

Featured Guest Interviews

John Spaulding (johnspauldingphotography.com)

[00:00:00] **John Spaulding:** Hi, my name is John Spaulding. I'm a professional commercial photographer. Most of what I do is architecture, food, products, interiors. Most of what I do is for the hospitality industry.

[00:00:12] Samples of my work can be seen at JohnSpauldingPhotography.com. I have been a professional photographer for about 30 years. I've been a photo editor and head of photography for some big corporate entities, and I've been on my own since about 2004 as a freelancer.

[00:00:33] **Diego Footer:** What do you think makes a professional photographer a professional? I get asked this because I've done a lot of podcasts. I've done it for about 10 years, and I think I have acquired a certain skill set than somebody who else might just do in interview once. What makes a professional photographer different than just somebody who's a hobbyist?

[00:00:53] **John Spaulding:** In an interview once, Harrison Ford described his own job as assistant storyteller. And I really took that to heart. I think what makes me a professional is that my clients have a story to tell, and I take that job on.

[00:01:09] And what makes me a professional photographer is whether it requires lighting expertise, composition, pre-visualization, or even more mundane skills, such as finding the right location, hiring the talent. I take what my client is trying to communicate to their audience, and I take that on. That's my job. I'm going to help them execute that vision.

[00:01:39] **Diego Footer:** With everything that you've learned along the way over the past 40 years, we're going to try and condense that down into a very short period of time today and give people some advice on selecting photographer and taking their own photos.

[00:01:54] When you think about photography as an art form, with everything, there are some base principles. What makes a good photo?

[00:02:06] **John Spaulding:** I'll tell you the same thing I tell my students when I teach is when you're getting ready to take a photo or even setting up to take a photo, you really have to ask yourself why am I taking this photo? Why is a photograph the best way to convey this idea?

[00:02:23] And once you really dig into the why, you start to get to the how. And what's the best way to do it? In other words, for instance, if it's product photography, you're taking that

photograph to show off the best characteristics of that product. So, does it need a contextual background, or does it need a plain background?

[00:02:47] Does it need hard, sparkly, lighting or does it mean soft lighting? But once you get into the why, that really lends itself to a lot of the, how you're going to do it, why you're going to do it that particular way, how are you going to edit that that image, how are you going to present those images to the client.

[00:03:09] **Diego Footer:** If you look at photography as a pyramid, like that why as the foundation of maybe a good photo, am I wrong in saying this? Because I've seen this in farming. People start out on the opposite side, they start out at the tip of the pyramid. I'm going to focus on like, specific techniques or little tips or tricks that I can do to take a better photo or grow a crop a little better.

[00:03:32] When like in farming, it's Hey, start with your soil, build great soil. And everything works from there. Here, thinking about the why, how you're going to compose the photo, that's more important, but people get lost on filters or that type of thing.

[00:03:46] **John Spaulding:** I think the same thing applies to farming, no matter what you're going to farm, no matter what kind of product you're going to bring to market, somebody else has probably already growing it or selling it. So why are you doing it?

[00:03:59] Are you doing a certain variety or a certain level of care that you think brings something new to the market? I'm the same way with my art. There are a million other photographers in the world. The reason I might be the right photographer to hire for a particular job has to do with listening to my clients. What are they trying to accomplish?

[00:04:23] If you're producing a particular product, whether it's a farmer or a jeweler or a craftsman, I think that you look at the market, you look at who your potential client is. You think, what do they want and why am I the right person to get it to them that they can't find at the mall or at their grocery store or at the produce department at Walmart?

[00:04:51] What are they not finding there that I can produce for them? I think, if you're not answering that question, you're spinning your wheels.

[00:05:01] **Diego Footer:** When we think about photos and how they've evolved, whether from film into the now digital realm, you teach a class on taking photos of students, regardless of what they're using to take that photograph, if we go one step beyond the why are you taking it, or what's the best way to capture what I'm trying to convey, what are some of the cores of photography that somebody needs to think about when they're going to shoot—not just like a selfie or something like that, but going to shoot a photo that's going to be used someplace to convey a message?

[00:05:39] What should they think about?

[00:05:41] **John Spaulding:** I think they really need to be—and this is core of how I teach—you need to be aware of how you see. If you come to, for instance, Niagara Falls or the middle of a Kansas wheat field, you're going to look all around, left and right. You're going to take in this enormous vista that is wider than your field of vision.

[00:06:04] And so if what moves you about that situation is the breadth of the experience, then think about taking a Panorama photo. Think about taking a photo that encompasses that incredible breadth of the view that's moving you.

[00:06:24] On the other hand, if you're coming to a sporting event, or you're taking a portrait of a loved one, or a product photo of something, then even if that, let's say, just for instance, if it's a product or a person, even if it's sitting at a table in the middle of a wide field, you're going to focus your attention very intensely on that product or that person.

[00:06:51] So, you have to sometimes physically just zoom in with your feet, which is an expression I use a lot. Take 15 steps closer until that person or that product fills the frame. In other words, it still comes back to 'why am I taking this particular photo at this moment?'

[00:07:10] If it's because it's my first visit to Niagra Falls, and I want to capture this incredible breadth of the view and the experience, then take a panorama that captures that. If you're taking a picture of your spouse or your child in front of Niagara Falls, then step closer, fill the frame with that person and focus your attention, and by that, focus your frame closely on the thing that is the most important part of that picture.

