

The start of another year, everyone is broke (you'd think we'd learn), so a perfect time to get off my lighting soapbox and indulge in a little 'lighting anti-pasta', that is a talk about some business practices I've employed that were quite successful in keeping the money flowing. Now to help with this my partner/wife Sylvianne will do most of the talking since this is her area of expertise.

Sylvianne (S): In the beginning Montizambert Photography was just Dave and his brother Mark, see image 01. Mark and Dave both did everything – promoted, shot, etcetera. Each had their own clients but shared the proceeds. Dave and Mark never thought to explore what they each individually excelled at and what they individually were weak at. They were both top-notch shooters and shooting was why they got into it in the first place, so they both did it. Like most photographers, neither wanted to do the sales/marketing/networking side, but out of necessity both did. In this way they never took advantage of the 'Power of Two' – that is define who is good at what and then assign those areas to that person. Mark was charismatic and a great negotiator – a much better front man – whereas Dave was an innovator and driven to constantly learn, but was more of an introvert compared to Mark.

Dave (D): After a decade and a half of struggling in our photo business, my brother Mark and I decided that it was time to let go of doing our own sales and marketing and to turn it over to a real pro. We were very impressed with a woman, Sylvianne, whom I was dating at the time. Sylvianne was a force to be reckoned with in administration, sales, networking and marketing. Mark and I decided that we must have her to represent Montizambert Photography, but unfortunately, we couldn't afford her, so we flipped a coin and I married her (see image 02).

Sylvianne (S): I really had no idea what was involved in working in a photography business let alone what an f-stop was...lucky for me my job wasn't to be the photographer – that was Dave's and Mark's job!

When I first came on board at Montizambert Photography I sat down with Dave and Mark so that I could define who did what and who would be best suited to each task. Both partners could shoot, so that didn't change, and I would, of course, handle admin, marketing (since my background was in administration, marketing and sales) but the lads would still have to do some portfolio appointments once I had qualified the client. This arrangement worked well and made the boys more exclusive since it was their agent, me, that the prospective client first saw. Once I qualified them the prospect could have a sit down with Dave or Mark. This defining who did what was the most important bit of managing I did for Montizambert Photography.

D: Having someone else represent you has a lot more strength than doing it yourself; they can talk you up without it sounding like bragging.

S: There were lots of other little things that really needed tightening up, so right at the start I did a little 'house cleaning' which scared the boys to no end, (and I don't mean sweeping and dusting, that I confess I am happily terrible at). Things like accounts receivable, (they had receivables going back 120 days, ridiculous for a 'small' business, this was not a multi-million dollar corporation), carrying receivables of thousands of dollars for 120 days had to stop! We were not a bank! Dave and Mark's fear, as most photographers would agree, is that I would anger the art director or designer or ad executive thus tainting the air for future work. A valid concern so I instead had careful conversations with the various accountants at the ad agencies (our primary clients), and this is a most important point, instead of changing the existing remuneration structure with the people Dave and Mark had a relationship with, I instead contacted the accountants for these firms and negotiated with them. Much to Dave and Mark's surprise, I was able to get better terms and I did it without 'pissing off' the people Dave and Mark had built working

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We Go All The Way

relationships with! If I angered an accountant, no designer, art director or account executive would care, besides it wasn't Dave or Mark stirring things up. So you see, having someone else to be the heavy allows the other to keep the relationship happy—good cop, bad cop is done for a reason in policing.

D: Another smart change we made was that nothing got shot without an estimate so that there would be no surprises to the client. Notice estimate not quote. A quote is more likely to be considered as written-in-stone, whereas an estimate is more flexible. To streamline the process, the estimate doubled as a contract. Once all the details were clearly written out with variables and time-lines, the agency/client signed the estimate/contract and handed over a Purchase Order (for the bigger clients) or a 50% deposit (for other smaller clients). We made a pact to never start a project with either of these missing; this avoids 99 per cent of misunderstandings, and misunderstanding leads to disgruntled clients who will most likely shop elsewhere for their photographic needs.

S: Looking for new markets for the lads, I joined the Board of Trade, the Chamber of Commerce, Business International Network www.bin.com, and various related associations. This meant I was networking most days from 6 am until 9 pm; our studio was well established with the ad agencies, not much more growth could occur there, and so I targeted direct clients through these associations who would need images of products, interiors,

dave MONTIZAMBERT'S creating with light





exteriors, or head-shots for advertising and/or press releases. The problem with dealing with direct clients is that they were not as sophisticated as agencies, they didn't really get the whole estimate bidding process, they just wanted to know 'how much does a picture cost?' Kind of like buying a hamburger, only we were used to, 'Will that be on a focaccia bun or a kaiser? Grass-fed or chemical? And so on. Montizambert Photography was used to everything being more high-end and custom. So, we set out to answer that in the clearest way possible, we created clearly defined photographic products called, QuikShotz, BigShotz, Full Monti (see image 01), and Absolute Monti (view these in the real cyber world at www.montizambert.com). These were bread and butter jobs and proved to be very lucrative and easy to sell. They were a smashing success with direct clients and surprisingly with agencies too. Our main marketing for these photo products, other than networking, was monthly mailings of a comical postcard. We only designed and produced four cards, one for each product, and we rotated them out each month. Our mailing list was only 300 clients which was constantly culled and added to keep a steady good 300. These mailings (pre-internet marketing) were inexpensive and always got work; we even continued it into the internet age and it was still a success – people still love tangibles!

As we got busier we also realised we wanted more time off – why work like crazy only to flat line on the weekend, not a way to live. Besides like most photo businesses shooting doesn't occur every day, so tighten it up, don't let the bookings spread out too much. This we did so that we could shorten our working week. At first, we did this in small steps – Friday either Dave and I or Mark would have the day off while the other(s) would man the studio. That worked and we loved it so well that pretty soon we all took Friday off – the three-day weekend was born. How did we handle this with our clients? Easy enough, we didn't say we were closed Friday, we instead would say, we have an opening Thursday this week or Monday next week or something like that. This way you are not saying no, just that you are available on these other days. Never tell a client no, just give them the option you want. Did we lose business? No, in fact we did better because we had more energy and vigour for the work – that's working smart. Also we weren't totally rigid on this, if something was truly time sensitive we would relent and book Friday, but then that shooter would take Monday off. Surprisingly this didn't happen that often.

I then thought about the future – here were two vibrant young men doing what they loved and determined to go to their graves with a camera in their hand! We revised the partnership agreement, updated life insurance policies, strategised with our accountant, made conservative investments and thought about the future. It was a good thing too because Mark dropped dead one day shortly thereafter from heart failure while doing some really heavy-duty mountain biking.

Real estate investments seemed a good fit for Dave and me to secure steady passive income in the coming years. Nothing risky just sound rental buildings that we could manage ourselves and secure funds for a long time to come. Buy and hold. We didn't know anything – so we did some research, talked to friends, colleagues who had such investments and just jumped in and quickly learned from our many mistakes. We started in 2003 with three properties and now in 2017 we have nine. That's our retirement portfolio.

Which leaves Dave to be 'the gentleman photographer' exploring and explaining the wonders of photography in our new/very old 1914 schoolhouse/home studio, (okay don't laugh, 100 years old is about as old as it gets for architecture in western Canada).

D: So the Power of Two can be two or more, it's really about multiple people working together, identifying strengths and weaknesses then building your business with and around these. Go forth and multiply! ... because I don't think you should do it all by yourself.

