

Spirit of Wedding Photographer

With time you learn new things, find out how better handle different situations and generally how make your life better and easier. There is no difference with my wedding photography thing. But if my previous article "My Wedding Photography Experience" I tried to address immediate technical issues, such as flash, lenses, battery, focusing and metering, etc. This article is more about what drives and makes the wedding photographer. Of course, I cannot make any standards in the industry or suggest any guidelines for those who start in this field. This only my view on the wedding photography and what I find makes it better and easier for everyone - clients and photographers. Though you may find it useful in you ventures and even in day-to-day situations.

- Requirements to a Wedding Photographer
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- Being Aware or Perfect Reflection
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Requirements to a Wedding Photographer

The professional wedding photographer involved into a million different things, from business issues to web design and maintenance of his/her own equipment. To make this article better I will try to outline primary things that are required from the photographer, and which ultimately result in better photographs, client satisfaction and the success. In this article I will concentrate on the actual photography and somewhat communication with the outer world. And I should note that this article is biased toward photojournalistic style of wedding photography. Therefore I see the list of requirements as follows:

- Have good equipment and know it
- See everything - Not miss moments
- Think on his feet
- Tell a story
- Be invisible
- Invoke smiles
- Stamina

What a strange list of items you may think. Well, that's what I consider important. Why? Let's see.

Have good equipment and know it

It may sound like a race for a better and more expensive camera. However the professional equipment is not only about the price and number of interesting features. The professional gear allows the photographer to get more out of very tough situations, such as low light, weather (rain, snow and dust). As well it relieves him from many technical distractions and allows to concentrate on the creative part of his job. If the person doesn't know how to use the camera, the lens and the flash, then this person is not a real photographer. And even if he is a photographer, but uses unfamiliar equipment, then it is a very dangerous for both of you: the client may not receive the photographs as requested and expected, and you may loose the business or loose a client and referrals. Nowadays the cameras are getting more and more complex, it seems that they become computers with lens. And such machinery requires an extensive knowledge to operate.

See everything - Not miss moments

It's about having another pair of eyes on the back of your head. Though the focus of the wedding is on the bride and the groom, there are a lot of small events that are going on. The photographer cannot concentrate only on the newlyweds, he has to be everywhere and capture as much as possible.

Think on his feet

The situations change sometimes several times a minute. You step into a dim lit church from a bright sunny outdoors or rush from a well lit hall into a dark room, where the couple tried to shy away from the crowd. All of those require different camera settings and maybe a new approach to handle things. You have to judge the light in a fraction of a second.

The couple may request a formal shot or you decided to take one. What about composition and interesting angles? Do you have time to stop and think for a minute or two? No way.

Tell a story

Whatever happens during the day, every image should encapsulate as much as possible and tell the story about this particular wedding, which is as different from others as the bride and groom. Sometimes it requires a great effort or luck to capture everything and tell their story. Actually the story is what the wedding photography is really about.

Be invisible

What? How come? Yes, we are reporters, not conductors. And less impact we bring into the day the better we do our job. That's why being invisible should be our goal (one of the many). Of course, existing technologies and abilities of human body do not give us such opportunity. Though, there are many time when you can be right under the person's nose and she or he will not notice you. And it's because you become the part of the day, of the environment, which can be easily overlooked.

Once again, why are we trying to be invisible? Because then people show their true selves. All those emotions that share with each other could be captured and kept on paper or as digital file.

Invoke smiles

OK, they see us. What do we do? Smile and people will smile back. That's the perfect time to press the shutter or do your thing, whatever you do. Then our photographs will show happy clients and people who attended the wedding.

And this rule applies not only to the day of the wedding, or when we press the shutter. It applies to every day life, when we meet with prospective clients, when we screwed up and delay the delivery. Lighten up and this light will show up in your images. Isn't it all about the light?

Stamina

If you think for a second, the wedding photographer is carrying a lot of stuff (cameras, lenses, bags, flashes and some other small things), which are not light and compact. And most of the wedding day the guy is on his feet. In my own experience, sometimes you have to crawl or jump. So there are a lot of physical exercises (if I may call it so), which the photographer does during the day. At the end of the wedding the tiredness is accumulating and to continue shooting the photographer needs a good stamina to do well his job. And the tiredness takes away from your ability to concentrate and adds to the shaky hands. For example, my female friend who is a wedding photographer uses Canon 1D Mark II camera. And she confessed me lately that after a few hours of this baby with EF 70-200 IS lens (overall weight about 6-7 pounds) her hands are badly shaking. And what kind of photographs a photographer can get with shaky hands?