[00:07:46] **Diego Footer:** I love the idea of that. And we're going to get talking about some ways to take better photos. But before we get there, what are your thoughts on this: in a time where photos have become commodified with digital—I'm old enough to remember using cameras that had film—and it was more costly to take a photo then.

[00:08:09] So there's just less photos in the world. You saw less photos because unless you shared them with family and friends, you just didn't see them. Can we still recognize a good photo out of all? I don't mean horrible photos, but does a good photo stand out from average photos these days, or have we become just inundated with so many images that we can't tell good from great?

[00:08:32] **John Spaulding:** That's a big question. That's a whole nother book. Photography was invented in 1839. And the best estimates are that between 1839 to about 2007, there were about a trillion photographs taken by all of the human race.

[00:08:54] That's a very big number, but you think about from 1839 until about 1930, when the Kodak camera was popularized, it was a highly specialized skill. You had to study the chemistry. You had to prepare the materials yourself. So not that many photos were taken.

[00:09:15] They were mostly taken by professionals that really delved into everything that was involved. Since photography was popularized by the invention of the Kodak in the 1920s and

thirties, it exploded, but it still was expensive. You had to buy the film. You had to learn how to use the camera.

[00:09:36] From 2007, when the smartphone, in the form of the original iPhone, hit the market, it's estimated that the human race has taken about another 2 trillion photos. So that's an explosion, right? That's an exponential explosion.

[00:09:58] But the fact is that most of us, those photos just live on our phones. Or we share them on platforms like Instagram or other social media, or we emailed them to our friends and family. But there is this kind of explosion of photography.

[00:10:19] On the one hand, it makes it—I'll admit—harder to make a living because there are people who just feel like it's so much easier than it used to be. They don't need to hire a professional. On the other hand, I think it's a golden age in the sense that it really raises the bar. To be a photographer in, say, 1870s, all you really had to learn was the chemistry and the lenses and how to make the process work.

[00:10:47] Now, that part's easy. So, if you're going to be a photographer now, whether as a professional or even just to do photography for professional applications, like someone taking pictures of their own product or a produce or jewelry or whatever it might be, the process is easy.

[00:11:10] But if you really want your image or your product to stand out above the sea of the tidal wave of images that anyone else could take, you got to put a little more thought into it than just learning how the camera works. So, I think it's definitely a double-edged sword. Yes, there are lots of images out there, and it's commonplace now.

[00:11:35] When people go to a restaurant, when something comes in front of them that's beautifully plated, they'll take a picture of it and share it on Instagram. Or maybe even they take that a step further. Maybe they have a food blog or something like that where they share those images.

[00:11:53] That's nice, but the images that a food company or a restaurant or a farmer would really want to make their product pop and kind of rise above the noise of all the other images that are out there, that's still a higher bar.

[00:12:14] **Diego Footer:** Yeah. I think that's really well said. And in thinking about this in the context of where this interview fits, a lot of people listening to this are farmers, and they're wanting to take pictures of the stuff that they produce to promote their brand, to convey something that they're selling for a customer.

[00:12:38] And a lot of those people, the camera they have is the one, it's some cousin of the original from 2007 to smartphone. And they're using that to take the best photos they can. What can they do to try and rise above, to stand out from some of that noise, and take the best photo you can with the tool that you have that we all have?

[00:13:04] **John Spaulding:** It still comes back to the same principles. The, 'it's not about the camera. It's not about learning to use the camera.' Cause like I said, that's the easy part now.

[00:13:14] But if you want to show off a product, you could search—let's say, for instance, you're a farmer, and you grow butternut squash. You could go online right now and find, I dunno, half a million stock photos of butternut squash.

[00:13:31] So you still have to think about what makes your product unique and what do you want to show off about it? Is it a family farm? You want to highlight the fact that it's a family-owned operation? Then, get your family into the photos, get them all holding up the products that you produce on your farm and make that family connection.

[00:13:49] Is it about the quality of the product? Is there something that's visibly different in the size, the color, the texture of the product, then put together a photo on a tabletop that shows those qualities off. There's a farm near me where their number one crop is asparagus, which is, of course, a very short term harvest, right?

[00:14:15] It's early spring, two or three cuttings, and then their season is over. But during that few weeks, they invite families to come walk around the fields, cut their own. Then of course, they guide families to the fields where they can do so versus the ones that are either too late or too early to cut their own.

[00:14:38] But they fill the property up with other family-friendly activities, and they photograph the heck out of it. So that the following season, they start their marketing campaign in April, which to be honest, here in Canada, there's still snow on the ground.

[00:14:58] But they start that marketing to remind people that there's this family-friendly activity waiting for them to come to the farm, cut their own product, and then of course, they have some beautiful shots of their product on the plate or on a dish, ready to eat.

[00:15:17] So, it's not something necessarily you can do in one shot. You might have to build a body of work over time to show how your product is unique, what you can do to show it off.

[00:15:32] **Diego Footer:** In terms of showing it off, is it... I think maybe where people get stuck is okay, let's say it's a carrot, and I have the top on—or a bunch of carrots. I have the tops on those carrots as well. It's, okay, do I highlight the whole thing? Do I highlight just the carrot itself? Do I have my hand holding it? How am I doing that framing? How much space should I have around the border of this to make it look good?

[00:16:03] **John Spaulding:** I'm sorry. I cut you off.

[00:16:05] **Diego Footer:** No, go ahead. Go ahead.

