

Be your own boss

Discover how to make it as a successful freelance photographer from the people who have already done it

Being your own boss is a common dream, especially for those who create photography during the few spare hours their day job leaves them. So, how do you know when you're ready to make the fantasy a reality? "It comes down to a number of factors," says lifestyle family photographer Vicki Knights (www.vickiknights.co.uk), who took the big plunge into freelance photography over five years ago. "Most importantly you need to ensure you have a fantastic understanding of light, composition and, of course, your kit, so that you are able to take great photos in all situations. You need to have built a portfolio of work that you are proud of and you must make sure you are ready to work for yourself. I absolutely love running a business but it's not for everyone."

As Knights points out, being a freelancer is not as sociable as sitting in an office surrounded by colleagues to go for coffee with. It can mean long hours and demands a lot of self-motivation, but there's also no one to answer to but yourself, along with the satisfaction of doing something you love. When deciding what genre to specialise in, however, which wins out: passion for the subject or market demand? For Knights, it was a mixture of the two: "When I set up my family photography business I was really passionate about portrait photography, especially children, and there were very few lifestyle photographers around when I first set up back in 2008, so there was a gap in the market for what I was offering," she says. "I don't think it's a good idea for someone to start a business specialising in something they aren't passionate about. It will show in their work and the way they deal with their clients."

You needn't choose just one genre, however, as freelancer Eleanor Jane (www.eleanorjane.co.uk) attests: "While no one wants to be a jack of all trades, master of none, it helps to be versatile," she says. "If you have a strong personal style it will be evident regardless



How to be a blogger

Running your own blog is a great way to promote yourself. Here are Eleanor Jane's top five tips

Identify your audience: Be it future brides, local businesses, or other photographers, focus your online activities towards them. Keep a regular, reliable posting schedule and then start engaging and communicating with others in a personable way.

Use social networking: Twitter and Facebook are useful in different ways, so don't sync your accounts as it will post the same blurb everywhere, which looks lazy. Make sure your images look the best they can across all platforms – optimise your website images for Retina Displays and upload images at the best resolution.

Implement analytics software: If your hosting package doesn't already offer this feature, get some immediately! You need to be able to track how many people are visiting your site, where they are coming from and in which areas of the site they are spending the most time. Without this information you may struggle to understand your audience and will find it difficult to target content to their needs.

Be yourself! This is so important. The internet can be such a smokescreen; don't ever try to convince people you're something you aren't. You want your audience to trust you and likewise, you want to trust them, so be genuine.

Interact with others: Part of the fun of blogging is the vast and varied networking opportunities it offers, so don't forget to comment on others' work.



THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, NEW YORK
Jane's passion for American landscapes is summed up best in this shot of the iconic New York skyline. The mist and cool tones showcase the buildings in a unique light

© Eleanor Jane



WATER FIGHT

Introducing props can instantly make your portraits more dynamic, encouraging the subject to feel at ease and presenting golden opportunities such as this

© VickiKnights

**FLOWER GIRL**

Leading lines aren't just for landscapes – they can help draw attention to your subject, too. The shallow depth of field also helps to enhance this effect

© Vicki Knights

of the subject matter." Her portfolio is a testament to that, as it ranges from hairy metal guitarists to charming, boutique wedding photography. A word of warning, though: "If you want to photograph weddings, my advice is to find out early on whether or not you enjoy, are comfortable with and are actually any good at photographing people. If not, it's never going to work out! I think many beginners consider weddings to be all and end all of commercial photography, but people are the hardest subjects to photograph well. It's definitely not the place to practise!"

One way of finding out whether you're compatible with your chosen genre is to get some genuine feedback on your work. Enrolling on a course will give you plenty of opportunities for this but, as Jane says, there are plenty more options available to the modern photographer. Posting your work on online photography forums or Flickr will give you feedback ("Although the quality of responses can be a bit of a lottery!" she adds), while offering to assist professional photographers and shooting friends and family will bolster your portfolio, as well as experience. But of course, 'freelance' doesn't mean 'free of charge'. Once you're ready to start charging for your services, don't make the mistake of underestimating yourself, advises Knights: "When I first set up my business, my prices were too low as I hadn't

accounted for all of my costs and the amount of time spent editing and running my business," she admits. "I realised my mistake pretty quickly but it then took some time to increase my prices to where they needed to be."

When it comes to drawing up a price list, some people recommend looking at what other photographers are charging in your area. While this might give you an idea and competitive awareness, it doesn't give you the full picture. "For all you know they might not really need to work and are just doing it as a hobby and not making any profit at all," Knights points out. "If their work is strong and their prices are low, you might set yours even lower if you don't think your work is at the same standard. Then you have just based your entire pricing structure on a business that isn't even turning a profit! What you need to do is work out all of your costs (yes, including paying yourself an actual salary!) and base your prices on what you need to earn rather than positioning them somewhere in the middle of your competitors."

