7 days to a more streamlined wedding photography business...

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Jonathan Ford&Co
Chartered Accountants

A systematic approach to higher profits

When you're running a wedding photography business, it can be tough getting the balance right between business time, studio time and photography time. As you focus on the client's 'big day' and the photographic skills needed to capture it, your focus on the running of your own business can begin to slip.

So, wouldn't it be great to have some quick, practical, easy-to-implement steps for improving your photography business?

In this book we're going to guide you through the process of streamlining and enhancing your wedding photography company. We'll be covering a different topic on each day of the week – so in seven days you'll have the starting point for a brand new, improved business.

Here's what you'll be doing:

1 **Monday:** Sign up for Xero

2 **Tuesday:** Systemise part of your business

3 **Wednesday:** Get on top of your cash flow & VAT

4 **Thursday:** Seek customer feedback

5 **Friday:** Write clear proposals

6 **Saturday:** Boost your profits

7 **Sunday:** Take a day off!

So, let's get started. It's Monday morning, you've had your coffee and it's time to power up your Mac and start changing the future of your wedding photography business.

Jonathan Ford&Co
Chartered Accountants
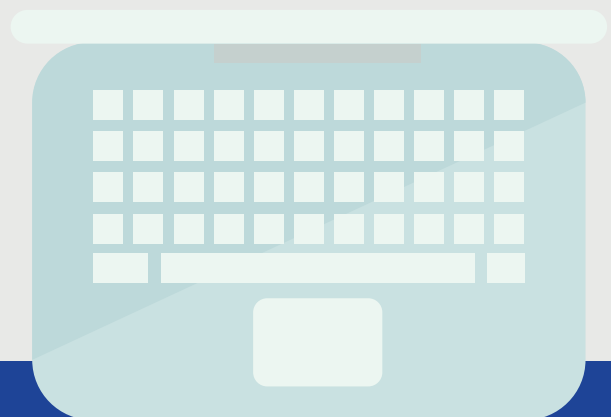
Sign up for Xero

As a wedding photographer, you need to be able to stay on top of your finances without letting the accounting get in the way of the photography. This is where Xero comes in.

Xero is beautiful accounting software. Yes, we know that 'accounting software' doesn't sound too revolutionary, but Xero is about so much more than just accounting. Xero is cloud-based software and it's an open platform that has the potential to become the central hub of your whole business.

Online, or cloud, accounting underpins all the other steps we'll be covering in this book, so it's important that you understand where online accounting really adds value.

So, what are the main benefits of using Xero?

- **Mobile** – Xero is designed to be mobile and work from any device. So wherever you are, you can see your numbers and do things like send invoices, reconcile bank transactions or chase old debts. You can run your finances from your iPhone while you're out on a shoot, and this saves you a huge amount of time.

- **Instant information** – Xero gives you instant, real-time access to your numbers. So you're not looking at a management report from three months ago, you're looking at a view of the business, as it is *right now*. That real-time view leads to better business decisions about the future of your photography business.

- **Flexible** – There are a host of plug-in Xero Add-ons that expand Xero's capabilities even further. You can be paid directly using debit/credit cards, chase your debtors automatically or magically scan your bills and expenses straight into Xero with an app like Receipt Bank (so you spend less time on admin on a weekend!).

xero

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And why is Xero so suited to your wedding photography business?

- **It's visually appealing** – As a photographer and creative thinker, design and aesthetic appeal are important. And Xero looks great. The design and the uncluttered simplicity of the UI make everything clear.

- **It's easy to use** – Xero is designed in a way that makes day-to-day tasks easy, so you don't need to be an accountant to stay on top of things. It only shows you the data, numbers and reports you need, keeping things simple and workable. So you can get on with capturing those amazing shots.

- **It's a great user experience** – The quality of the graphics, the simplicity of the layout and the streamlined nature of the functionality mean your experience of using Xero will be a good one. People end up loving it (and remember, this is accounting we're talking about!).

- **It works on any device** – Having software that works just as well on your iPhone as it does from your iPad or MacBook is a huge benefit. Xero works on all your devices and becomes central to your apps and systems.

Are you beginning to see why we love Xero? If you'd like to find out more about how cloud accounting can transform your creative business, take a look at our Xero page at jonathanford.co.uk/xero

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Systemise part of your business

Making your business both efficient and scalable is about systemising what you do. Take an important area of what you offer as a photographer and write a full system for it, including templates, checklists and scripts, and turn it into a more profitable service.

