

Chenin Boutwell took on the challenge of re-branding her wedding photography business to fly solo. She was just getting it all figured out when along came another major change in her life—motherhood.

WEDDINGS

By Stephanie Boozer

A totally new year

Know thyself, know thy studio brand

Two-and-a-half years ago, Chenin Boutwell stood at a crossroad. Her husband and business partner in Boutwell Studios had left the studio to run the couple's other business, Totally Rad Actions, which had grown exponentially and now demanded his full-time attention.

Boutwell wasn't ready to close down the

studio, and pulling in another partner seemed unlikely. Instead, Boutwell chose to fly solo and completely rebrand the studio. Having built a reputation in Southern California as husband-and-wife wedding photographers, that meant a total overhaul of the brand identity.

"I basically had to reinvent myself," says Boutwell, "and that was a challenge."

She began, simply enough, by making a

list. "Because I really wanted to be true to my personal style, I listed random things I like," she says. "Colors, textures, clothing stores, anything that inspired me. For example, I've picked up this huge collection of paint chips and tea cups, and I sat down to figure out what it was about all of them that appealed to me."

That got Boutwell's thoughts aimed in a new direction, and she hired a Web designer to help her translate those ideas into a Web identity. The result was the new www.boutwellstudio.com, featuring a mix of vintage patterns and organic styling that visually sums up Boutwell's tastes and style.

All images ©Chenin Boutwell





“It was a risk, because it was 360 degrees different from the brand the studio had when my husband was shooting with me,” she says. “The new style doesn’t appeal to everyone, just enough people to keep me busy every year.”

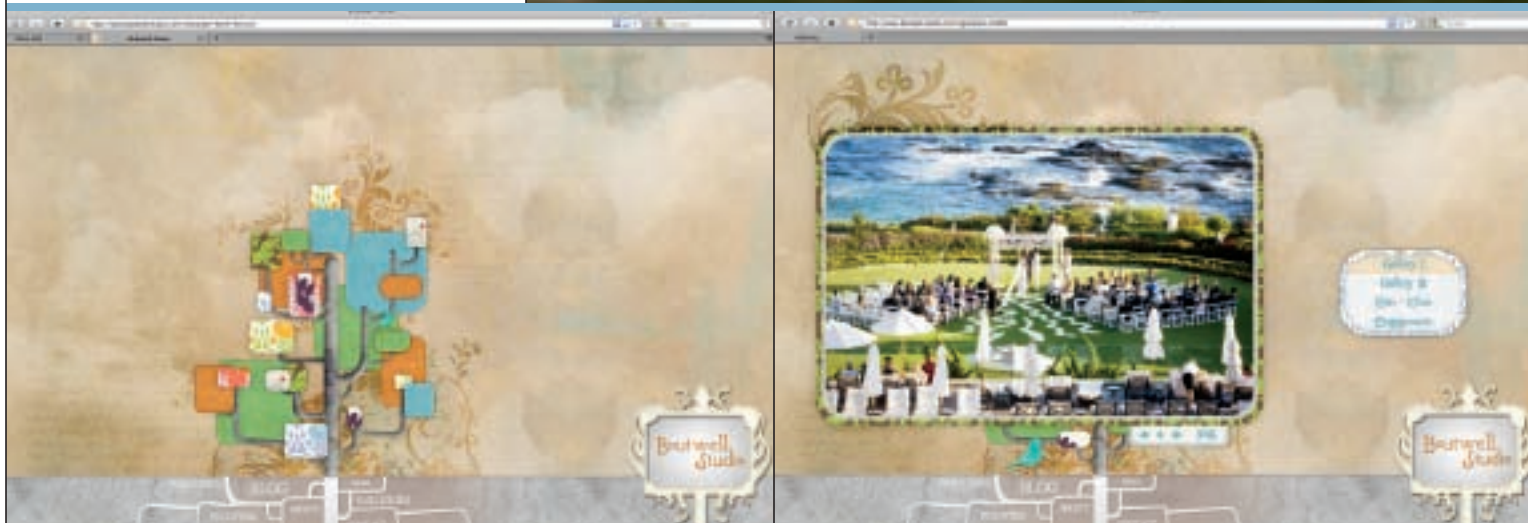
Located in Mission Viejo, Boutwell Studios is about midway between San Diego and Los Angeles, an area saturated with wedding and event photographers. Boutwell knew she’d have to stand out among the competition, and that the best way to do that was to stay true to her own personal style.

“If you look at my website versus my competitors’ sites, you’ll see I have a totally different take,” she says. “This was calculated on my part. I knew there were a lot of high-end photographers with elegant black-and-white websites with scrolling script. That’s not me, and I couldn’t really compete on that level; plenty of photographers were already fulfilling that niche. So I really stand out, and I think that’s why I’m still doing pretty well, even with the economic slow down.”

“Now there’s this whole crazy blog world, and you’re able to see what people are shooting every weekend. That tends to homogenize wedding photography. So don’t second guess how you shoot.”



