

# professional Image maker

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## Angela Adams

talks to fellow photographers about working at the coal face – an occasional series.



# Francis Pullen

**M**ost of us are aware of the big names in photography, but what about the jobbing photographer – one who isn't necessarily entering competitions and selling training – but simply working hard at their craft to pay the bills. Are they an endangered species? Has the industry become devalued in the digital era, with all camera owners deemed photographers by the general public? Or are there professional photographers diligently working away in our towns and villages providing their clients with great photos? With this in mind I set out to discover a little more from those at grassroots level, working hard to keep our industry alive and promoting good practice and producing a professional product.

**Francis Pullen** is based in the bustling university city of Cambridge, and has run a thriving photography business in his chosen location for the past 15 years. The last census recorded a population of 123,900. Not only does Francis have a large client base on his doorstep, he also has an ever-increasing number of amateur, semi-pro and professional photographers vying for a slice of the photography-business cake. Being a generous chap and wanting to assist others in the profession (did you know ...Tracy Willis purchased her first camera from Francis?), he agreed to digitally discuss his business with me over a series of emails.

### *What motivated you to start in the industry?*

I'd been a keen photographer for many years, and exhibited some of my work at local venues. However, an unexpected change in my full-time employment in 2000 prompted me to pursue photography as a full-time career, which I've been doing since then.

### *What's your mindset when you get up in the mornings?*

I've always been a glass-half-full optimist, so I greet each morning as a new day full of opportunity, challenge and satisfaction. Life in general, and running your own business can, and has, thrown some pretty dreadful spanners in the works – but I'm a great believer in having a positive mental attitude. This filters through to working with clients and thus into my photography. I've been very fortunate to have always enjoyed all of the jobs I've worked in, and never have Monday-morning blues or feel the need for a duvet day.

### *Do you work alone or employ staff?*

I'm self-employed and work alone, except for weddings, when I often contract-in a second shooter or assistant. Employing staff as a small business has become more complex with legal, pension, insurance and taxation requirements, so it's often easier and more beneficial to use contractors when needed.

### *Did it take you long to establish your name and brand?*

It took about 12 months, in a very competitive and crowded market in my geographic location.

### *Any tips on how you managed that so efficiently?*

I engaged a local marketing and PR company, who targeted wedding venues, suppliers, magazines and local press. When I started, I needed a USP (Unique Selling Point), and we discovered that many of the existing photographers didn't offer much flexibility or real value for money (expectation of the client for price quoted), particularly for wedding 'packages' and fixed pricing. So in the early days, this became my differentiator without compromising my own income and workload. Clients loved this approach and the work flowed in!

### *How do you attract clients and what market do you target?*

Much of my work comes through word-of-mouth recommendation, but I also use the full gambit of website, social media and agencies to maximise my target market, which mainly lies in the middle ground, but I also target the higher end where I can.

### *How do agencies assist your business?*

Agencies provide some of my corporate work, so anything from head shots to business interiors and even farming machinery in action. I'm also a member of a local photographers' agency called 'Cambridge Photographers', who supply similar work including weddings.

There are of course commission fees to pay, but flexibility in both pricing and product offer are key to my business, so providing I'm happy with both, then there isn't a problem.

### *What percentage of your time is spent creating images versus time spent on business administration and marketing?*

I think it's the classic Pareto 20/80 split, so well known by sole trader business owners.

### *Do you manage your own website, SEO, marketing, social media presence and PR or do you pay others to do that for you?*

I manage all these operations myself, especially as I can do so in real-time, rather than using a third party which would introduce time delays. One of the disadvantages of the digital age, is that everyone has an expectation of immediate results and delivery.

### *If you could start your business again from day one, what would you do differently (if anything)?*

I would have migrated to digital cameras a few years earlier because of the flexibility they offer in real-time shooting, especially at weddings where conditions change so quickly. Having said that, I still shoot film for special projects, or if a client requests it, and still love the analogue results it gives.







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**What's the best single piece of business advice you'd like to share?**

Make a well-researched, solid and realistic business plan that sets you and your style apart from other businesses. Monitor it regularly and make the changes needed to keep yourself on track – no matter how painful they may be.

**Was this what led you to offering photography walks across the UK?**

My Cambridge Photo Walks evolved from the business plan, as I had been photographically documenting Cambridge city for many years. The city has a huge diversity of population, plus another 25,000 students at the 31 colleges. Tourists flock in from all over the world, there's beautiful architecture, many hidden and less well visited areas, and quite a few ghost stories to tell. So the walks combine photographing all these plus advising people how to get the best out of their cameras and improve their photography whilst doing so.

Not long after I started the Cambridge Walks, I started receiving enquiries asking if I could organise Photo Walks in other cities, which I now do.

**What's the one piece of kit – camera aside, that you wouldn't be without and why?**

Actually it's not photography related at all! I always have plenty of bottles of tap water on hand, because I dehydrate very quickly, so it's essential to replace my water loss.

**Learning to become a competent photographer is a serious challenge, one that keeps us learning and exploring – what would you say is the most important challenge you've faced as a photographer?**

Keeping my work relevant and current, amongst a fast-changing technical industry, accompanied by vastly differing client expectations.

Looking at a photographer's portfolio can be revealing – what does your portfolio reveal about you?

I would hope it says I'm a more than competent photographer who meets or exceeds a brief. Whether a straightforward corporate head shot, a full-on wedding, or an engaging portrait or model shoot.

**Do you enter competitions? If so, is it with your day-to-day work or do you shoot specifically to create a competition image?**

I rarely enter competitions, but plan to become a little more active in that field with styled and themed shoots, created specifically with competition in mind.

**What do you love the most about being a photographer?**

I love engaging with the diversity of people I meet, discovering more about them and trying to reflect their character in the resultant photographs. I also love the reactions when clients view their pictures.

**Who inspires you?**

There are currently so many amazingly creative people in this industry, and I certainly admire and take inspiration from the likes of Faye and Trevor Yerbury, Damien Lovegrove, Clive Figes, Andrew Appleton, Damian McGillicuddy, Tracy Willis, George Fairbairn, Adrian Jones, Gary Hill and Vicki Boulter.

**What does the future hold?**

As someone once said, the only constant is change. And for myself, that's exactly what's happening as I'm realigning my business over the next few months. This will allow me more time for personal photography projects – something I've not had a great deal of time for over the past 15 years – especially with the time-consuming animal that is, modern wedding photography, with pre-meetings, the wedding day itself, editing, post-processing, album design and delivery. My aim is for fewer, but higher-priced commissions and more me-photography-time.

