

THE PHOTOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE BORLAND

A stock photo client calls you with an assignment. The photo buyer likes your photography and enjoys working with you and now wants you to shoot a project.

Commercial clients who purchase your stock images are likely to assume you shoot assignments. If, up until now, you've only shot for stock, consider this article a primer to prepare you for taking the step into assignment photography.

Unlike shooting stock, assignments are not speculative and have specific client requirements. Often these requirements are unavailable in a stock photo. For example, the client may want a photo of its product—with the logo prominent in the image—being used on a backpacking trip.

Assignments require planning, estimating/budgeting and production. Most often you are required to prepare an estimate for the client that will pull all of the elements together.

you. Question what the photo shoot entails, where the assignment will take place, how many photos are needed, how the pictures will be used, and what items need to be included in your estimate. Often the client will spell these things out without prompting; but if not, be prepared to ask. And be sure the client differentiates between what is optional and what is necessary to give you both some flexibility.

Project requirements may include such things as travel time and expenses, pre- and post production time, location scouting, photographer's assistant(s), models, props, hotels, meals, rental car, gas and tolls, image processing, permits and clearances. Each expense is important to estimate, so gather as much information from the client as you can up front. In your estimate, keep your fees separate from your expenses.

USAGE

Just because you are being hired on assignment does not mean you have to give up all rights to your photographs. Unless otherwise agreed upon, the photographer owns the

copyright to the images he or she creates and has the exclusive right to license their use. Your estimate should have a section that describes the usage the client has planned; how and where the client plans to use the images and how long the images will be used. Also, secure a price to allow the client to purchase rights in the future if they so choose.

If you prefer, you can spell out usage in a separate licensing agreement.

PRICING

Pricing varies considerably. The simplest pricing approach is when the client states the budget up front. This is common with magazine assignments where the editor will tell you how many photos are needed and what they can pay you to procure them. Everything is spelled out, simple, and the photographer can take it or leave it. Typically, magazines purchase one-time rights and some electronic rights for assignments, and they may require a short period of exclusivity after their publications come out. When faced with a pricing model like this one, do an estimate for your own sake to ensure

A list of resources to help you with pricing can be found on the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) website, at <http://asmp.org/links/32>. In fact, the ASMP website offers a wealth of information on licensing, management software, legal issues, photography events and much more. Start at the home page <http://www.asmp.org>. A printable PDF for photo buyers (which will be helpful to photographers as well) can be found at: http://asmp.org/pdfs/assignment_photography_guide.pdf.

WHAT'S THE ASSIGNMENT?

Assignments vary widely depending on the client and the specifics of the project. You could be asked to do a simple assignment, such as photographing a biologist doing ground-breaking work in the field for a magazine article, or an advertising campaign for the latest in golf clubs that involves shooting on location at major clubs across the country for multiple promotion and advertising uses. The former requires very little production, but the latter would need extensive planning. Preparing an estimate is at the core of any assignment and sets the scene for everything that comes after.

Your first step is to determine exactly what the client needs from

that you can make a profit, especially if the client is not paying expenses.

A more commercial pricing model bases fees on the amount of time involved; the client pays the photographer a day rate. Photographers who base their fees on a day-rate can be likened to farmers raising strawberries and accepting a flat fee for a day's harvest no matter how many pounds are harvested. The more images the client uses, the less the photographer makes.

A better option is the fee based on value received by the client; the more images used, the more value received. And the more images the client uses the more money the photographer makes.

So just what should you charge? If the client wants you to shoot for a day, then you need to research what commercial photography day rates are regularly charged for your area. Contacting local photographers and mentioning you are researching rates will often provide you with a sense of what to charge. If you plan to base your estimate on value received by the client then the most important questions to ask them is how many pictures they need, what usage they plan for the images and for how long a period of time.

PRODUCTION COSTS

Every assignment has out of pocket expenses, but sometimes expenses can include hefty production costs. Consider every possible cost that might come up. If the project is large, include a request for a 25 percent advance in your budget. Then you are using the client's money to pay upfront costs and not your own.

continued on next page



The concept of taking risks was the driving force behind this shoot for an annual report. The client also wanted all images to fit an adventure theme. I found the model through a local kayaking shop, and the client, kayaker, my assistant and I headed for a mountain stream to photograph for a day.



