



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
MEDIA PHOTOGRAPHERS

The transition from Assistant to Photographer:

prepared for ASMP-MSP by Steve Niedorf

Congratulations! You're ready for the big move! *What do you need to know? What do you need to plan for? Where do you start?* Let's dive into the process and see what some of the issues are...

If you are assisting and are serious about an eventual career as a photographer, within six months of getting your first check as an assistant you must set a timeline for the transition.

What's the rush? Here is the problem: If you are good at assisting and you hook up with the right photographers, you will have fairly solid bookings within a few months. With money coming in, and you working steadily, it will be hard to find the time and the energy to devote to your career as a photographer. If you do not have a firm transition date you have no specific goal to work towards and you may find that you are an assistant for much longer than you planned.

How much time should I plan on being an assistant before I transition? This will vary with each person. For some people it will be a year or less, for others it will be five years or more. For most it will be a two- or three-year time frame.

You will know it is time to transition when you:

- are bored every time you work
- know you could do as good if not better job than the person who hired you
- stop learning when you are assisting
- realize that any of the above is obvious to the people that hire you

Okay, I want to be out after two years, what's next? Put that date up on the calendar and treat it like a mandate from a higher power. Do everything you can to make it happen.

Start by being a sponge about anything and everything that you see going on around you that relates to the business side of photography. The technical stuff is very important but that will come naturally with your job as an assistant. You will have to dig and ask about the business side, but go for it.

Begin a notebook of things you like and things you don't. If you have a good relationship with the photographer ask questions after the job or during downtimes. Most people will be flattered and will give you answers.

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Look at your time as an assistant as both a job and postgraduate education. For the job part you are on top of everything. You are there for the photographer, anticipating needs, attentive, enthusiastic, and focused for the task at hand.

For your postgrad work, you are internally evaluating and learning everything you can. You are making mental and hopefully written notes about what you like and what you don't.

This is very important stuff: you are creating the framework of your future business and laying the foundation for your future success.

Begin a self-education about the business of photography. Get on the online forums, read the business books, get the ASMP Business Practices Handbook. If you can afford to, buy the books on the subject (and look for them used on the online auction sites). Attend seminars on business practices whenever you can. **Join ASMP!** (See resources page).

It is an absolute truth that if you are a mediocre photographer and a great businessperson you will have a long and financially successful career. It is also true that if you are a great photographer and a mediocre business person that within a short time you will be looking at the want ads trying to find ways to make ends meet.

The goal is to have balance – work towards being a great businessperson and a great photographer. Spend time working on your portfolio and working on your business skills. Both are equally important.

That sounds like a lot of work. How I will find the time? It is a lot of work! Successful photographers work very hard. Assistants who want to become successful photographers work very hard. This is a crowded, competitive, and difficult profession. If you do not have passion and willingness to work, the truth is you probably will not be successful.

Wow, that was harsh. What's next? After you have worked for a while start aiming higher. If you can, start to limit your clients to people you can learn from. Try to work for people you'd like to emulate, make it your challenge to get jobs from people at the top of their craft. If you take the postgraduate part of assisting seriously then working for the best people gives you the "degree" from the best "school."

When you feel you've got your business education moving along, look at your creative side and try to determine what you want to do as a photographer. For the most part the photo-generalist is long gone. Today you must specialize; you have to excel in one area of photography. What should that area be for you?

To answer that question, ask yourself some questions: What pictures do you love to create? What moves you? Where is your passion?

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When you enjoy doing something you will be better at it, and your passion will show in your work. As you work for different types of photographers, try to imagine yourself doing their assignments. Can you see yourself doing what they are doing in the years ahead? If so, you are ready for the next step.

Try it: get some work! The odds are that someone you know needs some photography and has little or no money to spend but is willing to give an inexperienced shooter a chance. I am not saying you should ever do anything for free, always try to get something in return. However when you start out without a portfolio or experience, that something might just be a sample, photo credit, or a small fee. Be creative, talk to friends and relatives. You might find more takers than you think.

Look for young art directors and graphic designers. These folks have projects they need shot for their portfolios and are in a situation similar to yours. Perhaps you will meet them when they are with senior designers at your assisting assignments. You will also meet them at Art Director or Graphic Designer functions.

Bank robbers rob banks because that is where the money is, you should attend these meetings because that is where your future clients are. The best result from these collaborations will be that you will help each other. These early business connections may last you for the rest of your career.

Remember, if you are really aiming for a shooting career *any* shooting job is better than an assisting job. You need that experience with the realities of actually shooting, delivering and billing a job.

Start off right! By now you should have learned some correct business practices, so apply them. Just as you shoot to perfect your craft, apply correct business practices to perfect your business skills. You need to practice and improve both. When in doubt about a certain business or creative issue talk to other photographers and check the business practices guidelines.

How do I figure out what to charge for my work? This is probably the most difficult question for the transitioning assistant, and for many working photographers as well. Pricing for professional services is often a stab in the dark hoping you are not too low or too high. Determining your fees is a matter of factoring what you can bring to the table in terms of creativity and experience and comparing that to the client needs and what they are willing to pay. The price guides available in the resource page will offer some assistance and talking to other photographers will also help.

