11-2017

Paying it forward

Joshua SIM

Citation

PAYING IT FORWARD

Joshua Sim, founder of The Beautiful Moment Photography, defines service excellence in a surprisingly relatable way — through emotional intelligence.

There is an openness to Joshua Sim that one doesn't usually encounter with creative entrepreneurs. Within minutes of our chat, he has started telling us about pricing within the industry. By the end, he has regaled stories of working partnerships and unusual customer requests.

As a corporate crossover with no prior professional experience in photography, Joshua first used his contacts to gain a foothold in the industry. Five years on and a leading wedding photographer, Joshua continues to remember his humble roots. The same drive that compels him to go above board for his customers pushes Joshua to pay it forward to an incoming generation of younger, aspiring photographers.

You were working in the corporate field before you started your own business. What made you pursue photography as a career?

I think I was at a turning point in my life then — I was about to get married, and photography had always been something I loved doing. But it took me a year to gather enough courage because I knew my salary would be slashed by more than 80 percent and I didn't have a portfolio to use. I discussed this with my girlfriend — now wife — on whether I should go for it, and she said, "why not?" So I gave myself a year to see if I could make it. In that year, I shot for events, food, kids' parties — basically any job that I could get just so I could build a portfolio.

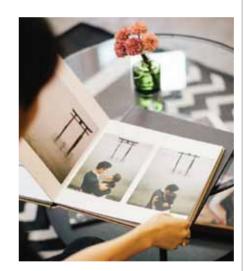**Were you trained or self-taught?**

Self-taught. I believe technical skills can be gained with practice, so I attended a few workshops where I met other photographers

and learnt soft skills instead. I really recommend attending relevant workshops because they're taught by people who have distilled their years of experience into tips you can immediately implement in your business. They taught me how small things that we do as photographers can help couples better engage with each other during a shoot.

Would you say soft skills are more important than technical skills then?

I wouldn't say it's more important, but I think most people would be able to pick up the technical side of things quite easily if they went for classes and practised every day. The soft skills are more useful for pre-wedding photography. Bridal studios typically tell couples to pose and stay still. There isn't much interaction or movement. The way that I shoot pre-weddings is to get the couple to engage with each other by asking them questions. I find that if you get

couples to focus on each other rather than the camera in front of them, you get more genuine images. Which is why soft skills are important — you need to be able to draw out who they really are in the shoot. Not having soft skills will affect the images you deliver.

Personally, I think people who don't make it often lack either good branding or emotional intelligence (EQ). In order to be successful you have to be your worst critic. You have to watch the way you conduct yourself. Some people can be super talented but not the best in terms of EQ. I know some wedding planners appreciate it when photographers conduct themselves in a certain manner. Word-of-mouth recommendations are very powerful, and if people stop recommending you, everything's going to go downhill.

Is that what service excellence means to you — having good EQ?

I think service excellence is also about being strict with yourself and your work. It's about always going above board. It starts from the first meeting till you deliver the images; you have to be consistent in how you deal with clients. On the actual wedding day, reassure couples that everything is going to be fine. You're going to be with them the entire day, so bring a certain level of energy when you meet them in the morning.

Another thing I learnt early on is to be more observant — keep an eye out for any extra objects, like dustbins or lampposts, that may be intruding a photograph. Put in more thought into every image you're returning to your client. I think it's important to deliver images which you've spent time looking at and working on.

Sometimes I surprise my clients with extra things, like a canvas print or 4R prints. There are also other situations where I don't charge clients extra even though they've exceeded the set hours, or I deliver their images earlier than expected.

I recently worked with a bride who told me not to take pictures of her mum — it was an unusual request, but as a service provider, I think the first response should always be "Ok, I'll see what I can do." If it's doable, just do it. It's really not too much to ask for.

People often say that the best job is your hobby because you're making a living out of it, but I feel like you have to treat it as a proper job because that's the only way you can continually make sure you're doing your best for your clients. The fact that I use the term 'job' means that there will be days where some weddings are totally uninspiring. On days like that I'll go oh man, I have to wake up and go for yet another wedding. But those are the days where you have to remind yourself that you're committed to the client, and you need to push through and do the best for them.

Do you think a person can learn to have EQ?

Yeah, I think you can learn it, but it definitely takes practice. Confidence is important. When you first start your business, the first few customer interactions that you have can sometimes be a little bit awkward because you don't really know how to sell what you are. That makes it more difficult for customers to decide to go with you when they pick up that you're unsure about your business proposition.

> *I really recommend attending relevant workshops because they're taught by people who have distilled their years of experience into tips you can immediately implement in your business.*

That's why I think mentorship is important. When my associate photographer first tagged along with me on shoots, I made sure to observe the way he dealt with people. I also brought him to meetings with clients, and after a few meetings I let him do the pitch by himself while I sat in. I would only butt in when he went off tangent. He eventually had enough confidence to deal with situations and meet clients on his own.

People shouldn't be afraid to reach out to business owners that are in line with the sort of business they see themselves wanting to start in future because most small business owners tend to be quite open to sharing. I'm more than willing to bring any beginner photographers to my shoots because there's absolutely no loss and that's how I started too. The photographers don't get paid but they get to keep whatever they shoot and experience what it's like to be a wedding photographer. It's my way of giving back. ✦