

No pay, no way?

Is there ever a reason to work for free as a pro photographer?

As a professional photographer, have you or would you ever work for free? Are you adamant it's always 'no' or are there instances when it might be acceptable? This is how you earn money to live, after all. But delve a little deeper and it can start to be less clear cut. For example, what about charity work? Are there times when this should be paid, and then times when you may choose to give free images or volunteer your skills?

US Nikon Ambassador Andrew Hancock is a sports photographer shooting editorial and commercial work. He tells us, 'Working for free is certainly a touchy subject in our industry and must be navigated carefully. Coming from the sports side of the industry, the proliferation of wire services and blogs that utilise free labour have certainly soured the industry and made things that much

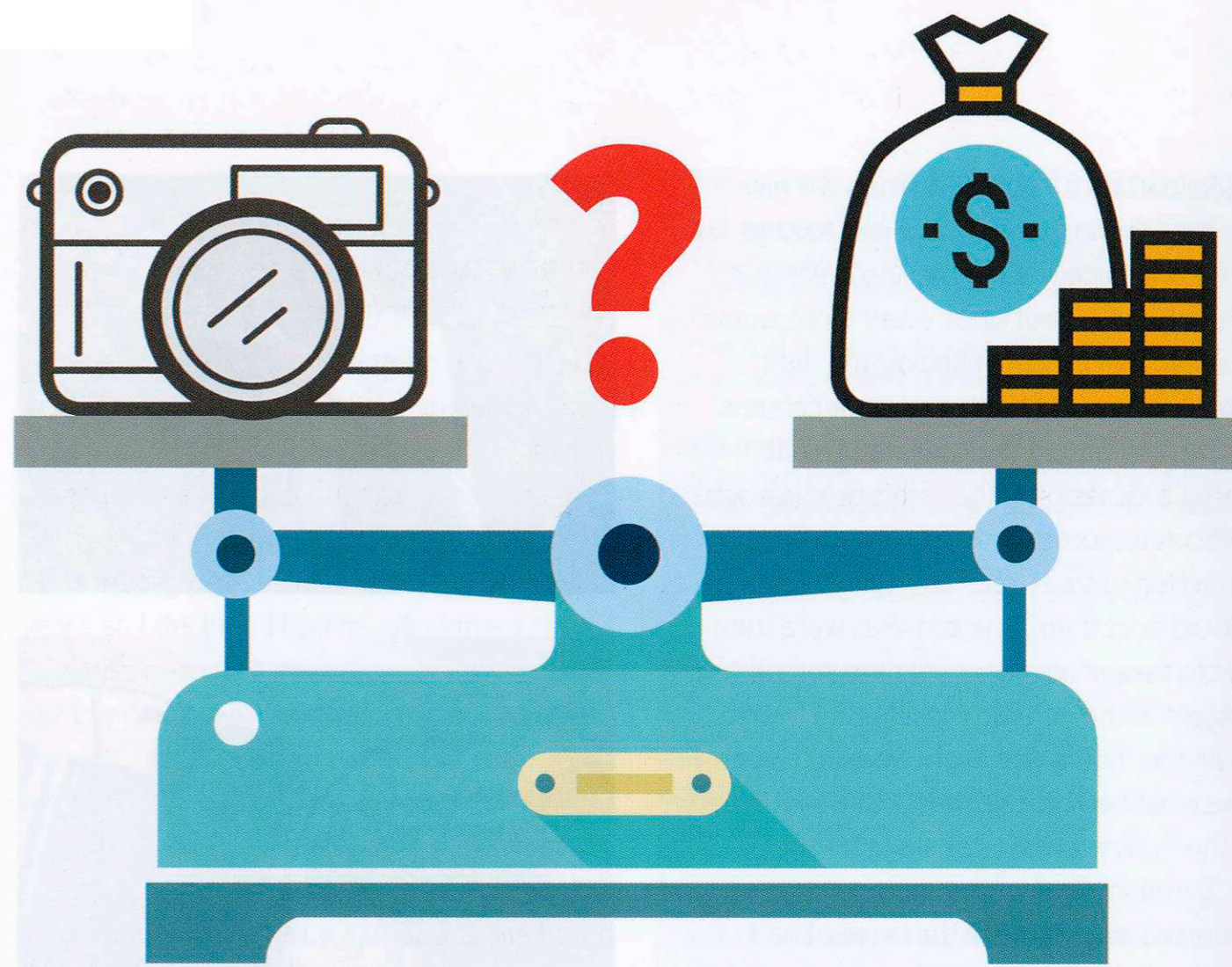
'If photographers keep offering their work for free, within 10 years there will be no such thing as a professional photographer.'