Tension and Distractions

Many of us experience tension and stress right before the wedding. It even seems natural to stress out before any major event in your life, especially when you have to carry a huge load of responsibility. Such as once-in-lifetime event as a wedding. Our minds drown in the swamp of second thoughts, doubts and what-ifs.

And what is interesting, the minute we start shooting and concentrate on the job, all those thoughts and doubts disappear and excitement flows into our minds. And if we are really good we let the flow to carry us and then we produce great images.

Sometimes the doubts return and panic creeps in. The equipment is no good, the light is too dim, the focus takes too long acquire or the couple is so far, I cannot see their faces. And then the enlightenment blinks and is gone.

Why all this happen? The answer is simple - confidence. You should be confident in what you do, in your skills, in your equipment, in your ability to handle any arising situation. But nobody is perfect and could be that sure in his own abilities or reliability of his equipment, could he? I would say that it is achievable. Many of our mistakes or

screw-ups occur from our fears and doubts alone. Not because we cannot handle certain situations or the equipment stopped working. No. That's because we distract ourselves with a doubt or fear, we rushed and pushed a wrong button (or didn't), we forgot to change ISO from 100 to 800, or incidentally we switched AF to MF and cannot figure out what's wrong. We build one fear upon the other and the small heap grows and grows, it becomes a hill and then a mountain. And we are so stressed out and in panic that we cannot think.

What a scary image I drew. All it started with a doubt in ourselves that we cannot do the job well. OK, what if we cannot do it well or, better say, we are not great at this? The answer should be - we can do it well. Otherwise don't do it at all or you will do more harm to yourself and the clients. This is the right line to draw. You are either can do it well, or you don't do it at all. But be objective as much as possible (and consider clients expectations).

When such doubts and fears start to visit my mind I remind myself of a good example. To ride a bicycle you need very little effort and less tense you are the easier to ride it. One day I rented a bike and needed to ride a few miles. But the handlebars were uncomfortably low, so most of my weight was on my arms. The ride was a torture, I was afraid to fall off and get hurt. And harder I grasped the handlebar the harder it was to ride. Finally when I arrived I was exhausted and it was such a relief to get to the destination. But now when I ride a bike when the road is flat and empty, I rarely hold handlebars, I steer with my body. Tension? What tension? This is a joy to ride; I even can take pictures during the ride. And I don't have to add that you are less tired at the end.

So the idea here is that the tension alone could ruin the day. Of course, you need certain skills to get rid of initial tension. Though even when you know how to do it (ride a bike) and still tense, then you get yourself in hot water.

Being Aware or Perfect Reflection

A wedding day is a almost uncontrollable event. Some people (like vendors and the bride) try to stick to a schedule and order, but it never goes as it was planned. However we have a job to do and take photographs, and I would add great photographs. It sounds impossible. There are so many things going on and there are so many people. Sometimes tough requirements and checklists of photographs are added by the bride, by the clergyman and the wedding planner (or anybody else who thinks he or she in charge). And in the eye of this storm you stand.

Well, first of all you cannot simply stand there, you have to move and watch. The idea here is to constantly assess the situation and foresee changes. Nothing should distract you from the events that unfold around you. Usually I freeze for a moment and scan the people around me and see if something interesting happens. If it really happens, I rush to the place, look for a good angle, take my position and shoot. When I don't see anything worth for a good photograph, I am trying to make one. There are many details (i.e. the guest book, a glass of water with lemon inside), which could alone enhance the wedding story. Or I combine these details with people, focus on a flower when the bride is thrown out of focus behind the flower. However most of the time, there are people and events, which you don't see. They are in the other room, or outside in the court yard. That's why there is very little time for us to take a break. Everything happens just once, and there is no second chance. We have to see everything.

Unfortunately, even when you see something, you have to do more. I am not talking about photography. Anticipation and going with the flow are the things I am talking about. This is a skill a professional wedding photographer has to develop. It happens that the photographer cannot be at vintage point all the time, but a step to one or the other side could make or break a photograph. As well the moment could be fraction of second earlier or too late.

So, how you suppose to know when to press the shutter or where to move? My first reaction is to say - intuition. Of course, it's not only the intuition, though it helps a lot (more like luck). If you give a thought to what people are doing around you, you will see that there are not that many variations to certain sequences. Such that if a person walk that way, most probably he will walk for a few more steps. It's the long sequences very hard to predict, but a shorter ones are easier. And the time the sequence unfolds is all you've got. If you see the person starts to smile or laugh, you know that for a second or two you can catch this moment. And within those two seconds tops you can shift to a better position (to get a clear view on the person) and point and shoot. There is no time for doubts, calculations or second opinions. Just point and shoot.