[00:16:05] **John Spaulding:** First of all, for filling the frame versus leaving extra space, I always leave extra space, and I advise anybody shooting anything, leave extra space. 'Cause you can

always crop it afterwards on your computer. But you can't expand the frame to include things that you cut off when you were shooting it.

[00:16:26] I would suggest always trying to make a simple background as possible. If you get some beautiful produce, like a carrot, to use your example, put it on a slate gray plate with pretty lighting coming in from a nearby window. That carrot it's gonna look great.

[00:16:47] I would avoid including things that make the background too complicated. Stay away from busy pattern tablecloth for instance, or plates that have filigree or a pattern around the edge of the plate. That's just going to take away. But on the other hand, to go hard, the opposite way, again, I come back to, what is it about what you're selling that makes someone want to buy it from you?

[00:17:16] I can go to the grocery store and buy carrots. So, if I'm going to come to a small supplier, that supplier had better say something to me about why I should come to them. What's solving a problem for me, the consumer, that they're offering the solution?

[00:17:35] So maybe, again, just to get back to the fresh, local supplier family farm. What if I just get my kid to pull a bunch of carrots out of the ground, hold them by the tops, and stick that fist-full of carrots out towards the camera where the carrots and the kids fist occupy most of the picture, and maybe the kid's smiling face is in the background?

[00:18:02] That tells me something different about that product that the package of carrots grown in Mexico that I'm going to buy it at the local grocery store.

[00:18:15] **Diego Footer:** I like that. Cause it gives it some life, some identity. What are your thoughts on stock images? I don't mean—let me back that up. What are your thoughts on catalog images you see a lot on websites where it's product, white background?

[00:18:30] **John Spaulding:** It's easy to scroll past those kinds of images. Very quickly. And stock image looks like a stock image except for the very, very good ones, which is maybe the five, the top five to 10% of that market.

[00:18:44] But if it's just the product on a white background, I've seen it before. The consumer's seen it before. It's very easy to scroll past. It doesn't have any particular impact. If I'm selling, for instance, a wide variety of products, then maybe that's a big job getting all those products photographed. And if I can quickly assemble a collage of stock photos of everything I sell, okay, great. That's a time saver.

[00:19:15] Maybe that's the header banner on your web page, showing that you sell everything from carrots to, I don't know, pork sausage, where getting all that stuff together for individual photo shoots would be a big job and take a lot of work.

[00:19:31] But I think for the smaller producer who specializes in a particular type of product, it's worth taking the time to show off what makes your product special or what makes you

special as a producer of that product. Maybe your farm has a barn that was built in the 19th century, and you're still using it.

[00:19:54] Then by all means, photograph your stuff in that barn. Or include that barn, a beautiful shot of that barn as part of your corporate identity. In other words, look for everything you can do in a photo to set yourself apart. And a stock photo is unlikely to do that.

[00:20:14] **Diego Footer:** It's that unique selling proposition, what are you doing that other people aren't. Let's say I have that, and I'm starting to incorporate that. The great thing about a lot of farms is there's a tremendous amount of natural beauty around them. But you also get a lot of challenges with that. You get sunrise, sunset, you get sunny days, you get cloudy days, you get rainy days.

[00:20:39] In a perfect world, what advice would you give somebody on capturing products in their best light—no pun intended—in a world that varies in natural lighting? Is there a better time of day or when should you go into, or when should you look at artificial lighting?

[00:20:58] **John Spaulding:** Yeah, that's a good question because you mentioned lighting. It's not so much about, is there a better time of day or a better type of light, because the answer to that is yes. It's, what's the best time of day or what's the best kind of light for what it is you're photographing.

[00:21:17] In other words, a cloudy day or indirect lighting, say, coming from a window, but reflecting off a white wall, that's what we call soft lighting. It's great for highlighting color and shape. It doesn't really show texture very well. That can be both a positive and a negative. And I'll tell you what I mean in a second.

[00:21:41] Direct sunlight, or even like a bare bulb. Let's take a table lamp and take the shade off, so you've got that bare light bulb. That's what we call hard lighting. It isn't great for showing shape because there's a light that's in, there's a side of the object that's in the light, and the other side is in the shadow and there's a hard line separating the two.

[00:22:02] It's great for accentuating texture. And, again, that can be a plus or a minus. And I'll tell you what I mean using this example: let's say you've got an eggplant, which has a smooth surface to it, right? And you've got freshly baked sourdough bread. The whole loaf, not cut.

[00:22:27] Both have a beautiful shape and a beautiful color. If the lighting is too soft, however, it'll look like a brown oval and a purple oval sitting next to each other with beautiful color, but no particular texture. In that case, you might want a harder light like direct sunlight, so you can see that fine texture on the surface of the eggplant and the surface on the crust of the bread.

[00:22:57] You need a harder light to bring out some texture. So maybe you want to put those on the table out in direct sun. On the other hand, let's say you slice that bread. You think

about what the inside of sourdough bread is like. If the lighting is too harsh, it's going to look like a moonscape, right?

[00:23:16] It's going to look hard and craggy, and almost like you wouldn't even want to bite into it because that surface, that texture is so exaggerated. So, when something has a lot of texture, let's say the leaves of a cabbage or sliced bread or a baked good, in general, you might want the softer light so that you can see some texture, but it doesn't look too harsh.

[00:23:45] So what I really recommend for people is if you're just starting out, and you really want to explore the different qualities of lighting and how they show off a product, do it both ways. Set up a table out in direct sunlight. Photograph your products, then take the same products and put them on a table near a window where there's indirect lighting, but not direct sun.

