

Questioning Success

In this article I'm taking a little break from my usual technique tutorials on lighting and have partnered up with my wife and business partner Sylvianne to uncover a few choice points and ways of thinking that were instrumental in our business and financial success.

Over the past year I (Dave) have had a lot more time on my hands as workshops, lectures, trade-shows, conferences and travel in general have been on hold. In addition to this, I've had way fewer opportunities to shoot and so with this extra time on my hands decided to work on some of those projects that have been on my to-do list for many years. Two of the biggest projects from this list that I tackled were to digitise all interesting film images from the past 35+ years of my career and to transfer earlier digital images from my old CD archive to my hard-drive archives. I quickly realised that there is a reason why I never got around to these 'important tasks' – this mind numbing, and not particularly rewarding work quickly threw me into a deep state of boredom, but as ever, my mind came to the rescue turning it into reflection. During this reflective state I thought about what got me to this point in my career and where did I want to go from here – this second bit being a little more difficult since none of us know what curve ball is awaiting us – what is okay today may not be okay tomorrow in this Brave New COVID World!

Being the herd animal that I am, I soon sought out my wife Sylvianne to join me in my reverie as I continued my mindless image scan and back-up tasks. During our repartee, we identified a number of points that were instrumental in our combined career success – ones that we thought others might find interesting, maybe even helpful, and at the very least entertaining.

Most successful photographers, or any person who has succeeded at life or business, almost always had a mentor or mentors – a good mentor can fast track you to where you want to be! Both are true of myself and Sylvianne, we both have had great mentors to thank. A common stumbling block to anyone's mentorship quest is that it isn't always easy to find a mentor in your field, in your town. Often people you would like to learn from in your industry in your town are afraid of educating their competition. Joining associations and attending seminars and conventions can help greatly in this regard as you can meet others from other cities who will not see you as a threat due to your geographical differences and will be more likely to spill the beans. I travelled to San Diego California from Vancouver British Columbia to take a workshop with Dean Collins (international lighting and photo marketing guru) back in 1985 with the intention of starting a relationship that would ultimately lead to a mentorship. I don't know why, but it seems that asking people – people whose achievements and/or work you admire or aspire to – how they got where they are is almost never done! Some sort of fear or pride I guess. When I think back on it, I was pretty freaked out trying to talk to Collins the first time; I think I pretty much babbled a lot of nonsense and was pretty sure I had made a fool of myself. Maybe it was that humbling myself to Dean that moved him, after all, everyone loves a little ego stroking and someone standing in front of you obviously scared but in awe is pretty touching. So, my mentor-seeking advice is, suck it up and ask! Ask lots of questions, then shut up and listen! Humble yourself, let yourself be vulnerable! Create worthwhile relationships and learn! (See image 001 of me listening to some sage advice from an unorthodox source. (Remind me which one is which? Ed.)

I (Sylvianne) think that working as an entrepreneur in the arts as opposed to having a 'job', has its challenges for sure. You wear many hats, and not all of them fashionably! As it is, you are a genius at what you do – photography – but the rest: marketing, planning, retouching, accounting, investing, capital expenditures, developing new products, finding and keeping clients ... the list goes on, are most likely not all your forte. We worked toward outsourcing as many of these tasks as possible, leaving time to concentrate more on what we were good at. This is also the key

to working on your business rather than in it. Most successful people do little of the work, they use others and then spend their time golfing, thinking and planning (see image 002, a prime example of how I like to work on our business).