This section is called "Being Aware or Perfect Reflection" The first of the header is clear I hope. But why I called it Perfect Reflection? In eastern religion you may find about a certain state of mind, usually it was about a warrior. There is a state of mind of a warrior when the warrior doesn't think, he simply reacts. Not a trace of doubt or intent crosses his mind. There is nothing in his mind, void. And such state is called "mushin" - no mind. In such state the body reacts almost by itself, as it was programmed to do. And the reactions are perfect and instantaneous.

One of the aspects of this state is the perfect reflection, which the mind of the warrior represents. The warrior is like a perfect mirror, he reflects everything. The surface of the mirror is flat and flawless. Any doubt or a thought is

a ripple on that surface that distorts the perception of reality. Doesn't it sounds familiar? I think, it is what a wedding photographer has to achieve in his work. The body performs quickly and without hesitation. The photographer see everything, reacts without a thought and continues his watch. A perfect cycle, a perfect reflection of the reality.

Making a Good Portrait

To make this article less spiritual and let you try something real, I am going to give you a few advices on taking a good portrait of a person during an event. It's not when you control the situation like in a studio, but rather the situation dictates certain rules and constraints.

Head View

If you know a bit of portraiture (or read my article on "Basic Rules of Portraiture"), you are familiar with three types of head views: 3/4 view, Full view and Profile. Those views of people faces you will see on most of the portraits of famous painters and photographers. The 3/4 view is most flattering to a person and I would say most dynamic one. The full view is static and boring, the profile could be considered too rigid or strong even (it almost never suits women faces). Where am I leading you? Yes, try to take 3/4 view of the people you photograph. Actually it's much easier to do as any of the other two and as I already said - most flattering. It's easy, because people constantly move and turn their heads. So you just have to wait till they move they head slightly and here you are.

However, if the person is talking to somebody else, you may wait quite long till their turn their head. So simply make a step to our left of right to get the shot right. It's that simple.

Chewing is Forbidden

Don't shoot while people are eating or drinking. Please don't. You will not get a good portrait. Usually when people eat or drink, their faces are distorted by the muscles involved into this process and their look slightly downward. So, don't waste your time, film or storage on such shots. Better grab a bite yourself, that's the best time to have a snack - you will need it for the rest of the wedding day (or night).

Bounce

In my other articles, I pointed out that the best way to use your flash is to bounce it from a ceiling or a wall. The idea here is to diffuse the light and create three-dimensional look. When the flash is directed right at the person's face it creates very flat (shadowless) lighting. Simply direct it upward to a side. I found that LightSphere (invented by Gary Fong) is the best diffuser for flash I used so far. Try it and you won't regret. By the way, you may forget about the flash bracket if you use the LightSphere.

Make Them Smile

This is more like an exception, especially after what I said in the previous section. The photographer should not affect the flow of events, he is more like the Invisible Man. But when you are spotted and busted - just make them smile and press the shutter. Wouldn't you agree that it's much better to give the client a photograph, where she is happy and smiling, then with a usual (read - boring) face? That's why - make them smile.

Keep It Vertical

How many portrait photographs or paintings you remember that were in landscape (horizontal) format? Probably not many. And many of those are taken by photojournalists. Oh, we are photojournalists, yes. But our job is not simply record the event and participants, rather to tell the artistic story of a perfect day. It's at least what I am trying to do. And if it is so, I suggest that you turn you camera and make a vertical frame, where the head of the subject (or his eye for closeup) is one third from the top. And try to leave some room in the frame in direction of his or her eye sight. Such simple things will make the portrait more like a portrait and it will be more appealing to the client's eyes.

Sequence or Anticipation

The technology allows us to do incredible things. For one, my camera (Canon 1D Mark II) can produce 8 frames per second. A bit more and it would be a video camera. That's simply amazing. Thank you, Canon. But wait, do I use it often? Nope. Seldom. Very seldom. I read about photographers who shoot a sequence of 3 to 10 shots in order to catch a single great (or good) frame. I don't see anything wrong with it. And some of such sequences looks great in a wedding album. However I prefer anticipation and storage economy. Sometimes I shoot two shots (with speed of 8 frames per second), but it mostly to ensure that one of them would be sharp enough. Well, these are my thoughts.