Most people start wedding photography businesses because they have a genuine love of photography and want to offer that skill as a service. But being an experienced, skilled photographer doesn't build a scalable business. You can't take the photographer out of the company and still have a business – their photography skill is the company.

What an entrepreneur does is create an idea or a system that can be understood, replicated and used by others – that frees up your time, makes the service repeatable by anyone on the team and makes the whole business scalable.

So, how do you start systemising your wedding photography business?

Find something to systemise

Every part of your business could and should be systemised. But for now, let's think about one part of your business that you can create a system for. This could be the process for taking a wedding shoot brief from a client, how you offer additional prints or printed merchandise or how you go about getting customer feedback from your wedding clients. What's vital is that the process you choose is:

- Really important to expanding the efficiency or profitability of the photography business
- Something that you want to improve or where you can see an existing missed opportunity
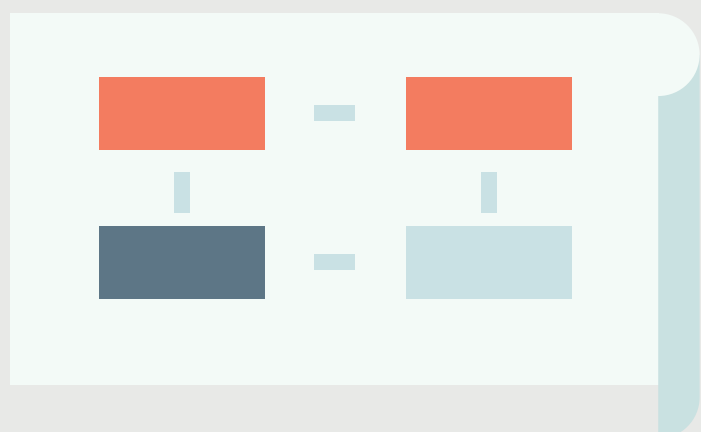
Write a systematic breakdown

One you've found the part of your business you want to systemise, you need to work through the current process. For example, think about how you may follow up an initial email enqury from your website. Write a systematic breakdown of how that follow-up process works within the business. Think about how you'd explain it to someone who knew nothing about the existing procedure.

- What happens?
- What's the process?
- Who does what?
- Where are the docs and files kept?
- Who has access?
- What should the customer get as an end experience?
- What's the desired end result?

Thinking about this process is as important as actually writing it. The process of reviewing your procedure helps you to step back and see how it works. And considering each step and each element, you'll get a much better idea of what does and doesn't work well.

Educate everyone in your business on how this system works

So, you've written down the procedure. You now have an explanation or system that anyone can read and understand – and that means the steps needed to reach the end result are no longer trapped in your head, or the head of one person in the team. This document is a how-to guide for everyone involved in the business, from photographer to studio manager or admin person. You've taken something integral to the photography business and systemised it. And it's this approach that makes this part of your business scalable.

It makes the process repeatable because:

- You can give the guide to anyone (a new photographer, or a studio assistant) to explain the process.
- It allows anyone to replicate the system, so people can provide holiday cover and help out in other areas.

Use your systems to plan ahead

Systemising your processes is nothing new. Fast food companies, like McDonald's, systemise every part of the process, delivery and customer experience. And what they end up with is a system for delivering the same burger in any store in the world, every time.

Having this systematic approach can really help you plan ahead. It allows you to sit down and think about *how* this works, both for you and for the customer. You can start scenario planning and think about potential questions you'll be asked, or potential hurdles and opportunities that the process suggests.

Scenario planning in this way has three very clear benefits:

- It allows you to predict possible client outcomes and behaviour.
- It allows you to plan for how you need to react to these outcomes.
- It gives you time to systemise a response so you have the right solution or answer ready to go.

So, for example, what happens if there's a delay in delivering a client's album because your printer hasn't delivered? Who tells the client? How do they communicate this? How might the client react and how do you respond to each of these possible scenarios. With a systemised process in place, there's an answer to all of these questions, ready and waiting to be put into action.

