

ALL CHANGE - WATCH THE GAP

There is little doubt that Professional Photography, as people have come to define or imagine it, has changed and that change has been rapid.

It's not that we don't want or need photography, it is simply that the way it is used, created and accessed has evolved to such an extent that the industry cannot support those within it in the same way that it once did. The evolution of photography has only just begun and it will alter in more ways than it has already and probably in ways that we cannot imagine or prepare for. The speed at which developments in the internet and imaging technology have moved means that photographers have to change faster than they ever did and compete in a much wider and even global market. Whilst it is a market that is shrinking, it demands much more from photographers than photographs.



Photographer and Graphic Designer. Photographer and Web Designer.
Photographer and Teacher. Photographer and Artworker. Photographer and
Publisher. Photographer and Marketing Executive.

All of the above are real people describing themselves. Less than ten years ago you'd have been lucky to have found anyone who considered themselves a photographer plus one of the above in any real sense. It is now often the case that simply being a photographer is not enough.

IT Consultant and Photographer. Nurse and Photographer. Hotel Receptionist
and Photographer. Taxi Driver and Photographer. Farmer and Photographer.

These are also real people who consider photography to be their second job. They have all got websites and they are all competing with their full time professional counterparts for a large slice of the market. The trouble is that often they will be happy for their slice to come at a cheaper price.

This is the point where the professional photographer starts shouting about amateurs being less skilled and that they are undercutting without the same overheads or earning expectations. The latter may well be true but the former will not always be the case – photography is not rocket science or some secretive black magic, it is simply maths mixed with a bit of art and common sense. No reason why Farmer Fred Blogs shouldn't be as good as Photographer Quentin de Flugel (Don't Google him, I made him up). One point not often addressed by those same photographers who have a second string to their bow, is how the Graphic Designer, Artworker or Web Designer view them. Does, for instance, the Photographer charge the same market rate for his or her art work that they do for their photography, or is it simply a useful marketing tool to add to their business that they can undercut others on?

I recently quoted for a wedding and knew before I even gave it that it would not be taken up. The couple finally went for an amateur photographer who was going to charge them £200. Was this lost business to me? Well, no, because I was never going to get it in the first place. Had the couple not found a 'photographer' for £200, they would have asked a relative with a decent camera to do the honours – they never had the money in the first place. Will the photographs be any good? They might be - I know that in this case they will not – but they might have been and the couple won't have been interested in insurance, back up equipment and experience, they just wanted a few photographs of their wedding day to stick in album from Boots the Chemist.

Same goes for the yoghurt company who want some photographs of their products for their website. It's a pot of yoghurt. You can pose it in as many ways as you like – but it's a pot of yoghurt and there are thousands of people who could take a decent photograph of a pot of yoghurt. Is the company going to pay £500 a day for a professional photographer to do the job or are they going to listen to the friend of a friend who can do it for a £150? As a professional photographer you have to ask if you want to sit on your backside for the day, or do you accept that money yourself and knock out photos of dairy products for the day?



A couple of years ago, I quoted a national company with a name known to everybody, for a job that encompassed new print, web and billboard advertising. I was informed that it would be a major campaign. I didn't get the job – it went in the end to a friend of a friend who did some wedding photography and could muster up some free models and use his house as one of the locations – that particular location had been very specifically described in the brief. I did keep an eye out for the campaign but it never appeared. The point is that this particular company would never have gone down this route for their photography at one time.

It's not just the lower to mid end of the market either. There used to be a time when Car Photography cost the earth. That's not necessarily the case now. Fact is that there are scores of companies out there who need a job done on a tight budget and are willing to think outside of the old box to get it done. They employ young people who do not know the old ways, they only know the here and now, they think differently and are more than happy to utilise the internet and their virtual networks to achieve it. Photographers who sit in the old boxes waiting for the knock will be waiting for a long time to come – it's a changing world and professional photographers will have to change with it to stay with it.

This changing world isn't only confined to commercial or portrait and wedding photography. The world of Landscape/Fine Art Photography (hard to define in a few words but you know the genre and area I'm talking about), once the domain of large and medium format cameras is changing because the buying public don't give a monkey's.