Your other secret weapon is who you know and cultivating a circle of friends and acquaintances in various work sectors, and getting to know how they succeed. Look around you and see people that have created success. How did they do it? It doesn't matter if they are in a totally different industry from you, there is much to be learned from any industry (it doesn't have to be photographic) that you can take, modify and apply to your work, your business. Then you also need to decide what 'success' looks like for you – for some it's creating a high-end clientele, winning awards, having a healthy bank balance; others it's a motor home, cottage, new car ... or lots of leisure time or family time. How is it possible? Start thinking about what you might need to do to get there. We found that the starting point is to ask yourself how and what do I need to do. Chances are you won't have the answers immediately; don't discourage yourself, don't think, 'I have no ideal' – just pose the question to yourself, your sub-conscious actually, which has a far more powerful processor than your conscious mind. The answers will come in time, sometimes an hour later, sometimes a days later, and if not, then frequently revisit that question until you have the answer. Works like a lucky charm! I think part of why this works is that you have put it foremost in your mind; you will subconsciously look for answers in everything around you, you are more tuned in and so more sensitive to the question at hand making you less likely to miss pertinent information or opportunities when they do avail themselves.

We have some very exciting and varied friends in all sectors of the workplace. One of our friends Kari Yuers has a manufacturing company (Kryton International) that creates a green bio-friendly additive to render concrete waterproof. Super-cool technology that actually works ... we often hang out together and topics of conversation will include politics, marketing, global economy, personal finances, but not photography. Our friend invests millions of dollars for her company as well as managing her own assets.

A really important aspect of our success was 20 years ago when we realised that we needed to develop a plan for passive income (make money while doing little for it) if we wanted to have the time to enjoy our lives and our careers – slaving away 60–80 hours a week at something you love is a good way to kill that love and yourself! Kari, like us, favours real estate investment – it's our favourite way to create passive income. No matter how bad things get or how much they change, people still need a place to live. It's like a secret vice we and Kari share ... even though her strategy is different from ours; Kari's real-estate buying decisions are based primarily on long-term equity value with rental income being important, but secondary.

Our strategy is similar but a little different, we are older and so are beyond our building wealth years. We are more interested in immediate cash flow – we buy what we fondly refer to as 'real-estate popcorn'; we have bought many inexpensive small rental units to create a tidy cash flow – that cash flow lets us move about at our leisure and not have to strive daily. We also gain on the equity just like our friend – but that's not the goal, we are after the monthly rental payments as our passive income.

We have no formal education in investment or real estate but both of us are endowed with critical thinking as well as a healthy helping of common sense and curiosity. We both have done much reading on the subject and have clocked many hours talking/questioning real estate investing friends, aunts, uncles and colleagues. The other magical thing about real estate is it can be grown with leverage. As you gain more capital (pay down the mortgage) there are various bank loan products

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that may be available to you – the bank is happy to lend money against the equity on the real estate you currently hold. Then with that capital you go and buy the next one! My all-time favourite is Equity Line of Credit – you gather up all the real estate or assets you have and borrow against that – you only pay interest on the portion you use. This interest rate is usually a bit higher than that of a mortgage, but it has more flexibility.

Anyhow, the real estate bit above is how Dave and I have freed ourselves from the daily yoke – I'm not saying this is what you need do, this is just an example of something you can do while still being a photographer, I realise it's not for everyone but we both feel that the concept of passive income should be included in your thought processes. As it stands, we are still in the photographic industry, but now it is way more fun, it is not all-consuming and it started by talking to others, not just photographers.

And finally, most photographers will tell you they will die with a camera in their hands and never quit! This is what I (Dave) originally thought as well, but the reality is, as you age you will most likely not have the drive, health, energy you once had, the marketplace will have shifted, technology too ...and most certainly you won't want to or even be able to work as hard as you are doing today! Therefore, start asking questions – we still do!

Bio

Dave Montizambert lectures internationally on lighting, digital photography and Adobe Photoshop. He is also a published author having written two books on lighting and digital photography (www.montizambert.com] plus numerous magazine articles on these topics in North America, Europe, Russia and Asia. Dave also creates lighting and Photoshop tutorial DVDs for www.software-cinema.com & www.PhotoshopCAFE.com/video and authors 'Dave On Demand' (www.montizambert.com) lighting tutorial-based photo-training. Dave is available for lectures and workshops in your area and can be reached through www.montizambert.com.



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