[00:24:15] Take the same picture, and then compare the results. You really do have to play around with it. I've said to my students over many years, really learning photography is a bit like learning a musical instrument. I can explain to you how to play the guitar in about 10 minutes. Doesn't mean you're going to know how to play the guitar.

[00:24:37] You have to start applying the principles and practicing, and then seeing what result looks right. And then you have to also start showing it to other people. Maybe have a small circle of people, not your loved ones who are going to just say they love everything you do, right? But some people who will be a little more critical who will say, this one looks better and here's why.

[00:25:02] And you do maybe have to spend a few days or a few weeks or some months over time, practicing at some different ways until you develop a consistent way of doing it that gives you the results that you're happiest with.

[00:25:21] **Diego Footer:** It really is just get out there, take photos, try different things, remember what you tried—

[00:25:29] **John Spaulding:** Exactly.

[00:25:30] **Diego Footer:** —and then look at the results and compare them. Say, Oh, this one was done under these conditions. That looks so much better than B, which was done under totally different conditions.

[00:25:38] **John Spaulding:** Or, this certain type of product looks better in these conditions because it's rougher and craggier and has more texture naturally. A pineapple under hard light would look like something you couldn't eat. It's just—it would look scary. Whereas a slice of pineapple, the fruit inside, would look just like a yellow circle under soft light.

[00:26:05] So you have to experiment with what looks better and why. And you do it. It's not rocket science. You do develop pretty quickly an eye for what you think is going to look better under one type of lighting versus the other.

[00:26:22] **Diego Footer:** If we compare what a practiced amateur could do versus a photographer who's a professional, how big of a difference is there between those photos for the average person if they were to look at them?

[00:26:38] Blind sample. Same shot, let's say same layout, just, one person decided to hold the camera and do whatever they did with it one way. And the other person decided to do it the other way. You think there's going to be a big difference between the hobbyist and the professional?

[00:26:56] **John Spaulding:** Both the hobbyist and the professional might be able to produce the same photograph. The question for me and would get—what gets back to your original question, what makes me a professional is that let's say a client has a dozen different products to photograph, and we have to get them done in an afternoon.

[00:27:19] I can deliver that result in a couple of hours that might take an amateur days or weeks of trial and error. So, I think, for instance, in one case, I have a good friend who's a chef. He wanted to produce a cookbook. We went through 80, I want to say 83 or 84 different recipes in four days where I had different setups of different parts of his restaurant.

[00:27:51] So depending on what came out of the kitchen, I said, okay, that needs to go to this setup with the hard light. It needs to go to this setup with a softer light. It needs to go to this other setup that has a blending of the two. We produced all the photos needed for a cookbook in under four days.

[00:28:12] I like to think that an amateur maybe could produce just a high quality of photography, but not in four days. It might take them four weeks. It might take them four months. Or they might give up and quit. So I think when someone wants to do their own photography, I encourage them to do so, but if they're busy with all the other aspects of running their business, running a farm, we all know that farmers put in incredibly long days, and it's very little downtime.

[00:28:49] So if they've got a whole bunch of products that are ready to be photographed, and they just want a big body of work that they can use to market their work done in a day or two, that's when you pull the trigger and hire professional, I think, cause they can come in and make really efficient use of that time and give you a big body of work that you can use.

[00:29:14] Plus also that work has a shelf life. Like, an amateur might do all that trial and error to arrive at one really great photo of a particular product. But once I've set up how to get a great photo of that particular product, I can, in very short order, shoot three, four or five variations.

[00:29:37] So I can say, Hey, use this one this year, use this one next year, use the one after that the year after, two years later, so that the client can freshen their content, freshen their Instagram feed, their website, and so forth using different images, but with a very consistent quality and a very consistent style, even while they want to change out and freshen the content.

[00:30:07] **Diego Footer:** If somebody does go that route, and I agree with you, it's, if you just want to get it done, I think hiring out is great. Whether it's plumber or a mechanic or a photographer. There's a lot of justification for going onto a professional.

[00:30:24] When I go to find a photographer, I've done this exercise myself. I go on Yelp or some service to find them. There's a whole bunch of photographers out there. Some specialize in weddings, or they more advertise themselves as wedding photographers. Some just say, I'm a photographer.

[00:30:39] If you're looking to get product, and a lot of people listening to this, food product, photos taken, should I look for somebody who does that? Or do you think any photographer can do justification to what I'm doing or do I need a specialist?

[00:30:57] **John Spaulding:** Yes, and no. I identify myself as a commercial photographer. And what I mean by that is that my client is paying me to take pictures of something. I differentiate that from what could be considered retail photography, where the person in front of my camera is the person paying me. That's weddings, family portraits, that kind of thing.

[00:31:25] That's a very broad, very crude distinction, and I'm not sure that all of my colleagues would agree with it. But I would say, first off, if what you're having done is for business purposes, hire a commercial photographer. Stay away from the weddings and babies and those guys.

[00:31:44] If they're ethical, they'll turn you away. If they're not ethical, and they maybe are trying to fill in the months in the fall or winter, where there aren't any weddings to keep their calendar filled up, they'll take the job and maybe just not be very good at it. Or—I mean, that's probably going to be controversial, but I think it's a fair assessment.