In the same way that you'll always get the same burger from Maccy D's, systemising the processes for your photography business means your clients will always get the same quality and experience from your service and the photographs you deliver. It's about creating consistency in your service – and about making sure you have a happy client every time. After all, happy clients are the ones who come back for more and refer you to their friends.

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Get on top of your cash flow and VAT

Cash flow can be problematic when you're a wedding photographer. Once a wedding client has paid an initial deposit, you may have to wait 1 or even 2 years to get full payment for the job. So having a good overview of incoming and outgoing cash, over the long term, is essential if you're going to be profitable.

Writing a proper budget is an incredibly good thing to do for the business. If you don't stop to think about the money you're spending, and the costs you're incurring, you're never going to have a tight grip on your profitability. Budgeting is about understanding your finances and making sure you can put your money where your mouth is.

Writing a good budget

There are two great reasons for writing a budget:

1 **Writing a budget highlights your costs** – The process of sitting down and writing a budget makes you stop and really analyse your business.

- It forces you to think about costs and where they're coming from.
- Gives you a great overview of the business and its overall financial health.
- Shows you exactly where money is being spent and how much.
- Makes you ask questions about *why* a certain cost is so high (or so low).

② Keep an eye on cash -

Xero gives you a brilliant view of your incoming and outgoing cash straight from the dashboard. You can see what you're spending, what you're earning and the difference between the two.

- You have a great overview of your cash flow, month by month.
- You can see any holes in your cash flow in advance.
- You can see when invoices are due and when payment is expected
- You get a clear view of your outstanding debts
- It's easier to chase clients and boost your cash flow

Think about VAT

If you're likely to edge close to the VAT threshold, you need to know what your sales in the last 12 months have been and what they will be in the upcoming 12 months. And that is a whole lot easier with Xero.

- Forget about working out numbers on the back of an envelope.
- Forget about hastily put-together Excel spreadsheets (you wont miss these, believe us).

Xero has all your sales, purchases and invoicing data already there in the cloud. So it's so much easier to work out your earnings over that 12 month period and make sure you're not going over the threshold for VAT and won't be getting a nasty bill from HMRC.

Armed with the right numbers and the right reports, you're better prepared to deal with the potential issues related to VAT. For example:

- If you go over the VAT threshold and continue to trade, that's about as bad as things can get with VAT. It's an absolute disaster that will take plenty of time and money to set right.

- If you're using any kind of non-UK services, like Google AdWords or LinkedIn Pro, you're meant to include that in your turnover. And that can bump your total up over the threshold.

So you need to pay close attention to what and where you're spending, and make sure you're still within that threshold in a year.

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Seek customer feedback

Customer feedback is vital for a wedding photography business. If you deliver the right customer experience, clients will spend more, come back for other services and will recommend you to friends and family– and that can be the difference between whether you sink or swim.

Asking for feedback from clients can be a hugely beneficial process for the health of your photography business. This doesn't have to be a hi-tech process; it could be as simple as phoning a client once the final prints and images have been delivered for a download of their experiences.

Turning a negative into a positive

We all hate it when something goes wrong. But try to take a positive outlook from this negative situation. You can turn around negative feedback and bad customer experiences and turn them into a real positive for the business and the end client. And the main way to do this is to listen.

Why is listening to client feedback so valuable?

- People like to be listened to and they like to feel vindicated when something goes wrong.
- Listening to the client's issue makes them feel more valued as a customer.
- Listening shows that you're willing to take action to solve their issue.
- If you can solve the problem quickly, efficiently and in a pleasant way, your client's experience of the business can be turned from bad to good in a very easy way.

Ask your clients what they think – it will pay off

You don't have to wait for a client to offer their feedback. In fact, you should be proactively asking for it. As a photography business, you're delivering a very personal service. So you need to have processes in place to ask your clients what they think of you.

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There are plenty of different ways to find out how well your clients feel you're delivering:

- Call the client once final photos have been delivered and ask them for a download of their thoughts.
- Give the client a short questionnaire at the end of each wedding project, asking them to comment on the specifics of what you delivered.
- Use an online survey site, like Survey Monkey, to poll your clients on a particular area of your service.
- Poll your clients online, or through a direct email, to find out whether there are services they'd like to see you add or changes they'd like to make to the way you shoot a wedding.
- If the client feels you've not delivered, ask them why. Remember you can turn a negative into a positive.

