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JOURNAL REPORTS: SMALL BUSINESS

Photographers Reveal Their Tricks for Getting the Perfect Family Picture

It can be tough to keep parents and children from getting sour on a shoot. Here's how pros keep them smiling.

By Matthew Kassel

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If you think holidays can be hectic, imagine what portrait photographers have to deal with.

They've only got a short time to get that perfect shot for the throngs of families who want a last-minute picture to grace their mantle or Christmas card. And capturing perfection is made all the more difficult by unruly children and bored or impatient parents.

How do they get past all that and snap a keeper during their sessions? Here are some of their secrets.

Pretending the shoot is over. People are in the habit of tensing up when they get in front of a camera, according to Bill Wadman, a commercial portrait photographer in New York who frequently gets asked to take pictures at family gatherings. So, if Mr. Wadman isn't getting a shot he likes, he will sometimes announce that the session is over when, in fact, he intends to keep taking pictures.

It is a tactic he employs when he wants to elicit a calmer and more laid-back mood among his subjects, who tend to relax their shoulders and smile more naturally when they hear that the shoot is complete.

"The stress gets let out of the balloon," especially among those who are self-conscious about having their picture taken, Mr. Wadman says.

But it is a short window of time, Mr. Wadman adds, as everybody is about to stand up and leave, so he has to be ready to snap a few quick shots before that happens.

Taking advantage of downtime. Similarly, photographers who are looking for candid moments may sometimes use the downtime between setting up different poses to sneak a few shots. For

example, Jessica Rist, a photographer in Reading, Ohio, takes advantage of the warm-up period before a shoot to get candid family shots.

Within the first five minutes of a shoot, Ms. Rist encourages parents to smile and play with their children while not looking at the camera—all while she surreptitiously clicks away. In Ms. Rist's experience, clients like these candid moments, even though they aren't posed, because they showcase their child's personality. And when Ms. Rist moves on to posed shots, she asks her subjects to stay in the same position that they were in while playing, so they don't lose that air of levity.

Dealing with that sullen teenager. There is occasionally at least one reluctant family member—in many cases, a dad or an older teenage boy—who isn't interested in being photographed, says Jill Carmel, a photographer in Sacramento, Calif. This can create tension, as sessions can last anywhere between an hour and two hours, according to Ms. Carmel, who has developed a workaround for those who drag their feet.

At the beginning of the shoot, Ms. Carmel will take the largest group photo first so any recalcitrant subjects can go and sit on the sidelines. Then she will break each shot down into smaller family units, excluding the stubborn participants, and build back up to a large group shot after everyone has warmed up. By this time, Ms. Carmel has noticed, as the reluctant subjects see what is happening, they will feel as though they are missing out and be eager to rejoin the shoot—usually with much more enthusiasm than before.

“It's kind of a little dance,” she says.

Ignoring the youngsters. During shoots, children can be skeptical of photographers, regarding them as interlopers who are intruding on what appears to be a family affair. It is a feeling that Kate McKenna, a portrait photographer in Andover, Mass., describes as “stranger danger”—and it can yield a bad photo because the child may not feel comfortable enough to loosen up.

With that in mind, Ms. McKenna says that she takes a counterintuitive approach when children are present, completely ignoring the child at the beginning of the session and engaging in convivial chitchat with the parents. The idea, according to Ms. McKenna, is that the child will witness this, realize that the photographer is a friend and be more cooperative.

“This is something a parent may not even realize is happening,” Ms. McKenna explains, adding that some older children may also be more eager to please—and jockey for attention—if they are being ignored.

Going for the gags. Portrait photographers say that it is better to earn a laugh rather than ask for a smile—from both children and adults. Michael Jurick, a portrait photographer in New York who often takes photos outside, says that he likes to grab a chunk of grass from the



Photographer Erika Seress works with some young subjects. PHOTO: ERIKA SERESS

ground, furtively shove it under his nose and then pretend to sneeze it out during shoots. “The kids go berserk,” he says. “They’re like, ‘Do it again, do it again!’”

Mr. Jurick adds that the joke makes parents laugh along with the children. But when he wants to get a giggle out of parents in particular, he jokes with them about what they

say to each other “after they put the kids to bed.”

Lara Aman Matthey, a photographer in Wayne, Pa., goes for a simpler approach. She just tells her subjects not to laugh. “Of course,” she says, “they laugh hysterically.”

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Keeping idle hands occupied. A common obstacle Erika Seress, a photographer in Culver City, Calif., encounters is that very young children will often put their hands in their mouths during a shoot. Ms. Seress, however, is always prepared and keeps a bin of props—balls, tiaras, toy unicorns, flowers—that she uses to distract the children from moving their hands to their faces.

If a little boy is being unruly, for instance, Ms. Seress may pull out a ball and toss it to him, engaging the child in a game while also leading him to pose for a photo with the prop in hand. “If kids have something in their hands,” Ms. Seress explains, “it’s a better photo.”

Swapping heads. Still, Ms. Seress says, “You can’t always get a good shot.” One option is a “head swap”—a common industry practice, she says, especially for group photos, in which it is difficult to ensure that everyone looks good.

If it turns out, for instance, that every subject but, say, the toddler is smiling, a photographer may digitally superimpose a better image of the toddler’s face, taken from another photo. Often, Ms. Seress says, her clients don’t even know that such a switch has taken place.

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