[00:32:11] I don't do weddings. I don't do babies. I don't do family portraits. There were people who were much, much better at it than I am. I know what I'm good at. And if somebody calls me and says, I need a group photo at a family reunion, I'll say, I'm sorry, I'm not the guy, but I can help you find somebody.

[00:32:29] Now, the question about specialty. I do architecture. I do interiors for designers. I also do food and product photography. Those are different specialties, but sometimes they're for the same client, right? I'll do a job for a restaurant where I'll photograph the restaurant interior. I'll do portraits of the chef, and the front of house manager. And then I'll also do food photography.

[00:32:59] That comes from, even though those are different specialties, it comes from understanding the client and their needs holistically. So, if you hire a photographer, say, who does industrial photography, and they may be also do agribusiness, the farmer sitting on the tractor in an ad for John Deere.

[00:33:26] That person might be a really good food photographer and will want to take on a job for an afternoon. He understands your business, understands what you're trying to convey. I wouldn't shy away from hiring someone in that circumstance just because he's not a food photography specialist.

[00:33:47] I'm sorry, that answer is a bit vague, but I'm a strong believer in understanding that someone who's good at what you need might not necessarily be that because he or she has done exactly that same thing. But if they're, if they hire, if they—I'm trying to figure out how to say this just the right way without irritating any more of my friends or colleagues who I might hear this.

[00:34:18] If they understand how to translate the business need into an image, that's what you want. In other words, if you figure out why you need the image, how you're going to use it, who your audience is, a commercial photographer will likely be able to translate that into a really effective photo-shoot.

[00:34:44] If you hire somebody who does weddings and engagement pictures, they're used to making the person in front of the camera feel comfortable and maybe play to their vanities or insecurities to some—that is just not a skillset that's going to serve you when you're looking for a commercial photographer. And that's why I don't do weddings.

[00:35:10] **Diego Footer:** Understood. I'll throw my hat into the controversy fire here, too. I've dealt with a lot of photographers and video people in the past and some are what I would say are in the artists group.

[00:35:27] They're a little more free-spirited with maybe their view of photography and just how they run a business versus somebody who's just, like, a cleaner. They show up, they get the job done, and they do great things. You've been hired by a lot of people over the past 20 plus years.

[00:35:50] If I'm out there looking for a commercial photographer, what questions should I ask to really find somebody who I think can do a good job and exclude these artists who I've dealt with in the past, that they're just a headache, nothing's on time, that type of thing.

[00:36:08] **John Spaulding:** It's an interesting distinction that you bring up because I'm very clear about this. I don't consider myself an artist, and I've never called myself an artist. I consider myself a craftsman.

[00:36:19] If you hired me to build cabinets in your kitchen, you don't care what kind of wood I think is the most beautiful and fun to work with. You've already decided if you want maple or

walnut or cherry or whatever. But on the other hand, if you want me to make recommendations, based on my experience, I better have enough depth of experience to be able to bring something to the table maybe that you hadn't thought of.

[00:36:52] So, that's a fine line, right? I'm—I can't... There are some creative directors and art directors and advertising agency people who want to just do a sketch, and then give that sketch to the photographer and say, make a photograph that looks exactly like that. I don't really want that kind of job.

[00:37:18] But a client who can express the feeling that they're after, the audience that they're trying to reach, the maybe mood or spirit of how they see their brand, maybe it's whimsical, maybe they use humor in their advertising, and they want images that are going to be a little a little funny or a little whimsical or a little offbeat, or maybe they sell mostly to corporate clients, and they want their brand and their image to be very quality-oriented, very buttoned up.

[00:37:58] I have to be craftsman enough to treat that as gospel. But on the other hand, I have to be artists enough, creative enough, to take that mood board or that communication or that brief—in the business, we just call it a creative brief—I have to be able to take that creative brief from the client and bring some recommendations to the table.

[00:38:28] So, I think if you are going to hire a professional, you have to have that conversation. You have to say, if I want to achieve this and this, these are the must haves. I need it to be whimsical. I needed it to be family-friendly. I need it to have some elements of humor, and I might need you to think of how to do that in a photograph.

[00:38:54] If the client is just, 'I need you to show me some sketches and some concept thing, or I don't know what you want,' then maybe that person is a little bit too... A little—not creative enough, let's put it that way. But on the other hand, if you talk to someone, and they don't really seem to get it, they want to just say, okay, we'll just start shooting and see what happens.

[00:39:23] I need you to have a little bit more of a plan than that. I need you to suggest some specific elements that we'll have on hand for that day and maybe how you're going to set up the shoot and what the location is going to be. You need to bring a little more to the table than just, I'm going to show up with my camera, and we'll see what happens.

[00:39:45] So I think that it is very important. If you're going to hire a professional, and if you're going to spend your hard-earned money, and you're going to take that cash out of your marketing budget, you need to be really comfortable just based on that conversation. And if somebody doesn't inspire that kind of comfort, you just say, okay, I'll let you know and move on to the next.

[00:40:12] **Diego Footer:** Yeah, I guess then that's where a lot of the work comes in on the client. Instead of going in thinking, I need photos, it's more, what do I need to—what's the

essence of what I need to capture in a photo? Like you said, it's a family brand. We're rustic. We want to show freshness in all our food.

[00:40:30] You have that brief thought out, put together, and then, you talk to them or send it to them and see how they respond. And if they're like, gave me references or something like that, then you can start to feel like, okay, this person can work with what we're doing, or this person is a more template-based.