And make sure you act on this information. If you ask for feedback then you have to be seen to act on that feedback. Once you know about a problem, you have to solve that problem – clients will expect to see a resolution in place, so you've got to deliver on this.

Be open and transparent about customer feedback

Customer feedback can be a real gold mine of information. If you're asking your clients what they think of the photographs you deliver, and the experience they received, why not share it more widely? Having honest customer feedback available publically on your website can be very useful.

If a prospective wedding client can see genuine customer comments on your site, or through your social media channels, that's a really good way to boost your marketing and create an open, transparent vibe for potential customers.

Having your customer feedback in the public domain:

- Raises the profile of your brand and you as a photographer – and your brand is one of your biggest assets.
- Creates a good reputation for your brand and explains what it's like to do business with you.
- Gets you known for good customer service – which will get you more work.
- Helps with word-of-mouth and B2B referrals and recommendations – and these are still the best kind of advertising, especially for the wedding market.

There's an additional bonus to acting on an issue: clients can actually be *more* satisfied after you've solved a problem than they were prior to the problem occurring. So if you want to create real advocated for your brand, listening to clients and resolving their issues is an amazing place to start.

At Jonathan Ford & Co, we regularly ask our clients to let us know what they think of our service. We can't edit or delete these reviews. Read what they say...

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Independently rated by our customers
9.7
SATISFACTION GUARANTEED
customer sure

Write clear proposals

You'll know the situation: you do a shoot and the client goes from wanting one printed album and the rest in digital format, to wanting every photo in hard copy on the highest quality paper – while expecting to pay the same fee. This kind of 'mission creep' can have a real impact on a photography business's time, resourcing and revenues. Getting a great proposal sorted out early on, spelling out what you'll shoot, what you'll print and what the price will be, is crucial.

You start a wedding project with one job in mind and end up doing several jobs that weren't included in your initial brief. It can be insidious and can mean you spending far more time on a particular client than you intended. And somehow you're going to have to charge for that time, or end up making a loss.

As with most things, prevention is better than a cure. So you need to get a proposal and contract in place before you even start doing any prep or photography work. What's needed is a written agreement on the nature of the wedding project, your remit for the work to be done and the specific elements your fee will cover.

Define your mission

You can call it a mission statement, proposal, engagement letter or project brief. What's important is that it protects you from the danger of mission creep. The important elements to include are fairly basic:

- Put something in writing that outlines your remit for the photography work and follow up deliverables.
- Clearly outline what you *will* and what you *won't* be doing on this project.
- Make it 100% clear what's in scope and what would be additional work.
- Make it very clear what each element will cost and the amount of the overall fee to the client.
- Outline the costs for any additional work that's outside this scope.
- Get the client to review the document and sign it off.

Get your client to agree on the mission

Builders and tradespeople are very good at quoting and giving a proposal that includes the scope of the work. You want an extension built? They'll tell you what their fee will cover and if you require more they will happily do it – but at a price.

The principle for wedding photography is no different. It's about being transparent about the photographic and printed work you do and the fees you're going to charge. What's important is that you talk about fees, scope and what's part of your remit from the very start.

And once you've got a proposal document, you need to get the wedding client to agree on the mission and sign off the proposal. Then you know you're both agreed on the scope of the project.

The written proposal doesn't have to be too formal:

- It could be a short email to the wedding client outlining the work and asking for a reply in the affirmative.
- It could be one page in Word that you email to the client – and that they then say they agree to.
- It could be a full-blown, branded proposal, with all the legal bits and bobs included.
- You could even use a Xero Add-on like Quotient to send your quote and proposal online.

Whatever you use, you just need to make sure you've made your scope clear and your fees clear – and that the client is happy with all this. Then you know you're protected from the dreaded mission creep and will get paid for the work you do.

Boost your profits

Put in the most simple terms, profit = sales minus costs. So there are a limited number of ways you can improve that profit. The key is to look at the available options, have a great understanding of how your wedding photography business works, and to pick the one that'll give you the quickest 'easy win'.

Running a photography business is about listening to what a client wants and delivering a quality, creative service that meets these needs. But that business also has to make a profit. Without profit you don't have the income to fuel the company, pay the wages, grow your team or expand into new markets.

So any strategy that can increase your profit quickly and easily is going to have real value for the success of the business.