JEREMY WALKER

more challenging for some, especially those young in their career, to make a living. The rapid expansion of clients willing to prey on weekend warriors and fans with cameras who just want to get on the sidelines for a credential has soiled the water in the pool and now we all have to swim in it and everyone is looking for clean water. We find the industry in need of much more chlorine in the form of photographers making smart business decisions to keep the industry sustainable for most.'

UK Nikon Ambassador Jeremy Walker is a landscape and architectural photographer. A pro for three decades, he explains, 'The world of photography has changed quite dramatically over the last 10 years or so with digital technologies influencing the way we shoot images but also how images are viewed, sold and distributed. Images have become more transient: here today, gone tomorrow, replaced by yet another new image, one of millions floating around on the web. Here I believe is the heart of the problem. Images have become two a penny, if the images are cheap to buy from picture agencies this then reflects on the photographers and the wider photographic community. The image as a commodity and the perceived value and role of the photographer have been incredibly devalued, forever.'

Martina Wörz is a music photographer from Germany. She's been pro since 2007. She says, 'I'm connected to the hardcore punk scene where DIY fanzines are a common thing. Doing interviews with bands, layouts for the fanzines, taking pictures – the people there do this just for fun. There's no financial aspect involved, it's just to keep the scene alive. Some of the fanzines you could easily compare with music magazines and some are definitely better! And the fanzines are free, so anyone who wants one grabs them at shows or orders them (well, you have to pay for shipping). So this is a reason for me to give pictures and sometimes my time for free to be part of the culture. I always try to support upcoming photographers because when I started I was lucky to get an internship with a well-known fashion



photographer and filmmaker. She taught me a lot and helped me develop my skills, so why shouldn't I help others?

'But,' warns Martina, 'there's a fine line between help/support and being exploited. So I'm closemouthed till I see the true intentions of a person.'

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Jeremy says, 'If you work for nothing or allow your images to be used with no payment you're undermining your own worth and the value of the images you produce. You create a downward spiral and there will be no going back. Expecting a photographer to produce images for free will become – is becoming, has become – the norm in many arenas and this isn't helped by new people offering their services for free to get a foot in the door with a view to charging for their work next time. If a client has had your work for free once they'll

'Being a professional means you live from your pictures.'

MARTINA WÖRZ

expect it for free the next time and if you don't give it to them for free someone else will.

After all his years in the industry, Jeremy says, 'I could be seen to be a bit of a grumpy old man, however I'd like to call it experience. I was young once – yes, really – just starting out in the profession and I went through all the scenarios of trying to get work into magazines and commissions from agencies and feet into doors. My conclusion was good clients were prepared to pay a fair rate for a job well done, and then come back for more as you built a relationship with them. And let's face it, you're more likely to go the extra mile for a client that's paying rather than someone who wants a freebie.'

These sentiments are echoed by Andrew: 'One thing to keep in mind is once you start working for free for a particular client, the client will most likely never be willing to pay for your services. If you won't, they can find another weekend warrior to fill your spot on the sidelines. It's a tough position for the up-and-coming photographer to break into the industry and be successful.'

Andrew adds, 'Many photographers aren't business savvy and this day and age of budgets lowering and clients wanting more for less isn't going away. That makes for a challenging business climate for the unprepared. Don't get me wrong, there are still plenty of clients that value great work and are willing to pay for that work. While Andrew's view is you shouldn't work for free, he says, 'That comes with a caveat: I've no problem working for spec and there's a clear difference between the two.'

