

## What Is Custom Photography?

The photographic art you choose to place on your wall is ultimately the result of the vision of the photographer. This vision, coupled with what you wear to your session, the environment, the lighting, even the mood the subjects are in at the time of photographing creates the work that you will want to proudly display on your walls forevermore.

Your first step in the process is more about determining who you are, who your family is and then seeking a photographer that reflects your style. For instance let's say your family is extremely outdoorsy and loves playing on the beach. You start determining what style you like, browse through photography website portfolios and determine if any of the styles exhibited there would be a good fit with your life and family style. You have already determined that you should probably seek out a beach type photographer (that is if you live near a beach) and then begin narrowing the field down a bit.

Finally after a bit of internet research, you have narrowed it down to two photographers who do what seems like solid work, the sort of outdoor beach look you desire. It is now time to ask yourself: Do you like photographer A's style over photographer B's style? Is it because the people in the images of A's style are having a great time and it seems much caught up in the moment vs. B photographer more posed, looking in the camera images? If this is a case, you probably like lifestyle photography or perhaps even take it a step further and define your desired style as a photojournalistic photography style. The photographer you probably should choose is photographer A because their style is very similar to the style you desire.

What custom photography ultimately is all about is choice and experience. Custom photography is about finding someone who will photograph your family, give you devoted 1:1 attention without worry of who is next 'in line' or the feeling of a crowded portrait studio.

- A custom photographer will typically show you a fairly extensive gallery culled to only show the good images that meet the photographers' creative sensibilities.
- Often the images are fully edited images-color corrected with blemishes and under eye circles removed.
- Custom photographers are also known as boutique studios, offering a range of products and unparalleled service. Think Lexus vs. Hyundai, think Nordstrom vs. Wal-Mart.

A custom photography experience should have you, the client and your experience in mind.

## Why Choose Custom Photography?

### Custom Photography as something "special"

Custom photography is more of a luxury than your entry level cookie cutter chain experience. Custom photography truly is not for everyone; it requires a level of commitment, investment in time and money, forethought and planning on the part of the subject/client and requires a larger time commitment for the photographer as well.

Clients who enjoy taking a more active role in the creation of their families' memories have the desire to have portrait art that is truly personalized. These more discerning clients have been known to budget and allot time for a custom photography session. Many clients opt for it to be a once a year special experience, some opt to have custom photography sessions done to record their child's stages in life. Having said this, it is clear that custom photography is not in everyone's budget, it is something that most families save for to splurge on from time to time to memorialize their children as they really are (not posed and primed in the cookie cutter studio setting).

There is a great deal of time involved in creating high end custom photography sessions for a client. The luxury of great service is better choices and a superb end product. The result of all this are heirloom quality images. The time invested at the session is only a small portion of time involved in this process.

Custom photography has been likened to purchasing a fine vehicle. To get to point B from A let's face it, even a bus ride would suffice. If you want to luxuriate in a finely appointed vehicle, customizing your own experience by listening to smooth jazz while sitting in a climate controlled setting adjusted purely for your comfort in a body hugging leather interior, perhaps that Lexus you so desire is your cup of tea. Custom photography is much the same cup of tea. It is the Lexus of the photography world. It is where the intangibles make the experience truly wonderful and the images themselves make the investment of money and time truly worthwhile.

Custom photography can be broken down into even more levels. There are on location, studio, and mixed studio/on location, specialty location and destination type photographers. The beauty of custom photography is in the choices and in the luxury of those options. The customized service level you are sure to experience will be amazing. The knowledge that your final images are the result of someone caring about those moments so much that they take extra time ensuring that the artwork you receive is good enough to stand by with their name on it. That level of quality and commitment is all but lost in the age of "mass produced," "mass marketed," corporate "everyone is a number". Custom photography is based on being unique to you. How great an experience would be, to be able to sit back and allow a photographer to do this highly custom work for images that you will most likely cherish for a lifetime?

Keep in mind more than anything that the Lexus will never appreciate in value the way your portraits will. The portrait art you become invested in from your custom photographer will no doubt increase in value and become more priceless as the years pass.

### **Why Does Custom Photography Cost More?**

The digital revolution has brought amazing flexibility and ability to control various factors during the image taking and making process. Photographers, the hobbyist, the professional, the amateur all benefit from this ability to manipulate pixels. However, with flexibility comes a price. Digital camera equipment is still considerably more expensive when you factor in its' lifespan, the need for additional resources for processing those images, the time it takes to get a usable image and the effort that goes into creating a work of photographic art. We all know that you can go to the local Walgreen's and pay a \$1.99 for a print – as a client you may wonder why you may pay upwards of \$50, \$70, \$90 for a custom photography print. Photographers hear this statement every once in awhile:

"How in the world can you charge \$60 for an 8x10, if it costs me less than \$2 to print at a store?"

The truth of the matter is the answer to this question is multifaceted. Much of the cost of a photographic print produced by a professional photographer has a lot to do with the time, equipment costs, artistic vision and reputation of the photographer not to mention expertise and the usual costs of running a legitimate business. **The cost of TIME** approaching it from a time standpoint, let's imagine that you have hired a photographer who has work that you love. This photographer is traveling an hour to your destination to photograph your session. Here is an example of a time break down:

- booking time: 30 minutes to one hour (client contact time + paperwork)
- pre-session prep time (30 mins – 1 hour, includes equipment and back up equipment checks + vehicle checks)
- one hour travel time TO session
- 15-30 minutes prep time at client's home
- 90 minutes-2 hours with client photographing subject
- one hour travel time FROM session
- 30-45 minutes uploading time from digital cards from camera to computer
- 30-45 minutes time spent backing up the original images
- 2-5 hours editing time to present you with a diverse gallery of edited images
- 1 hour prep time getting ready for ordering
- 2-3 hours time with client for ordering images
- 1 hour sorting through and checking order
- 30 minutes-1 hour prep time for delivery
- 30 minutes-1 hour getting order shipped
- any additional phone time or time needed for add on ordering, shipment issues, quality issues

In this example, the time spent per client can range from just under 13 hours to 19 hours – dependent on the photographer's level of service. This is time dedicated only to ONE session. When the photographer charges \$150-\$300 for the photo shoot (aka SESSION FEE) you are not just paying for the two hours of session time, you are paying the photographer for 12-19 hours complete time for your session.