Ways to quickly improve your profit

1. Get more clients
2. Sell more to your existing clients
3. Put up your prices
4. Cut your costs

To improve your profit you must focus on all of these four areas – it's the only way you can affect the profitability of your enterprise. The trick is to work out which of these options will have the most impact on the profitability of your wedding photography business. In most circumstances, options 2 (sell more to existing clients) and option 3 (put up your prices) are your go-to solutions. But each option has its merits at certain points in your business journey.

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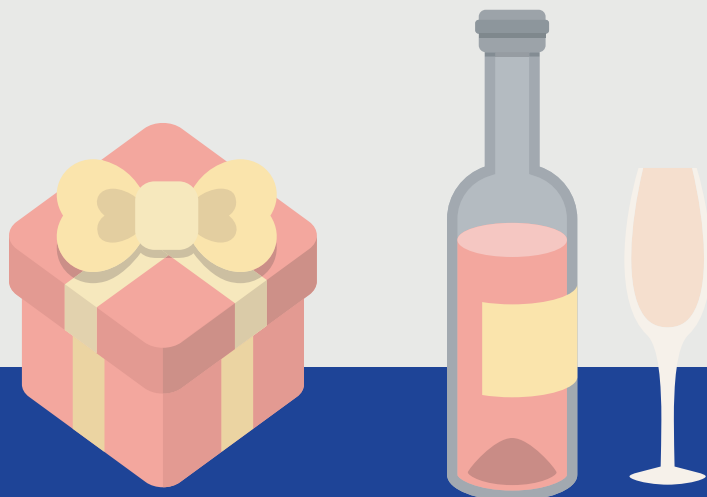
1 Get more clients

To focus on getting more customers, you need to work on your sales, business development and marketing.

- Get more clients through referrals – talk to your existing wedding clients and work their networks. Word of mouth and personal recommendations carry a lot of weight.
- Get more clients through advertising – in a digital world there are plenty of advertising channels to use: improve your website, run a targeted marketing campaign or advertise in wedding industry media.
- Use social media to raise your profile – social media, like Twitter, are free and can be a highly effective way to increase awareness of your brand in the wedding sector and build a following of potential customers.

2 Sell more to your existing clients

To sell more to existing clients, you'll need to work on those customer relationships, listen to your wedding clients' needs and make it easy to upsell other services and merchandise.

- Create fixed-fee packages – wrapping up a number of photography and printing services in a package gives you more control over fees.
- Make sure your wedding clients are on the right package – think about the varying levels of service you deliver and make sure each client is on the optimum package.
- Talk to clients and upsell – building a good customer relationship with the client helps enormously. Talk to them and find out where you can add more value for their big day.
- Promote your wedding services through marketing – use digital marketing and social media marketing to promote new services or push existing services to a wedding audience.

3 Put up your prices

Putting up your prices is easy. But you also have to think about the impact this price rise could have – and decide which prices to increase.

- Increase your prices – a jump in price, where your costs remain the same, is a quick way to boost your margins.
- Think about the impact of this increased price – new customers may think twice if you're not looking attractive from a pricing perspective.
- Make sure the price rise is sustainable – think very carefully before raising your prices and make sure the end result won't be a dip in customers. Or if the price rise does cause a dip in customers, make sure it's a small enough dip to be worth it.

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4 Cut your costs

As we've already highlighted, focusing on your budget and your costs can have a really positive impact on your profits. What's needed is a clear understanding of *where* you can cut costs and *how*.

- Work out a clear budget – the process of writing a budget will focus your thinking on costs in the business.
- Analyse and review your costs – think about your current costs and keep an eye on spending so you understand why you have this expenditure.
- Look at where cuts can be made – consider where you think cost-savings are possible.
- Spend less on overheads and costs – by reducing your costs, and maintaining your sales revenues, you're already having a positive impact on your end profit.

Choose a way to boost your profit

With the 'four ways to improve profit' structure in your head, it's much easier to analyse how the photography business works and see how you can change it to make more profit.

7 Sunday

Take a day off!

It's always good to take a break from your business. And, as a wedding photographer, it can be easy to get stuck in a rut of working every weekend and running yourself into the ground with a 7-day week. So, what do you with your free day?

By taking time out from the wedding photography business you give yourself that most precious of commodities: time! And having this additional time gives you some freedom to spread your wings and explore new areas.

So, what do you do with this spare time?