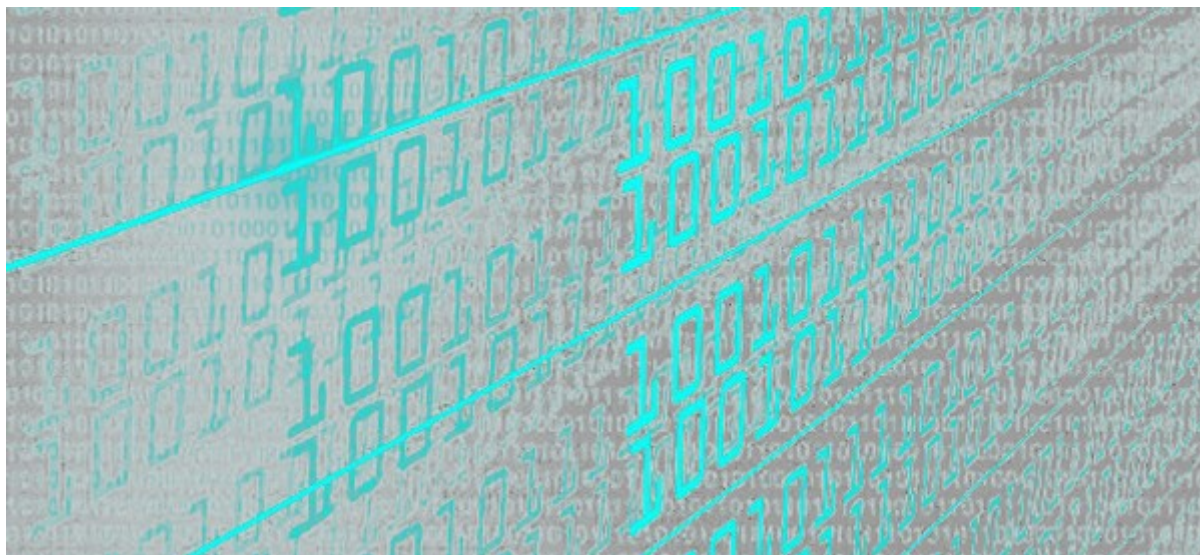
Ask yourself where most of the house owners of the UK buy pieces of 'art' for their wall? The Range? Ikea? Dunelm? All of these places and more just like them. Why go to the bother of producing a photograph on a large format camera to have it poorly printed on a bit of cheap pseudo-canvas to sell for £20 in The Range? How much does a Phase One Digital Camera cost? Yes, the files are beautifully detailed, the colours and contrast are superb and the overall quality is sublime – but then you whack it on a bit of cheap paper and put it in a black plastic frame called the Osterglumbo or some other unfathomable name and charge ten quid.

When I talk to gallery owners, all I hear is how depressed the market is. Even when framing a photograph, the largest percentage of buyers will head off to the racks of affordable ready made frames rather than have a bespoke one made by their local framer or gallery owner. Sure there's a market up there in the high echelons but how many photographers can it support when there are far too many photographers in the slush pile beneath it? It's a sure thing that the upper stratosphere above it has become thinner at the same time. One local gallery recently rang me and said that they could do with a few local village scenes, about 7x5, that they could frame and knock out to the tourists for about £3. It doesn't take a mathematician to see what is in this for the photographer.

I was prompted to write this blog following a visit to a high school sixth form. They were sending would be photographers off to college and university with some misplaced idealistic view of a world 15 years out of date. A world in which half the class were going to become 'Art Photographers' and the rest would be Travel Photographers and be paid huge sums of money to circumnavigate the globe with their camera. They also had pupils interested in Commercial Photography using curriculum time to learn darkroom techniques. It's great fun but it's something that needs to be done out of school hours because why would they need it?

New photographers need to be on Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and the like,

