want to lose the revenue. Over the next three years, they raised Mi Belle's prices in two significant steps, while reducing the number of bookings. With each price jump, the Bellers revised the studio's branding to appeal to an ever more upscale clientele. They made changes to the studio's marketing materials, website, products and approach to client service to reflect those revisions.

"The idea was to steadily increase prices until we started attracting clients who really appreciate what we do, and who give us the freedom to do it," says Josh. "As we've evolved to appeal to new clients, it's changed

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our approach to the work and our clients' approach to us. Clients in the lower price ranges are spending what amounts to an enormous amount of money to them. Because of that, they want to make sure they're getting their money's worth, and they tend to micro-manage the process. Our new clients are paying *us* to be the professionals, and they trust us to deliver the creativity they hired us for. Those are the clients we enjoy working with."

Of course, raising prices was risky, considering the pinch of the recession on so many people. The Bellers' objective was not only to weather the economic storm, but to reach their ideal business model as well. So along with upping prices, they built more flexibility into their packages. They certainly didn't want to price themselves out of the market entirely. "The recession was a huge influence on our decision making," says Josh. "People were still having nice weddings and spending money on photography, but they were more *value* conscious."

One solution for Mi Belle was to introduce a shoot-only option, charging a fee for the photographers' time and artistry, but no albums or other products. To sweeten the



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deal, those clients can return at any time for albums or prints without paying a penalty for the delay. The photographers were somewhat hesitant about this option, but it has helped them stay competitive in the market without lowering their standards.

A year-and-a-half after adopting the shoot-only option, all but one couple have returned to order an album; the income from album sales wasn't lost, just deferred. "Clients liked the idea of flexibility," says Michelle. "They *wanted* an album, but wanted to be sure they could afford it. They



really appreciated our willingness to work with their budgets."

Josh adds, "When circumstances change in the marketplace, it's important to reset your thinking."

The Bellers are riding a wave of good press that began a couple years ago when they photographed the wedding of Andrew Firestone—the third bachelor on ABC's reality show *The Bachelor*—to model Ivana Bozilovic. One of the images landed on the cover of *Us Weekly*, and a flood of publicity followed. In the last two years, Mi Belle has been featured on several wedding blogs, as well as the magazines *Bride and Bloom*, *Inside Weddings*, *Pacific Weddings*, *Your Wedding Day* and *Santa Barbara*.

"Five years ago we looked at each other's work and said, 'Wow, you're really good.' That work is nowhere near what we're doing now," says Josh. "The challenge is to keep improving. It's what inspires us. If you're not constantly improving and evolving, you're done." ■

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