SPEC WORK VS FREE WORK

Andrew explains, 'When you're working for free, you're doing just that. When you're working on speculation, you're working with a careful and detailed plan on how you can monetise the images – always by retaining complete rights remaining with you – on the back end. I've done this a handful of times. Each time I did, it was with great planning and calculation to ensure I came out ahead in the end. Each time, however, there's an element of risk. One instance was after I'd already been working as a contributing photographer for *Sports Illustrated* for several years and there was a game I felt needed to be covered and it wasn't assigned or being covered by the magazine. I called my editor and told her I felt very strongly about covering this game, that I'd an idea for a photo and had to be there. She said she would credential me, but I was on my own for the flight and expenses. It was a tough decision for my wife and I at the

'Your work has value, and sometimes you have to educate your client on this delicately – and sometimes bluntly.'

ANDREW HANCOCK

time as our budget was tight, but we found a way. I ended up making what was considered one of the best photos published in the magazine that year and it ran as a two-page spread at the front of the magazine. I spent around (US) \$1,000 on flight and expenses for the gamble. To date I've made over (US) \$50,000 on the photo between print sales and licensing. While I was taking a gamble on this photo I felt I could make. I also had a plan in place for how to monetise the photo on the back end if I was successful. Granted, this situation was made easier due to my relationship with the client and their belief in my abilities. Regardless, it's still a financial risk and the goal in doing anything on spec is minimising the risk to maximise the reward.

Andrew's tip is to not make spec work all you do: 'Spec work should be in situations where you've the opportunity to make an image you otherwise wouldn't be able to make which will benefit either your portfolio in a significant way (to help you land another or more paying clients) or to monetise the images appropriately on the back end. If you don't have either of those, you're back to working for free.'

THE C WORD: CHARITY

Jeremy comments, 'Is there a place and time to do charitable work for free perhaps? Yes, but the issue can be clouded. If a charity wants you to shoot their ad campaign you should be paid a fair wage for a fair job. However, if you wish to support a charity by donating a print for a charity auction,

why not? I have done on several occasions and was happy to support the charities that asked but you can't say yes to everyone and you have to draw the line somewhere.'

Martina explains, 'I got paid for my work for a street magazine, which is sold by homeless people to get back on track. But I've also donated pictures for exhibitions where the auction proceeds were donated. In the end I have to identify myself with the project. If I feel I can help with my donation, I'd help. Same for my time. Teaching kids who are interested in photography but can't afford to pay a course, why shouldn't I help? The important thing in my eyes is to keep the balance between the job where I earn my living and the passion I want to share with others.'

EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

Andrew shares, 'There's an exception to every rule. I've a friend who shot for free for a sports wire service. He occasionally got a cheque for some sales, but nothing that would come anywhere close to making even a meager living. However, what he was doing in covering some of these events (collegiate football in particular) was to make his images very visible to the fan base by retaining his copyright and being very active on social media. What he was doing was then becoming a familiar name within a region and his primary income was wedding and portrait work, which was booming as a result. Other photographers would criticise him as being part of the problem (on the sidelines working for free), but it was all part of his master plan, and it worked financially for him. It also built up his portfolio and he now does work for one of the biggest universities in the US, which he was previously covering for free for a wire service.'

Martina says, 'I hear a lot of complaints about the issue that professional

photographers' work isn't valued anymore. And working for free destroys pricing and the market. I don't see it that way in regards to my photography. But as always there are two sides of the coin: being a professional means you live from your pictures. There are a huge amount of semi-professionals out there who have a day job to pay the bills and work for the "fame" or little money. I wouldn't say that my way devalues my body of work, for me it increases the possibilities to get paid jobs.'

A BLEAK FUTURE?

Jeremy says, 'If photographers keep offering their work for free, within 10 years there will be no such thing as a professional photographer. A few specialists in advertising or fashion perhaps but the vast majority will be earning money from other jobs and offering photography on a part-time basis.'

Martina has a slightly more upbeat take, 'The struggle is real but as long as you keep your business serious and professional, no one can devalue your work.'


Andrew says, 'Generally speaking, working for free is something you should absolutely not do. Your work has value, and sometimes you have to educate your client on this delicately – and sometimes bluntly. There's an exception to every rule and for someone who has a very detailed business plan in place for how to make working for free generate substantial business in another way can certainly work. Those instances, however, are very few and far between.'

To see work by these pros, visit:

www.andrewhancock.com

www.jeremywalker.co.uk

www.martinawoerz.de

 What do you think about this story? Share your views on our Facebook page.