



GREAT REPSPECTATIONS

by John Sharpe

What should a photographer expect from a rep?

The answer depends, of course, on whom you're talking to. Since photographers and their reps, in most cases, run separate businesses, it's quite natural that they will have differing needs and priorities. Given this, it is imperative that both parties communicate their expectations about the relationship prior to committing to each other, and hopefully, on an ongoing basis thereafter as the relationship evolves. And evolve, it will.

Since the specifics of rep/talent relationships differ between reps and their talent, depending on their respective needs and negotiations, there is no applicable industry standard by which a photographer can measure their own — other than, "Is my business growing?" (I NEVER hear from photographers looking for new representation when their business is super). Unfortunately, this myopic view doesn't take into account all the variables of the relationship and the marketplace. Business growth, while definitely important, should be only one of the factors by which to judge the "value" of your representation. Maybe, just maybe, you might be to blame for the lack of your business success.

I'll attempt to address some other areas you might consider, in hopes of provoking discussion among all parties and possibly dispelling some misconceptions at the same time. Although I'll address them individually here, (and in random order), they are all interrelated, and, to varying degrees, cannot be separated from one another in real life.

Marketing/Promotion

Is your rep actively involved in your marketing and promotional efforts? By "actively involved", I don't mean helping pay for them. Nor do I mean simply acting as your mail house. I mean, do you discuss marketing/promotion strategies? Do you have agreement on a plan, a shared vision of your mutual future, or do you do things willy nilly? Does your rep have ideas to bring to the fore? Do they make sense to and for you? Historically, photographers and reps might have succeeded by putting ads in the sourcebooks and waiting for the phone to ring, but those days are long gone.

Sales

A misconception exists among some photographers, (usually ones junior in their careers), that once they find a rep, he/she will spend all of their waking hours with the photographer's portfolio (and only theirs) in hand, chasing down clients whose needs and desires align perfectly with the portfolio, and then job requests will soon come pouring in. Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration, but I think there's a definite "perception-reality" gap that exists. Direct sales are an indisputably important factor in producing business, but the reality is that most reps simply are too involved in the other areas of the mix to generate and service face-to-face appointments on a daily basis. Add to that the fact that independent reps have a number of talent in their stables and voicemail system barriers have sprung up in all but the tiniest of clients, and you should be reaching the conclusion that direct sales appointments are a luxurious exception these days. But (and this is an important "but"), sales calls can and should happen, and there are other sales related variables that are relevant to evaluate as well.

Does your rep read trade publications relevant to you (Adweek, Advertising Age, Creativity, Print, CA, Graphis, PDN, How, ID to name a few for the general ad/design market)? Do they use the publications to generate leads? Do they follow-up on leads you pass to them? Do you pass on leads to them?

Does your rep visit other markets to show your work? Getting appointments in markets outside home base seems easier than going local (maybe we're less of a daily threat!), and market visits always seem to generate work.

Sales skills are also of obvious importance when clients come calling (how many of us have NOT bought the car we want at a particular dealership because the sales person was a total turnoff?!) Personality and style aside, a good rep should be knowledgeable about your work and capabilities, the client and the competition, and be able to talk about all of them comfortably. Good reps should have the ability to either ask the right questions to understand the client's needs, or facilitate direct contact between you and the client for you to do so. They should be able to service all calls promptly and follow up in a timely manner.

Negotiation

Because of its importance, I've separated negotiation from sales. Good negotiation skills are more important in today's business environment than ever before, as it truly is a "buyers market". Successful negotiation not only requires the attributes mentioned above, but also a level of creativity, as we on the supply side try to get our clients' (and their clients') perception of the value of our "product" to jibe with our own, and to get fair compensation for that value.

Portfolio Development

How does your rep contribute to your portfolio development and evolution? Do you communicate on its content/format/design/packaging? Do you discuss personal work projects and what to do with them? Are you getting feedback from the market on the current work? While you may at times disagree, your portfolio should be a collaborative effort between you and your rep that marries your artistic vision with the needs of the marketplace — an ongoing, constantly evolving project.

Contacts

Here's another area of misconception. Yes, established reps know a lot of people. Yes, those relationships can help to get portfolios seen (that is, when there's time - see Sales above). However, I think photographers who place too much value on contacts expect too much from them as a result and will end up disappointed. Contacts are more relevant when it comes to negotiation, when knowledge of and familiarity with a client are definite advantages in the process. Contacts also have value if they can be utilized to facilitate outside creative services you require (i.e.: graphic design) at a lower than retail cost, and for collaborative marketing/promotion efforts.

Production

A rep's production knowledge and production contacts can help the creative process. While most reps don't act as line producers for their photographers, the ones that have some production knowledge/contacts they can bring to bear, if the need arises, are more valuable than those that can't. Also, the greater their production knowledge, the more they should be able to contribute to the estimating process.

Administration

Many reps choose not to get involved with the administrative areas of their talents' business. By administrative, I mean estimating, securing and evaluating contracts/purchase orders, billing and collecting. We do, for a variety of reasons. It allows the talent to concentrate solely on their creative contributions. It utilizes our specific skills and orientation. It centralizes the process and is the most efficient way to do it. And finally, most creative people don't like administrative chores anyway.

Nurturation

Okay, so it's not a real word. But no discussion of a rep's contribution to their talent would be complete without mentioning the behind the scenes nurturing we provide. We push, we nag, we listen, we cajole and if we're lucky, we inspire and motivate our talent to do the things we all know are necessary to grow the business. Things like doing personal work, updating/editing portfolios, entering award shows, advertising and taking risks, to name a few. We share your glory and your pain. And no rep can/will be successful unless his/her talent fulfills their obligations to the relationship, which is the stuff for another article.

In closing, representation should not be looked upon as the "necessary evil" as I have heard some talent describe it. With proper consideration on both sides prior to starting a relationship, a true commitment to fulfilling each others expectations and a continuing, open dialogue thereafter, the relationship should afford ample opportunity for both parties to meet the needs of their respective businesses.

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