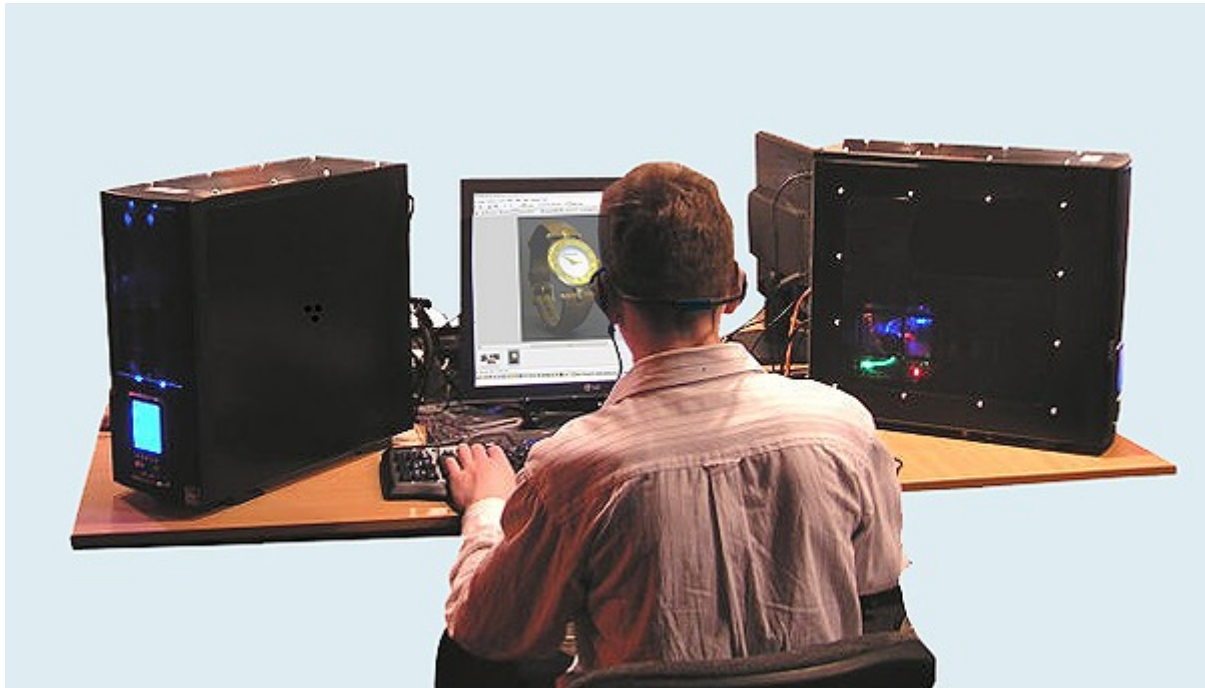
networking, linking, posting and building traffic to their own website. They need a You Tube account with a few home made virals on there. They have to have a Flickr stream and attract the euphoric homilies of thousands of other Flickry photographers and hope that somewhere, someone is watching and thinking that here is the next great thing. The replacement for the 'butterfly on my shoulder' generation with their own fresh angle on an old theme.



But most of all, they will need to diversify. It's been a buzz word for a long time now in many industries and it will become one in the world of photography. So with that in mind, we should all stop bemoaning and belittling the Farmer, Taxi Driver and Hotel Receptionist who are also diversifying and adding Photographer to their CV. We are lucky, or unlucky depending on which side of the fence you stand on, to be involved in an industry that has more hobbyist devotees than it does professionals. Your average GP doesn't have to compete with Bob the Builder who prescribes a few painkillers after work, your average Photographer does and these days even more so. Maybe that's how it should be, after all, photography was invented by amateurs.

Another worrying aspect for many photographers, who base their business in Stock Photography, is that although the internet demands photography and graphics on a huge scale, it does not pay in the same way. Factor in the huge numbers of photographers who now contribute to image libraries and then couple that with the ever increasing availability of cheap and even free images and you have a whole section of the industry which will probably within a few years be provided almost totally by the amateur market – certainly the web supply side of it. Each of the images used in this article cost me nothing to use and legally so. I am allowed to use them commercially and to alter them to suit my needs. All that I am asked is not to use them as stand alone products. Another website simply required that I provided a link back to the photographers portfolio – even the library admit that this link can be anywhere on my web site, it does not have to be on this page. Had I wanted to do away

with that link the images would have cost me \$5 each and if I wanted to use them commercially in print, \$10.00.



Quite simply there are more people trying to earn a living from photography and less money in the kitty to pay for it. Cameras have become more capable and more open to everybody and backed up by the safety net of Photoshop. They will get more intelligent, produce better results with minimum input from the user. Software will follow suite.

I can honestly see a day when the idea of being a Professional Photographer will cause people to raise their eyebrows in astonishment. A little like someone telling you today that they are a Gong Farmer or a Knocker-Up... who needs them?

Either that or they will fall over in shock when you tell them that you are not a wedding photographer.