[00:40:50] **John Spaulding:** Yeah, it really is... To do effective marketing, whether it's photography or anything else, social media or anything, you've got to have some sense of who your audience is and how you're trying to reach them and where and how they find the service or product that they're after.

[00:41:11] So if you're a big producer, and you want to sell mostly to grocery stores or big distributors, then obviously, you're going to have a different corporate identity for your farm than you would for a small family farm that's closely located to an urban center where you mostly want those people who maybe come into the farmer's market on a Saturday, but maybe it's a beautiful day, and they'd rather just get in the car and come out to your farm.

[00:41:41] So who your market is and who your audience is and how you want to reach them, those are all questions you've got to answer, I would say any business has to answer, before you hire a photographer because a good commercial photographer is going to ask those questions.

[00:42:00] Who's the audience for these photos? What are you trying to say to them? And if you haven't figured that out, then the photographer, look, I'll show up, and I'll take pictures, and they'll be good, but it, ultimately, might not be the right tone or type of picture for the audience you ultimately are trying to reach.

[00:42:23] So I would also suggest whenever you're hiring a photographer or a professional, if they're not asking a lot of questions like this, then maybe they're not experienced enough in this particular area of business to be the right choice for you. Many photographers have booking information on their sites, on their websites, right?

[00:42:51] They want to know the date of the event, what's your budget. Those are all the wrong questions. Because first, I want to know what do you need. And if I'm not the right photographer for you, I'll tell you. And if I know someone who would be a better choice, I'll recommend them. I believe in karma, at least professional karma.

[00:43:13] But if all the photographer's asking is what date did you have in mind, and what's your budget, Boy, you've skipped. You've skipped right to the last part of the conversation, over all the most important parts.

[00:43:28] **Diego Footer:** I think that's a really good way of outlining how to approach the conversation, what to ask, and what to listen for. When it does come to budget, what should

people expect there? You have crazy day rates, or what I would say are very high day rates that the supermarket chain could maybe seek out.

[00:43:53] But a lot of small businesses, like, they just don't have that budget. Is there... They're going to run into problems of, I can't pay \$2,000 a day for photos, so I got to go down to whatever a day, and now my photos are that much worse. How should you think about choosing a photographer, find somebody who's great. And now it comes down to budget, and your budget isn't huge, but you want to compensate them fairly.

[00:44:22] **John Spaulding:** Yeah, it's tough. That is the struggle to me. That actually is the fault line in professional photography right now, because there's always somebody who will do it cheaper. And for that matter, there are people who will do the job for free because they need the portfolio material or the exposure.

[00:44:44] And then ultimately, those folks are competing against people who would just rather do it themselves and spend no money at all. Some of the things that should drive the rate are, first of all, the size of the audience.

[00:44:59] The thing that really drives the rate for most professional photographers—for most commercial photographers, I should say, is the usage. If you are a big company going on a national ad campaign, and the images are going to appear in print ads in every magazine on the newsstand for six months, that's a five-figure photo shoot to start.

[00:45:25] A photo shoot like that can get into six figures. On the other hand, if you're a local small business, and you're really just looking for images to add to your social media, then that's obviously unrealistic. You're not going to spend \$2,000 for someone to come out for a few hours or even a whole day because your audience is still maybe a few hundred, or if you've got a pretty decent following on social media, a couple thousand, maybe, a five-figure following.

[00:46:02] What I would suggest a small to medium-sized business consider is if you—let me start that, let me start that over.

[00:46:13] You have to be aware that a commercial photographer has to make a living, right? So, if I do a hundred photo shoots a year at a thousand dollars a day, that's a hundred thousand dollars. That's a pretty good living depending on where you live. Maybe not in Manhattan, but it's pretty good living here.

[00:46:29] On the other hand, would I want to do 200 photo shoots a year for 500 a day for that same hundred thousand dollar living? That's getting pretty busy for a pretty small rate of return. Could I do 500 photo-shoots a year for \$200 a day? Now, that obviously becomes absurd, right? I can't do 500 photo shoots a day. That's more than a year—that's more than one a day.

[00:47:01] So if somebody offers to do a photo shoot for you, and they're only saying they're going to charge \$200, that's a clue that this is not how they make their living. They're not a professional. And so it becomes, 'be careful what you wish for.'

[00:47:21] If you find a budget photographer, you might be hiring somebody who is a trust fund baby. Okay, good for them. Or they have another job, but they don't depend on their photography to make their living. In other words, they're not really a professional photographer.

[00:47:42] What you can negotiate, though, is how often do you want to do this? And what are you getting for your money? So, let's say the photographer wants to charge a thousand bucks for the day. It's a lot of money to a small, independent farmer. That's a chunk of change.

[00:48:02] But what if that photographer could promise that they are going to give them 40, 50, 60 different usable photos out of that one day, so they can feed photos into their marketing content for a year? They can change the photo header on their website weekly for a year. And then, a year later, pay that same photographer a thousand bucks to come back and do it again.

[00:48:34] If you think of it as a thousand bucks a day, that seems like, a lot of money, but if you think you're going to get a year's worth of content, and only do it once a year, then you budget for it as a thousand bucks a year, and it becomes much more reasonable sounding.

[00:48:49] So, I would encourage any small business operator before they fall over a need, need smelling salts when they hear a commercial photographer's day rate to negotiate what they're going to get for that day. If I, as the producer, like my chef friend, if we could go through 80 recipes in four days, and then he generates a book that he can sell for the next 10 years, that's a bargain.