How do I improve my portfolio? In addition to whatever paying assignments you can get, plan on creating self-assignments. Make these self-assignments as real as possible. Create budgets and timelines. This way you are giving yourself both a creative and

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business challenge. The more challenges you complete successfully, the more self-confidence in your overall abilities you will gain.

How do I figure out what to shoot? Many people find that starting a clip file is useful. Go through any publications you can find and clip the images that move or interest you. Ask the photographers you work for if you can have their old copies of the magazines and source books in their studio.

The clips are not for you to **copy**, they are for **inspiration**. Perhaps you'll see a technique you like or maybe an unusual lighting method you'd like to try. Your self-assignment is to give your images your own spin. Remember to keep your self-assignments within the area of specialty you have initially selected. A focused body of work will be critical for your portfolio to have impact. Clients want to see your vision applied in a specific area of photography.

Do whatever you can within your means to get the production value of your assignments as high as you can. Borrow and barter if needed. Your potential clients will be paying attention to wardrobe, make-up and props and you must as well. It is very likely that some of the stylists or talent you meet on the job will be interested in testing with you. Get business cards or numbers during downtimes or after the shoot and use your good judgment about calling.

Okay I've got a portfolio, and I'm setting up my business. How do I transition? There is no easy answer to this question that will work for everyone, but here are some strategies:

Cold Turkey: Just say no. This is not for the faint of heart but for some people this sink or swim method is the right way to go. They just set a date and say from this time forward they will not assist. This works best if you have some money saved for rainy days, a solid portfolio, and a least a few starting clients.

Get out of town: It is drastic but sometimes the best alternative. Some people feel that they will always be looked at as an assistant in their current location and never a photographer. This is a big hurdle, especially if you are working in the same field as your assisting clients do. For these folks the move is the only solution. Check out your new location in advance. If possible go there ahead of time, show your book and gauge responses. Plan on at least a year or two of slim pickings while you get settled and pay your dues.

Fade-out, Fade-in: This method is probably the most popular. As people are winding down their assisting careers and starting to shoot on their own they limit the number of days per week they will take on assignments. On the days they don't assist they make sure they are working on their photography business or their portfolios. During the fade-out they also limit whom they are working for. For a number of obvious reasons they try to find jobs in an area of photography that does not conflict with the area of

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photography they are planning on entering. For example, if you are planning a studio career, think of ending your assisting time with location shooters.

Some closing thoughts:

Spend your money on images not equipment:

Only get the gear you must have. Rent, barter, or borrow everything else. Put the money and energy you have in making your images the best they can be. When you get work you'll have the money to the gear you need.

Use your creativity, brain, and your heart to make your photographs. The best gear in the world cannot make a weak image into a strong one. All the money in the world cannot turn a bad concept into a good one.

Get help:

Create a group of people that will help you on your way. Find mentors and friends for business and creative support and advice. Look for supportive designers and art directors you can go to for critiques. Seek out people to ask about best practices for your business. Join online forums. Read the books. Go to the seminars. **Join ASMP!**

Be patient:

Think **progress not perfection**. The path you have chosen is not easy and for most people it takes many years of hard work before they see results. Give yourself permission to make mistakes (you will) and the time to learn from them.

Good luck on your journey!!

Resources:

Marketing and Business:

ASMP: Professional Business Practices in Photography by American Society of Media Photographers

- Paperback: 416 pages ; Dimensions (in inches): 1.00 x 10.25 x 7.00
- Publisher: Writers Digest Books; 5th edition (September 1997)
- ASIN: 0927629143

Photography: Focus on Profit by Tom Zimmeroff

- Paperback: 416 pages ; Dimensions (in inches): 0.95 x 9.52 x 8.48
- Publisher: Allworth Press; Book and CD-ROM edition (October 2002)
- ISBN: 1581150598

Portfolios That Sell: Professional Techniques for Presenting and Marketing Your Photographs by Selina Oppenheim (Paperback)

- Paperback: 144 pages ; Dimensions (in inches): 1.57 x 11.01 x 9.08
- Publisher: Amphoto; (June 2003)
- ISBN: 0817455434

Art and Attitude of Commercial Photography by Rick Souders, Selina Oppenheim

- Paperback: 160 pages ; Dimensions (in inches): 0.54 x 11.04 x 8.26
- Publisher: Amphoto; (July 2002)
- ISBN: 0817433090

Pricing Photography: The Complete Guide to Assignment & Stock Prices by Michal Heron, David MacTavish

- Paperback: 160 pages ; Dimensions (in inches): 0.42 x 8.28 x 10.90
- Publisher: Allworth Press; 3rd edition (January 2002)
- ISBN: 1581152078

Pricing guidelines software:

Hindsight: <http://www.hindsightltd.com/products/PriceGuide.html>

Fotoquote: <http://www.fotoquote.com/>

APA (Advertising Photographers of America) 1999 cost survey free download:

<http://www.apanational.com/standards.html>

Online sources:

ASMP-MSP: <http://www.asmp-msp.org/>

ASMP-National: <http://www.asmp.org/>

Editorial Photographers: <http://www.editorialphoto.com/>

Photo District News: <http://www.pdnonline.com/photodistrictnews/index.jsp>

APAnet (free online photo business forum): <http://www.apanational.com/apanet/index.html>

APAdigital (free online digitalphoto forum): <http://www.apanational.com/apadigital/index.html>