On the topic of money, be prepared to become your own accountant. As with any self-employed person, you will have to manage your tax affairs, but there is plenty of guidance online, such as the HMRC site and www.gov.uk in the UK, for tips on funding your business. When Jane first started, she was able to take advantage of her local support system, with council-funded business and

enterprise training schemes. "Check out what kinds of business support your local council offers," Jane recommends. "They might run seminars on managing your books, understanding tax or dealing with the Inland Revenue. There may even be grants on offer, such as rent subsidies to help you set up in a studio or office, or economic development loans to help you purchase essential equipment."

There are also other means of earning money from photography beyond shoots. Workshops, for instance, are a great way to supplement a freelancer's income and this is something that Knights offers. After clients began asking her to show them how to use their camera, she decided to run a class for parents to show how to take beautiful pictures of their children. "It was such a success that I've run around 15 a year since then!" she tells us. "I get a lot of satisfaction from seeing the results parents get after just a half-day Photography for Parents workshop. I've also run a few Photography for Bloggers workshops for creative owners who want to take better photos of their products."

Additional services a freelancer can offer are quality products to display the finished photographs. Hating the thought of her images being left on a CD in a drawer, Knights only sells digital images alongside a product purchase. "I have spent years sourcing the very best products for my clients, spending much time pouring over albums and frames at trade shows," she explains. "I make sure that the products I offer are of a much higher quality than can be found on the high street and are designed to last a lifetime. I keep my offerings simple, only providing products that will stand the test of time and not look dated in ten years. For anyone starting out, I would suggest going to trade shows, so you can actually see the products in the flesh and choose the ones that will delight your clients."

"I get a lot of satisfaction from seeing the results parents get after just a half-day Photography for Parents workshop"

Vicki Knights, www.vickiknights.co.uk

**GEMMA & JAMES' WEDDING AT LUDLOW CASTLE**

After capturing the whole scene in a wide-angle shot, zoom in on the little details to help tell a story

© Eleanor Jane

Offering a good customer service is a good way to encourage repeat business, as well as spread the word. Responding to emails and other enquiries as quickly as you can only help to secure clients, but they know you exist if you have a web presence. When you're just starting out, it's inevitable you will incur some costs and one of these should be building a website. In most cases, this will be the first thing a prospective customer will see. The site needs to be user-friendly and show off your business, as Knights explains: "I put a lot of time and effort into making sure it really shows what my clients can expect from a shoot with me," she says. "By having so much information my website, it means when people enquire with me it is usually to book a session as I have answered all of their questions on my website." When considering the unique design of her site, Knights cleverly

"Keep putting work out there – post regularly to your blog, update your social networking pages, send pictures to magazines" Eleanor Jane, www.eleanorjane.co.uk

opted to make it resemble the kind of websites her clients were used to looking at, such as children's online clothing stores. "Having my website custom-designed and built was a big investment to make but it has definitely paid off."

Today's photographer also needs to think about tomorrow, as Jane explains: "These days every image

I upload is optimised for Retina Display. I know not everyone is viewing on such high-definition screens yet, but I see it as future-proofing my business," she says. "When you're on a new MacBook Pro or an iPad and you visit a site where the images have been optimised, the difference is incredible. It's slightly fiddlier but absolutely worth it." Running a blog will help your crusade of self-promotion by boosting your online presence, along with Twitter and Facebook. Knights, for example, has just released free video training on getting natural expressions in your family photos (www.vickiknights.co.uk/freevideotraining); while Jane regularly updates her blog with behind-the-scenes details of her latest shoots (www.eleanorjane.co.uk/blog/photography).

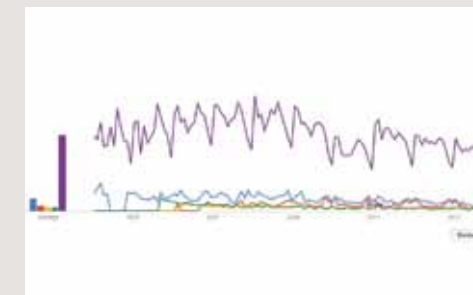
"Keep putting work out there – post regularly to your blog, update your social networking pages and send pictures to magazines," Jane advises. "Also, leave the house! Meet people and talk to them because ultimately work doesn't pop out of thin air, it comes through other people's needs."

Confidence is crucial and it takes heaps of the stuff to take that initial step to becoming a freelance photographer, she adds: "There's never a perfect time to go professional and you'll always be learning, but if you are self-assured, have a strong portfolio and an even stronger work ethic, set some goals and give it a go for a while. Life is too short!"

What's the trendiest genre?

Discover what people have been searching for using Google Trends

Google Trends is a free service that enables us to compare the relative popularity of up to five terms over a period of time. We entered a selection of photography genres to discover how often they have been searched for (vertical axis), from 2004 to 2013 (horizontal axis) in the UK. With Google Trends, the numbers represent the search interest relative to the highest point on the chart. It doesn't show absolute search volume, but nevertheless Google Trends gives a useful indication of what's hot and what's not. The resounding results of our selection shows that 'wedding photographer' is by far the most popular searched-for term, with portrait and landscape coming in second and third place.



Purple – Wedding photographer
Blue – Portrait photographer
Red – Landscape photographer
Yellow – Commercial photographer
Green – Music photographer