[00:49:20] So if I could pay a photographer—and a lot of my clients are like this. A lot of my clients do hire me once or twice a year for 2,500 bucks, but they can completely refresh all their marketing materials, print collateral, website, social media, you name it, for that amount of money that they've budgeted, then that suddenly becomes much more manageable when it's in context.

[00:49:55] **Diego Footer:** Is that—are those numbers you throw out there, is 50 usable photos in a day, is that in the realm of realistic?

[00:50:05] **John Spaulding:** Sure. Yeah. I can easily shoot two, three hundred photos on a conservative day, and close to a thousand. It depends on the subject matter. So if you, now you have to realize that to make that feasible on the client's side, they might need to have 30 or 40 different things they need photographed.

[00:50:29] Or even having that number, let's say you're a farm that grows nothing but root vegetables. So, you're going to bring potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, radishes, onions.

You're going to bring several baskets full of vegetables for the day's photo shoot. I'd be happy to commit to going through, I'll photograph them in the bushel baskets.

[00:50:57] I'll take them out and photograph them individually. I'll take some out and say, Hey, take this into the kitchen and whip up some mashed potatoes or some fried potatoes while I'm doing this other thing. You'd be amazed at the amount of different setups you can get through in a day. So, if I say I'm a thousand bucks a day. I can't go any lower than that.

[00:51:19] And the farmer says, I just need a couple of photos of my potatoes. If the farmer starts thinking no, I grow eight or 10 different products. And out of those eight or 10 different products, I could photograph each one, two different ways. Now, all of a sudden, we're up to 30 or 40 photographs easily.

[00:51:43] So I think both the photographer and the client need to think about how they're going to use that day. If I'm charging you for the day, you get me for the day. So, if you only have two things you need photographed, and you only want them done a certain way, obviously, it's a waste of money.

[00:52:02] But if you grow a variety of products and some of them can be photographed in situ, in the field, being pulled out of the ground, and then we move to a lighting set up on a table where we cook some things, we photograph some things individually and together, you get a ton of content out of one day of a photographer's time

[00:52:27] **Diego Footer:** To pull back the curtain a little bit here, what percentage of the total process is just the shooting day? If you take 500 photos in a day, at the end of the day or the next day, you have to go through, get rid of the ones that are no good, mark the ones that have potential, then go in and post-process whatever ones you're going to keep, and that gets you from 500 down to 50. If you do a shoot like that, how much work do you have on the backend?

[00:53:01] **John Spaulding:** It depends. But generally, for budgeting purposes, it's about one-to-one. So full day of shooting is about a full day of editing and finishing. That in itself also drives that day rate. I could tell you I've charged you 500 for the day of shooting and 500 for the day of editing. And you'll say, what if I only want the images directly from camera?

[00:53:24] That's a pitfall that a lot of clients think is a better deal for them. Clients will think, what if I don't want to pay for any post production, and I just want the raw files? I don't know of any photographers that will be willing to turn the raw files over because it's like turning over the eggs and the butter and the flour and the sugar when you hired me to make a cake.

[00:53:51] It's just turning over an unfinished product. And I don't know what the client is going to do with that raw file, how they're going to do whatever they do with it. And then maybe they put it up on their website and tag back to me at my social media and the images look terrible.

[00:54:13] So that's a bad bet for the photographer, but I'll build that post-production time into my rate. If the client says—and the best thing you can do is tell the photographer, Hey, look, I can spend a thousand bucks, and here's what I want for my thousand bucks.

[00:54:32] I want 40, high-quality, finished photographs that I can use to update my marketing materials throughout the year. Deal. Done. That's an easy negotiation. It's when a client has a strong idea of what they want, how they're going to use it, and how much they are willing and able to spend. I have a friend who is a television producer for documentaries, he's done work for National Geographic and Discovery and HGTV, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:55:09] And he'll say, look, I can make a show, a half-hour show, for \$30,000, and I can make a half-hour show for \$300,000. It just depends on what the vision is for what kind of show you want. And if what you want is in sync with how much you're willing to spend, we have a deal. If what you want is out of sync, then we negotiate, or I'm not the right fit.

[00:55:42] **Diego Footer:** How do you approach that question? Or how would you advise a prospective client to approach the question of, if a photographer, you've had the conversation about what you're looking to do in terms of what to capture, and they say what's your budget? I think so many people, myself included, are like, I don't even know.

[00:56:01] So, I don't want to shoot myself in the foot and say, oh, it's 2000. And you've been burned by mechanics and other people that aren't ethical and well oh, 2000. Okay, I would've charged him a thousand to do this. How do you navigate this situation? Is it, Hey here's what I'd like.

[00:56:22] Like you said, I want 50 good photos that are edited out. I'd like to try and do that for this price, and you just throw out, Hey, this is what I would pay if that person magically showed up, or if those photos magically showed up on my door, this is what I would pay. And then just see what that photographer says?

[00:56:41] **John Spaulding:** Some combination. I think it's a conversation, to be honest. It keeps coming back to the client needing a clear understanding of what they want and having a marketing strategy. If they want to be able to update their marketing materials for a year. So, this is their annual budget to be able to do that, then they need to be able to say, I want 40 to 50 finished, edited, final photos.

[00:57:14] One photographer will say, oh that's going to take me four days, and your budget needs to be \$10,000. And another photographer might say, I can do that for you an afternoon, and I'll charge you 500 bucks. The client has to do a little bit of that research.

