

Why Does Custom Photography Cost More

Costs of running a business + experience and knowledge



Image by Amanda Padgham

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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 travelling 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:

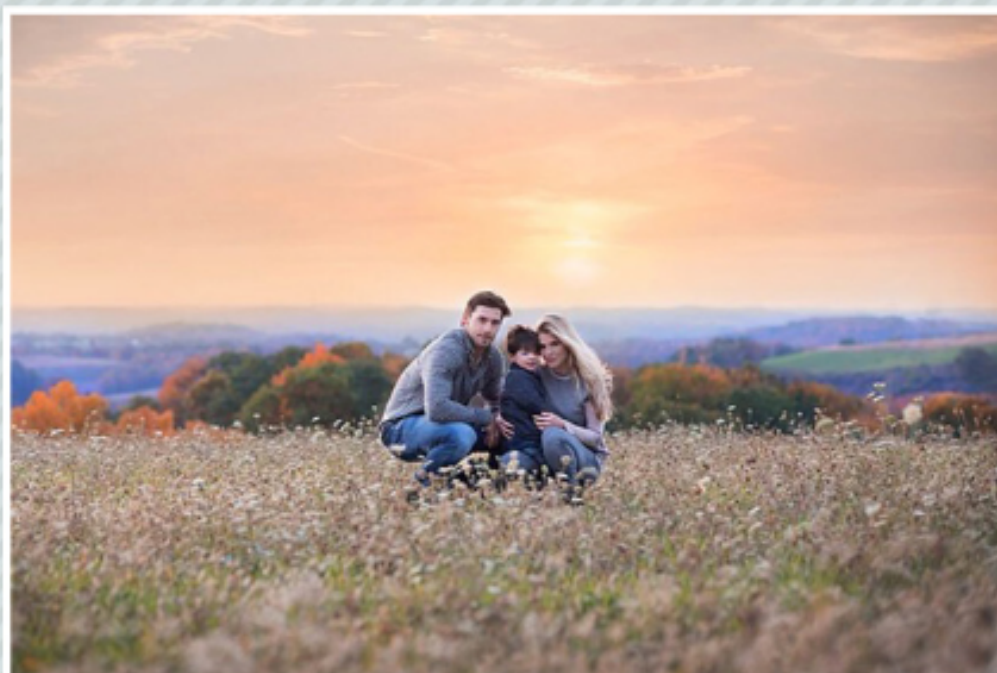


image by Kathy Wolfe

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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 come 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 times 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 a 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 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 bare bones, "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 a older gentleman was called in who simply brought in his small tool bag and a hammer. He set about prying on various parts of the vast engine with his hammer, finally settling on one area. He spent a few minutes prying 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 disbelievingly 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 prys 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, back ups, 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.