Boutwell Studio's website reflects an eclectic taste. The gallery pages have the appeal of an artful and highly personal scrapbook.



More than “pretty well.” Boutwell’s re-branding has been so successful that she’s become a sought-out mentor, and is frequently asked to speak on the subject.

“To begin with, I usually have people try to describe their style in five words or less,” says Boutwell. Then she leads them through a series of targeted exercises to help them hone in on what it is they truly want to photograph, and what they want to communicate about themselves to their clients. That gives the participants the start of a foundation to build their brand around.

“Stop looking at what your competitors are doing and focus on your own photography,” she says. “Now there’s this whole crazy blog world, and you’re able to see what people are out shooting every weekend. That tends to homogenize wedding photography. So don’t second guess how you shoot. We all do our best work when we’re being true to who we are as photographers.”

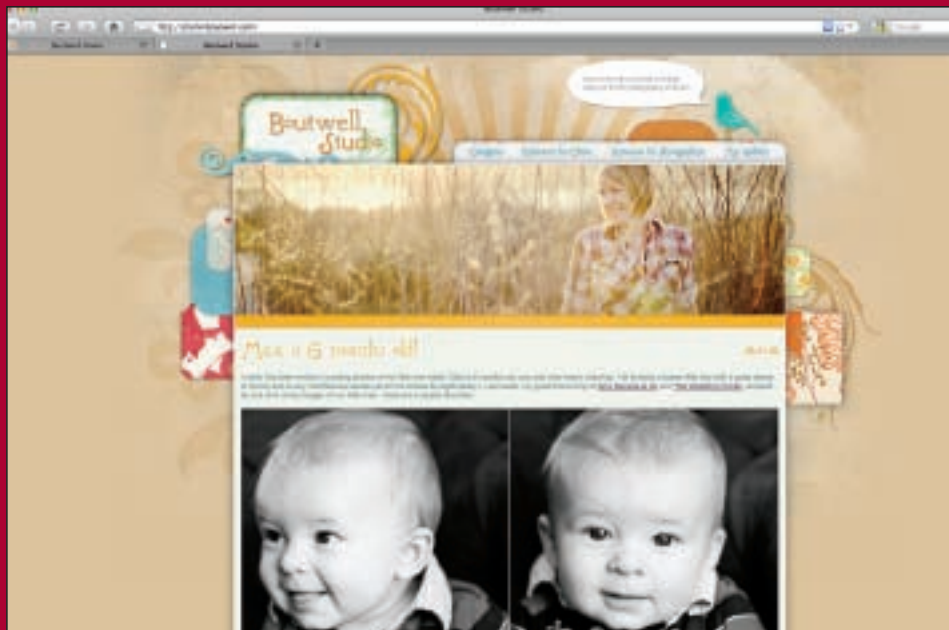
Boutwell takes time to step away from the genre of wedding photography to see what’s happening in other kinds, such as fashion and fine art. She also devotes time each week to sending her images to bridal blogs and magazines. The exposure to potential clients through blogs and editorial content in lieu of traditional advertising qualifies her work and solidifies awareness of her brand.

“It’s essentially free advertising,” says Boutwell. “Most of the time, clients come to me having already decided that I’m the photographer for them. I’m lucky in the sense that the clients I do work with really get me. I put out a cohesive image, and for the people who my images appeal to, well, it’s usually a slam dunk for me.” ■

For more from Boutwell, go to www.boutwellstudio.com.

AND BABY MAKES THREE

How a busy studio owner handled her pregnancy



Now that Boutwell has successfully transitioned into a new brand identity, the last year has brought another huge upheaval—the birth of her son. She continued to shoot late into her pregnancy, and is working out the challenges of folding her new role of motherhood into the running of a business. She frequently blogs on the subject, discussing everything from child care to the coolest, most functional high-chairs, and finds herself in the position of online advice-giver to a multitude of pregnant photographers.

“The first thing I tell them is that they need to figure out what their comfort zone is, such as how late into the pregnancy they want to shoot and for how long afterward,” she says. “I was very active throughout my pregnancy.”

Boutwell let her own clients know early on about her situation, and affirming her intention to be there at their wedding. “I explained that I’d still shoot the engagement session, do all the postproduction

and album design, and that circumstances could forbid my shooting the wedding itself. If they weren’t comfortable with that, I was fine giving them a refund on their retainer and helping them find another photographer.” Only two clients opted out of their commitment with Boutwell.

“I tell women that whether or not you feel like crap, it’s important to put on a strong front,” she says. “Your clients have paid you to be there. If you can’t give 100 percent, you have no business being there.”

Boutwell decided to cut back on the number of weddings she’d do this year, from an average of 40 to just 25.

“I think I made the right move in deciding ahead of time not to take as many weddings,” she says. “Try to explain things to your clients in the most positive way possible. If you start to act scared, then they’ll flip out. My goal for my clients was that on their wedding day, they would completely forget about the fact that I was pregnant.”