[00:57:33] It's going to cost you more, for instance, in Southern California or in the New York area, or the Toronto area—you get what I'm after, major metropolitan.

[00:57:45] **Diego Footer:** Sure, sure.

[00:57:45] **John Spaulding:** It's going to cost you more to hire a photographer in those regions. There might be somebody in Wisconsin who loves shooting for agribusiness, loves shooting farms, and he'll do it for a song 'cause he just wants to work.

[00:58:01] So it's not a one-size-fits-all answer. I think you have to look for what are the resources who do the kind of photography you need in your area. Talk to more than one. If you talk to five people and they all give you similar quotes, that's what you should budget for. If you talk to five people, and they'd give you wildly different quotes, keep looking, keep talking to more people until that curve starts to flatten out.

[00:58:30] It also depends on how busy they are. One of the rules for a creative professional is if you're getting too busy, raising your rates. That's just the reality of it. When I was doing work for the housing market, I was getting booked five days a week and turning work down 'cause I was booked. When I raised my rate, that thinned out, I was working a little bit less hard for about the same money.

[00:58:59] So that was a wind, right? If a photographer is hungry, he'll make you a deal. That's great. You still have to make sure he's the right choice for what you need. He still got the competency, he's still asking the right questions. He still shows examples of the same kind of work that you're looking for.

[00:59:22] On the other hand, you might call somebody and, she'll just say, Hey, I'm booked up for the next two months. You're not going to get a deal. And good for them. If she's that busy, she's got a really robust client base, and she's flying all over North America, great. That just might not be the right person for a small business operator to hire because they're busy running around doing shoots for Monsanto.

[00:59:49] **Diego Footer:** Just given the potential audience for this, if we look into this, and if we try and average it out across Canada and the US, is that thousand dollars a day rate, is that close to probably where it averages out? Or do you think that's a little low, is that a little high?

[01:00:08] Where do you...?

[01:00:10] **John Spaulding:** You know, I would say shooting for small business, probably 800 to a thousand, should be considered about the baseline, depending on the market. If I were in a smaller market, and I had trouble finding a photographer that even did what I needed, it might go strongly lower, or I don't know, that's a little tough, but I think 800 to a thousand is a reasonable baseline.

[01:00:45] You might find some people who say I'll do 800, but I'm strictly six hours. Not even a full day. Whatever we can get done in six hours, great. But that's the kind of thing that can be negotiated. But if somebody is saying two, 300 bucks or I'll do it for nothing, be very skeptical.

[01:01:08] If somebody's saying 2000 and up, again, depending on the market, Southern California, tough market. A lot of industry, a lot of communications and advertising photographers in that area, as crowded as that field is, if they're good, they're busy.

[01:01:28] You have to pay more, or you might have to wait. Let's say I've got an open day, but not for two months, but I'm willing to do it for this amount. But then again, if, again, if that 1200 or 1500 or 2000 exceeds your budget or exceeds your expectation, then say to the photographer, boy, that's a lot of money.

[01:01:57] I can only afford to do this once a year. Could I get a year's worth of marketing content out of that day, if I had this many different products available, and could I get 50, 60 images out of that day if I pay your full rate? So, all those things affect—

[01:02:22] All those things can be negotiated and affect what's a fair price versus what isn't. If somebody says they'll do the shoot for 600 a day, but you only get two or three pictures out of it, that's a tough sell. You put those images on your website or on your social media feed, and then you're done. Maybe refresh it a couple of weeks later, and then you're really done.

[01:02:49] But if they give you images that you could use seasonally and swap out over time for the whole year, then suddenly that rate doesn't look so bad if you're only doing it once a year.

[01:03:02] **Diego Footer:** Right on. I really appreciate all the advice, John. Again, for people who want to look you up, if they're in the Ontario area—

[01:03:12] **John Spaulding:** I shoot all over north America. Sorry to cut you off.

[01:03:16] **Diego Footer:** Let me restate that. So thanks so much, John, for people that want to look you up, you shoot all over North America. Where can they find out more about you?

[01:03:25] **John Spaulding:** JohnSpauldingPhotography.com. That's J O H N S P A U L D I N G Photography.com. Or you can find me on any social media platform. My tag is the same, at J Spaulding Photo.

[01:03:43] **Diego Footer:** All right. Perfect. Yeah, if you ever vacation in Southern California, and want to make it a work vacation, look me up. I'll happily redo some of my product imagery.

[01:03:51] **John Spaulding:** Yeah, I would love to. Like I told you, my son lives in Riverside, and I've got a really dear friend who lives in Pasadena. So between Riverside and Pasadena. It's only a few miles for the south to York and ocean side.

[01:04:03] **Diego Footer:** Sure, sure thing. Cool. I think this is great. I think it—I liked the way you approached it in terms of how you explained it. I think it's going to translate well to people. So this will air as audio 'cause I'll put it out as just a podcast.

[01:04:16] I'll edit it to tighten it up a little bit. And then parts of it will go in the book as excerpts. So, thanks so much.

[01:04:22] **John Spaulding:** Yeah. If you could send me a link for the podcast, when I know it's coming up to be released, I'll also share the link on my social.

[01:04:31] **Diego Footer:** Okay. Yeah. Right on. And then if you ever have anything to share in the future, find yourself out this way, reach out, let me know.

[01:04:38] **John Spaulding:** All right. Sounds good.

[01:04:39] **Diego Footer:** Thanks so much, John. Thank you. Bye-bye.

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