

PHOTO DARWINISM

Things your mother never told you BY STANLEY ROWIN

As a trade association ASMP is here to inform, educate and represent you. Some of these tasks are easier to do than the others. We try to advocate for you by taking on the Goliaths, but limited resources restrict our ability. We do a good job at informing you through our Web site, this *Bulletin*, local chapter meetings and our member-to-member forums. However some things that need to be told are never discussed. I will try to begin this discussion here.

When I started out in this business, I made a lot of assumptions that, in retrospect, were wrong (aside from the one that I'd be shooting partially clad models all year long). They were wrong because I had a glamorous view of being a freelance photographer and no one was talking about the "dark side" of this occupation. My first incorrect assumption was that the biggest part of the job of being a freelance photographer was taking pictures. Well that's probably wrong. The biggest part for most of you will be looking for your next assignment. Although there are exceptions to every rule, for most of you, 60-80 percent of your time should be looking for work and the rest of the time will be doing the actual work. Do you find this to be true? Would you have continued in this profession if you had been told this early on?

Unlike other occupations, this one can get harder as you get older and more experienced. An advertising photographer friend of mine who is 40 years old, recently lamented that he feels that he is losing assignments to younger photographers. Some of his clients had just undergone a change of art directors. The new ones were younger and he feels he is having trouble connecting to them. He thinks they prefer to work with people more their own age, in their twenties. This does not bode well for photographers in their fifties and higher.

Another friend of mine thinks that the era of photographers setting their own rates is over. Just when you think that you deserve to be earning more money, economics and market forces might prevent it. We recently took a survey of members from several chapters around the country. Half of those surveyed felt that their income in the last two years has decreased while only 25 percent felt that their income has increased over the same time. It's hard to grow a business on decreasing income.

I was describing our industry to some non-photographer friends. One of them made the analogy that the bulk of photographers are like most actors. We both have a lot of people driven to this vocation by passion or glamour. We both have members

trying to be stars, but the vast quantity of people wind up being in the middle of the "curve," doing infrequent smaller jobs and few achieve the stardom they set out to attain. So I went to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and to the actors trade associations to see if this analogy holds true. It turns out that the median income for actors and photographers is similar. According to the BLS there are 61,260 people employed as photographers.

The median annual wage for these 61,260 photographers in 2001 was \$23,040. According to BLS statistics, only 10 percent of all photographers made over \$48,050. Those numbers are dismal. Albeit most ASMP members, being the top of this profession probably make more than average, but if someone had told you that you only had a one in ten chance of ever making over \$48,050 in your career, would you have started in this business?

I went to the Screen Actors Guild Web site to see what they were telling their new members. "About 90 percent of our membership must rely on income outside of the acting profession for food and shelter. This means two things to aspiring actors: (1) they must understand that rejection in this business is normal, regardless of their talent; and (2) they must be trained in another line of work and gain experience in that work. While seven-digit movie deals make headlines for some stars, creating a false impression that all actors are highly paid, the reality is far less glamorous."

Should we be telling incoming members something similar?: Welcome to Photo-Darwinism: members who adapt to change should survive. The ASMP will try to show you how to thrive in an economy with a decreasing client base due to consolidation and an economy on the brink of recession with clients increasingly risk-averse. There are members with business models out there that seem to be working and we will research them and distribute that information in our upcoming traveling educational seminars. If you have insights to share, please contact Susan Carr, our education committee chair, [Carr@asmp.org].

Non-photographer members: Did you know that ASMP membership consists of many non-



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