A catalog company that sells travel and adventure clothing chose a coastal town with mountains as background for this shoot. We arranged to stay at a nearby mountain lodge and hired models for four days of photography.

PROPS, MODELS AND LOCATION SCOUTING

Adventure and recreation assignments are common for outdoor photographers. In many cases these assignments require specific locations where the client wants you to shoot. They may require advance scouting. If so, be sure to photograph the

locations that fit the client's description so they have an opportunity to choose their preferences.

There are various ways to hire models. Modeling agencies are one option but can be quite costly. You can post an ad on Craigslist. Some cities have "real-people" modeling agencies where fees are more affordable than the more tradi-

tional modeling agencies. If you need models to portray athletes or outdoorspeople, you may be able to find them where actual athletes or outdoorspeople hang out. For example, bike shops for mountain bikers; runners at the athletic club; and, sporting goods stores are great for campers, hikers, boaters and more. Many sporting goods store employees

are outdoorspeople themselves, and often they are eager to earn extra money. So, don't be shy; ask the salespeople at these places if they are interested in modeling for you or if there is anyone they can recommend.

Rates for non-agency models can run from nothing to trading for some of the client's gear; rates for real models can range from \$300 to \$500 a day or more. It is crucial that models be able to perform the activity they are asked to do. Most people know how to ride a bicycle but that does not make them mountain bikers. Be sure and take a picture of each candidate to help the client decide who to use. Also be sure to secure all necessary model and property releases.

The client may also request props and these may need to be purchased or rented. You can find prop rental stores in your area by doing a Google search or an old-fashioned lookup in the Yellow Pages.

FINALIZING THE ESTIMATE

Once you have the details from the client, it's time to create an estimate. Let's approach a hypothetical assignment. The client's website sells outdoor equipment: apparel, backpacks, tents, footwear and accessories. He wants to hire you to photograph for four days in Arches National Park, capturing hiking, camping and backpacking scenes with a variety of outfits and gear, which bear the company's brand.

First contact the national park about fees for a commercial-use permit and find out the cost of an insurance policy. The client will provide the props from its product line.

Second: establish hotel rates for you and your assistant and also travel costs. If you live near Moab, then there may

be no travel costs, but if you live elsewhere there are airfares and rental vehicles. Include in your estimate the time required for scouting the park, finding models and travel time to the assignment. Your billable time for these tasks should be half of your daily rate. A qualified assistant's fee should be about 20 percent of your fee. Include model fees, food and hotels, props and any out-of-pocket expenses with a minimum 25 percent markup.

Some clients will not pay the markup, but instead pay expenses dollar for dollar and expect to receive all of your receipts. It really comes down to how tough you are in your negotiations and whether you are bidding against others or you have the job without bidding and have plenty of clout to set the terms. Most commercial photographers request an advance for expenses if a client won't pay markups.

Third: establish your photography rate by looking at how many photos the client needs. In our hypothetical assignment, the number of images is 30, about eight per day since this is a four-day assignment. Based on where you live and your cost of doing business, let's say \$1,500 per day is an average rate. Each day you will have eight scenarios to shoot and be paid \$1,500 for each of those days, giving the client one image from each scenario. You will probably shoot many variations of each scenario, so state in your estimate that the client can license additional images for a set amount, such as \$200 each. Using this pricing model, you will make more money based on how many images the client uses.

If the client ever presents a work-for-hire contract, consider it with caution. In a work for hire, the client pays you a flat fee and in return you release ownership (including copyright) to all of the images taken while on this assignment. Generally, a work for hire is regarded as a bad business practice, since photographers' income is derived from usage of their images.

Carefully consider all time and costs associated with preparing for the assignment, photographing it, and completing it. You should be paid for all time invested as well as fair compensation based on the client's usage of your images. ➤

Charlie Borland has been a professional photographer for close to 30 years. His images have been used in many major magazines, including National Geographic Adventure, Newsweek, Outdoor Photographer, Outside, Women's Sport and Fitness and others. Charlie is vice president and cofounder of www.fogstock.com, an online picture agency. He teaches an online course, "The Business of Outdoor and Nature Photography," at the Perfect Picture School, <http://www.ppsop.com> and is publisher of <http://www.pronaturephotographer.com>.



© Charlie Borland