### **The COSTS of Maintaining a Custom Photography Business:**

Regarding equipment costs, a good quality professional camera with a selection of good optical quality lenses and digital storage mediums and computer set up can run from \$10,000-\$30,000 costs dependent on the photographer. Even though you can purchase a really good quality digital SLR for about \$2100 there are still other costs related to photography. A good lens for portrait photography can run from \$900 to \$2500. A dependable computer system with software loaded for business and creative usage can run \$2500 to \$8000 dependent on the photographer. Then you have the lab costs for specialty products. A good photographer knows their professional lab is an integral part of their success. These labs often cost more and offer a range of products that allows the custom photographer to continually offer new, innovative products for the discerning client.

Discussion on other costs of running a photography business could take awhile so we'll skip many of the intricate details. An overview: the costs of running the business, taxes, studio rental/mortgage if the photographer has ownership of a dedicated studio, vehicular costs, costs of advertising/marketing, costs of sample pieces that the photographer will likely bring to your session, etc.

**APPLES to ORANGES to BANANAS:** Often time's clients will mention to their photographer that X studio in the mall/department store only charges \$19.99 for an 8x10 "sheet" or they may mention other things related to discount photography chains. The fact is those discount chains make their money on volume, not on customized 1:1 service. In February 2007 a company who has leased photography retail space in a rather well known discount retailer closed down 500 of their portrait studios across the nation. The reason it happened is simple, you cannot make money on 99¢ "professional" prints if you do not sell enough of them. Interestingly enough – those same studios that offer the loss leader packages often charge much much more for their a la carte pricing vs. many custom photographers (as high as \$40-50 for an 8x10).

A little history – the whole reason the big department stores began offering portrait services in the first place was to get you, the savvy consumer, in through their door so that you could spend more money with them in other departments. Your "PORTRAITS" are considered the "loss leader". Your portraits that are meant to symbolize an once-in-a-lifetime stage in your child's life are part of what a store considers a way to get you in their door to spend more money on goods that you might not really want or need but because you're there "anyway" you buy.

Also keep in mind that when you go to a chain studio, as a consumer, you don't have the benefit of 1:1 attention for 2 hours at your home where your child is allowed to explore, play and be comfortable in their home environment, nor do you get the experience that many custom photographers are known for as well as the lovely captures of natural expressions. You simply get a barebones, "SAY CHEESE" experience.

**REPUTATION/EXPERTISE of the PHOTOGRAPHER:** There is an old story about a ship that cost a company millions of dollars. Something went wrong in the engine room and the ship was stuck in dock. They called various "experts" who spent weeks trying to fix the issue to no avail and at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars. Finally an older gentleman was called in who simply brought in his small tool bag and a hammer. He set about pinging on various parts of the vast engine with his hammer, finally settling on one area. He spent a few minutes pinging in that area took out a few tools and fixed whatever what was wrong. After a few moments the man straightened up, looked at the captain and instructed him to "start her up." The captain disbelievably went to get the engines started while the man sat in the engine room listening as the engine roared to life. The man tipped his hat as he exited the ship to the staff who sat dumbfounded because they had seen all the experts come on board for days with their expensive equipment only to have the ship not fixed. This man did it in a few minutes with a few pings of his hammer!

A few days passed and the man sent the shipping company a bill for \$10,000. The accounting department contacted him immediately. Why all the rumors mentioned that this man had only spent "a few minutes" fixing the ship "with his hammer and a few other random tools". When questioned about why his bill was for \$10,000 – did he accidentally leave an extra zero on the bill? The man confidently responded: "In fact the time was worth the \$1,000. The other \$9,000 was for the years of experience and the ability to discern the issue as quickly as possible for the company."

Now I'm not saying that photographers fix large ships but being in demand, being well known for quality work, having a good reputation often costs time on the photographer's part (years of practice, study, experience, etc). A photographer's expertise comes at a cost, their time learning their craft and learning the intricacies of lighting and the commitment put forth on their end to create a persona about their business that oozes professionalism. A great number of photographers go a very long time from the

time that they purchase their first good camera to making money at the business of photography. Many photographers, when first starting out, rush in thinking that the business will be easily profitable in no time, how expensive could it be to get a camera and use it to create their dream? These photographers often undervalue what they do because they have the realization that they do not have experience or expertise but are very adept at pushing the shutter on the camera. Many times these casual "professionals" neglect to factor in the cost of business, the cost of equipment, software, backups, etc... When you hire a photographer of sound reputation, you are hiring an expert, one that knows that they must always reinvest in their business to create the reputation of being top notch. To create good work a photographer possesses not only sound knowledge in the technical and creative aspects of photography but also good, reliable equipment and back up equipment.

The photographer who desires to be known as better/best/unparalleled reputation-wise knows that the most important thing they can do for their business is reliability and dependability. This is how reputations get built. Good work often is a wonderful side product of building that good reputation.

I hope this (lengthy) article helps shed some light on WHY a custom photographer is a better choice for your family's memories. The photographs that are produced as a result of the professionalism and dedication that your photographer has will be cherished for a lifetime (or more) and great thought and consideration should be placed into hiring who is right for your family's most precious investment.