Take time out to find inspiration

When you're burning the midnight oil to get photos to clients all week, there's no time to step back from the day-to-day of the studio and to remember why you fell in love with photography in the first place. Take time to immerse yourself in photography as an artform again and help your inspiration for the paid wedding work.

- Go to photography exhibitions, look at other photographers' work and search out images that you find inspiring and motivational.
- Spend more time making your own photographs and experiment more – try new techniques and see where they take you.
- Set yourself defined projects for a week, or a month, and write yourself a clear brief that you must stick to – restrictions can actually make you more creative (Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies offer a similar approach for musicians, so give them a try).
- Network with other photographers and people with an interest in art, photography and the creative process – other creative people can be very inspiring.

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Run another business on the side

If you're not so good at relaxing and sitting still, maybe you can put your free time into running another business outside of the wedding photography sector. Use another hobby or interest to inspire you, or look at other ways you could use your photography experience to make a profit.

Running a second business can also be a great way to get around the VAT threshold for the wedding photography business. By diversifying your business interests, and splitting your income across them, you're effectively increasing the income you can pull in before getting involved in the messy business of VAT.

For example, you could focus on photographing subjects and locations you know work well for stock image sites and make a nice profit on selling these to image libraries etc.

Strike a balance

The important thing with this time away from your core business is to get the balance right between work and leisure. That work/life balance isn't a profit thing, but it is a wellness thing. And if you're stressed, overworked and making yourself unhealthy your long-term business prospects don't look good. Taking a day off may seem counterproductive, but it will refresh and restore you.

So it's good to:

- Make sure you stick to the free time you've agreed on
- Use it productively to:
  - Relax
  - Find inspiration
  - Run a second business

- But make sure the balance is always right between working (and profits) and relaxing (and quality of life).
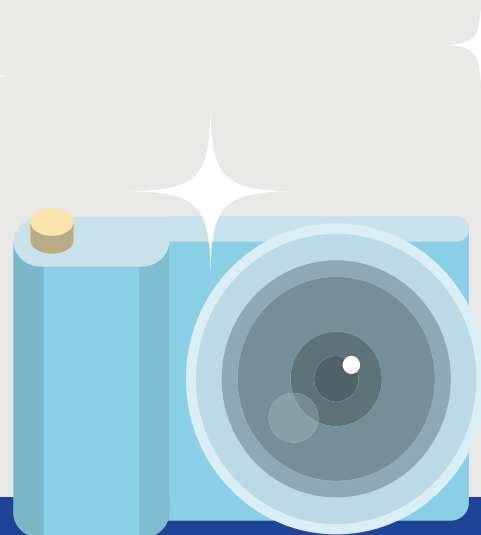
You're ready to start improving your business

So, here we are. It's Monday again and you've been through a whole week of reviewing, analysing and rethinking how your wedding photography business works – and the simple ways you can improve that performance one day at a time.

Let's take a quick look at our week to summarise those points again:

1 **Sign up for Xero** – accounting solution to get a mobile, flexible way to instantly see your numbers and manage your finances.

2 **Systemise part of your business** – take one part of your wedding photography and work it into a system or process that can be replicated and scaled as you grow.

3 **Get on top of your cash flow & VAT** – write a budget for the business and spend some time looking at the costs you're incurring and how you can cut them.

4 **Seek customer fedback** – ask your customers what they think of you and your photography service. And take action to resolve any issues and improve their customer experience.

5 **Write clear proposals** – for every wedding shoot, write a proposal that outlines the remit and scope of the work; and what it's going to cost the client.

6 **Boost your profits** – work out the best way to improve your profits and choose the option that's the quickest, most effective win.

7 **Take a day off!** – Get the balance right between work and leisure by having a day of refreshment and rest.

Use this as your checklist and tick off each area as you go along. Take it one step at a time and work your way systematically through the process.

Now you're ready to start improving your business with these easy-to-implement tips. And you're in a much better place to start thinking about the long-term future of your creative company.

Chat with us online

Get in touch

At Jonathan Ford & Co, we specialise in helping creative companies get more from their business. With expertise in the agency, freelance, media, design, photography, publishing and TV production industries, we understand the specific challenges of making profit as a creative.

If you'd like to find out more about how Jonathan Ford & Co can help your creative business, you can get in touch here.

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