

A View from the Inside – How Photography and Art Careers Are Changing and What You Need to Know to Succeed

Appeared in The Picture Professional Issue 1, 2009

The official publication of the American Society of Picture Professionals

A two-hour, standing-room-only presentation on the changing nature of careers in photography was hosted at the National Press Club on November 16, 2008 by The DC/South Chapter of the American Society of Picture Professionals in conjunction with Photoweeek DC. The panel discussion “A View from the Inside – How Photography and Art Careers are Changing and What You Need to Know to Succeed” attracted students, mid-career communication professionals, and career changers considering a future in photography.

Initiating and maintaining a career in visual communication is, to say the least, getting complicated. Many traditional markets for photography are evaporating. Photo-internships are vanishing. Entry-level positions where college graduates got real world experience and learned the photography business are disappearing.

This has been especially true in the publication world where positions that offered full-time employment with benefits have disappeared as focus has shifted to ways that the budget can be trimmed.

The ease of low-cost, digital, automatic cameras has given rise to the idea that anyone can push the button. Management has wrongly come to believe that usable images for websites and publications can be acquired in this lower cost, but also low quality method.

The panel re-enforced the values-added by experienced picture professionals in a world where limited attention spans and the necessity for speed in the absorption of informative and storytelling images are depended upon more than ever before. The two-hour session also discussed new markets, new marketing techniques, and business models that work for working professionals in this new-fangled, brave world.

Panel participants included Jay Sumner, Director of Photography, National Geographic Kids Magazine, Jeff Hutchens, Photographer for Getty Images, Bruce Hunter, Director of Media Services, U.S. Geological Survey, David Shives, Senior Art Director, K12 Inc., and Coburn Dukehart, Photo and Multimedia Editor, National Public Radio. Each panelist shared his or her particular viewpoint and offered practical advice for maintaining a career in photography.

Jay Sumner, now Director of Photography at “National Geographic Kids,” worked her way up from assistant, to representative, to photographer, to director. She emphasized the importance of relationships and performance that solves challenges for their editors.

Panel participants, (left to right) Dave Shives, Bruce Hunter, Jay Sumner and Jeff Hutchens. Photo © Judy Heffner



Ms. Summer made the following points. When on assignment, the professional must show concern for the time of his or her subject's and respect the project deadline. The photographer must be a resourceful problem solver. The practitioner must understand client needs and accomplish the task on deadline and within budget. Pay attention to the details. Double check the photo composition. Make sure spelling and caption information is correct. Research your on-site contact. You only have one chance to make a first impression on the client. Seamless solutions from the image-maker are as important as great images.

Before you approach a publication to solicit work, learn about the potential customer. Does the publication use stock exclusively? What type of assignments do they make? What is in their pages? Do you do the type of work they use? What can you offer that the publication wants or needs?

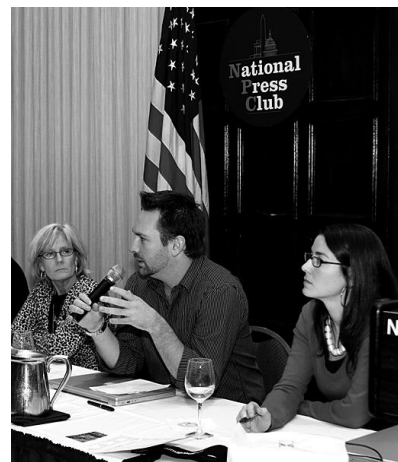
Some successful shooters like Jeff Hutchens and Bruce Hunter become photogs through a side door. Jeff studied Psychology and Pre-Med as an undergraduate. Bruce studied Advertising Design, Computer Science and Oceanography during his college days. Although photography was an avocation for both, their widely different course work lent additional skills, knowledge and opportunities to use as an entry point into the photographic world.

Although some photographers are generalists, many develop a specialty. This specialization makes them the go-to person in particular areas. Bruce's knowledge in the natural sciences created opportunities in both marine work and astronomy. He first worked at the National Geographic Digital Lab where his underwater photographs brought him to the attention of magazine editors and got him published.

Jeff's background as a son of diplomats, allowed him extensive world travel.

He lived not only in the US, but also China, South Africa and the Philippines. This opportunity allowed Jeff to develop an awareness of different cultures, and meet many kinds of people and became the basis of his career as a social documentary photographer. Clients have become comfortable with sending him to distant locations and are assured that he will return incredible images, having managed the rigors and logistics of the trip.

Both Bruce and Jeff utilize their non-photographic experiences into successful photographic careers. Life experiences and interests enable their storytelling abilities.



Jeff Hutchens making a point (center)
Jay Sumner and Coburn Dukehart. Photo
© Judy Heffner

Dave Shives is an art director. Working as the point person, he coordinates workflows, people, and deadlines. Each project brings its own challenges and central to satisfying challenges are people who work as part of a team. Photographers must be technically astute, have superior good work ethics, positive attitudes, and be problem-solver. People and person skills distinguish one photographer from another.

Technology is shrinking the gap between still and moving pictures. Sound is becoming more important. Colburn Dukehart stresses good storytelling. She thinks today's photographer must be able to acquire a strong audio component as well as strong images. All these elements combine today into the ability to tell a cohesive, compelling story. Colburn provided several examples during her presentation. Although it is easier to sometimes show rather than explain good storytelling.

Does the photographer know what story he or she wants to tell? Is the focus solid? Can it hold audience interest? Does it have a beginning, middle and end? Is it worth telling?

The photographic career has changed. One needs to be more imaginative in finding that first job or maintaining a photographic business than was necessary as little as ten or twenty years ago. If a shooter possesses good business sense and the ability to research situations that require specific skills and abilities, making a living as a still photographer is still possible.



The audience at the National Press Club presented by the ASPP/South Chapter Photo © Judy Heffner

An important aspect is the ability to market your work. Ask yourself some questions. Do you have a sales pitch? Why should you be hired over anyone else? How do you market yourself? Do you have a website, blog and online network social and business profiles? Do you enter contests? Do you network at tradeshows? Do you belong to professional organizations and do you participate in activities and organizing events? Do you do pro bono work? Do you have a mentor who gives you advice? Do you send out emails and other marketing material? The sum

of the answers is the marketing that finds work.

Within all of these devices, you are showing a prospective client or employer that you are a problem solver. You bring value to the job. Your storytelling ability and style attracts readership or helps to convey the client's message. You need to show you are a team player who can perform under pressure with a positive attitude. Doing pro bono work or working within a professional organization provides an opportunity for others to see your work ethic and enhance your reputation. You need to offer what no one else can. Value

your work and make it affordable to your clients. These positive impressions through your marketing material are essential to growing a career.

There is no master plan to a career in photography. Each panelist has a different educational background. They do, however, share similar character traits. Each has an ability to write, a talent for visual communication, a passion for what they do, purpose, mission, outside interests, outgoing personalities, team players, and each knows how to tell a good story.

This summation was from a panel discussion by the American Society of Picture Professionals DC/South Chapter held on Monday, November 16, 2008 at The National Press Club, Washington DC
Moderated and Written by Laurence L. Levin, American University Adjunct Professor and ASPP past National President, email: larrylevin@verizon.net