



L A U R A C O T T R I L

Laura Cottril sits at her desk reviewing folders of images on her computer screen. It's time to select new portraits to update her website. Collectively, the folders are chapters that tell the story of her home-based studio from the time she established it in 2002 until today. They also tell of the trends that are influencing the way family photographers do business. Not only is the technology changing—the families are changing too.

Some of the images Laura sorts through are classical. There's the maternity session taken in window light with a soon-to-be mom in repose. Then there's the "sexy

momma" standing on the sidewalk in a chic outfit with her pregnant belly busting through the buttons of her blouse. She engages with the camera, confident yet serene, like a model in a fashion shoot.

A LIGHTHEARTED PHOTOGRAPHER WITH LIFELONG FAMILY CLIENTS

By Donna Mackay

It's one of Laura's favorite maternity images. "I love how the building in the background makes this portrait more interesting. This mom really wanted to have her session outside, and I think it is important

to show that kind of flexibility," Laura says as she considers it for her site.

In contrast, Laura's most recent family sessions have gone back inside. Perhaps neighborhood parks are just too generic these days. Many of her clients want to be in their own homes surrounded by their belongings. It seems couples that chose a photojournalistic style for their wedding photography are becoming parents, and now they

want candid, informal family portraits as well. Laura actually prefers these sessions. "There are some big advantages to crossing that threshold into a client's personal space. It's a chance for me to build a friendship



with them. It's great to see the way people interact naturally. The kids can even be with their pets, and there's more opportunity for laughter and play," she explains.

Indeed, Laura captures the joy of parenthood and family life in her images. She's won awards for her mastery of composition, lighting and natural posing. And she's taken a leadership role in the industry as the president of the Northern California Professional Photographers association. Her business is based in the kid-centric community of Walnut Creek in the San Francisco Bay area, where she caters to a high-end clientele that values personalized service and products. That means being versatile enough to work skillfully and quickly with small children, anxious moms and self-conscious dads in any environment. She covers a lot of territory in order to stay relevant in an ever-changing market, but it keeps her profitable and in sync with her own creative journey.

Professional photography is a second career for Laura, but looking back, she recalls it was one of her first passions. She took photography classes in high school and college and later branched out into graphic design. When she graduated she became a production manager with an advertising firm. That's where she learned branding strategies for national accounts and how to negotiate with vendors. It was a high-profile job, but it left little time for family life once Laura's first son was born. She began to re-evaluate her options for finding something more compatible with her new priorities. Encouraged by a support group of young mothers in her own family and neighborhood, she decided to use her photography skills to bring in additional income and satisfy her need for personal growth.

As it turns out, one of her most pivotal

decisions in making the transition was how much to charge for an 8x10. It was not so much the answer, but the quest. When she called a colleague for advice, she found out Lisa Evans was offering an apprenticeship at her studio. Laura was well aware of Lisa's reputation for being one of the most creative and accomplished photographers in the nation. "When I first met Lisa, I



brought an album of my favorite images," Laura says. "She told me, 'You have a great eye, and I can teach you the rest.' I committed to working with her for one calendar year, four days a week, no pay, in exchange for mentoring. She taught me to use a Mamiya RZ67 camera. I assisted during her sessions and sales previews. I tried to emulate what I was learning by photographing 40 sessions on my own during that year. Lisa critiqued my images, and it

changed my work dramatically."

The immersion in the technical and creative aspects of photography was only the beginning of launching her business. Since then she's established Laura Cottril Photography using the principles she learned during her advertising career. At the very outset, Laura wanted a logo that would be a touchstone to express her sentiments.

She chose a woodcut of a bird's nest as a metaphor for the home and family. "The nest is built for protection and nurturing. It is a point of departure and return," she explains. "I really wanted something that would symbolize the encompassing nature of the family circle."

Then Laura built strategic relationships with local businesses that cater to her ideal prospects. She provides portraits for display at a baby furniture boutique and in the office of a massage therapist who specializes in maternity clients. Her images evoke the nurturing aspects of their products and services, and they plant the seeds for seeking her out as a family photographer. "Some of my clients tell me straight out in the first phone call that they are looking for a lifelong photographer to grow with their family," Laura says. "I remember well what it was like to have your first child, so I bond with them over how exciting and life-altering that time can be."

Many photographers believe that maternity sessions are not very lucrative, but Laura has discovered ways to make them profitable and to provide more value to her clients. She encourages expectant parents to book a maternity-newborn package for a 25% discount on what she would charge for two sessions. "This gives me the opportunity to create something special for the whole family once the baby is born," she explains.

Because couples don't buy canvas wall portraits of maternity images, Laura offers

smaller prints that have a greater aesthetic appeal. "I order black-and-white fine art prints from Jonathan Penney and sell them framed," says Laura. "These are the kind of prints that a couple will order as a set of four and hang in their bedroom." A sale like this can be even greater than a canvas wall portrait.

When Laura photographs newborns, she reconnects with her clients at a time when they are experiencing the essence of new life and the spirit of family bonding. She realized that she could do more than just illustrate these stories—she could write them too. Laura searched for a vendor that produces leather-bound books that have the appearance of fine art limited editions. She found the Heritage series from PhotoStream Books and began to offer them to all her clients. In addition to designing pages with photo montages of the family, she writes biographical information about the parents and children. She also includes a short note to the family from herself as the creator of the book. The samples in Laura's studio have great appeal to those who want to invest in high-quality personalized keepsakes of their family history.

In fact, many of Laura's clients have very definite ideas about what they want when they first meet her. But those ideas can change during a sales presentation. "One of my best client couples came in for a consultation and said they did not want canvas wall portraits. I showed them a book from SharedInk.com and they loved it. I did a 'day in the life' session at their home and mixed in a variety of traditional portraits," Laura says. "They ended up buying wall portraits and a book. It was one of my biggest sales of the year."

Laura knows the key to sales like this is an ordering process that optimizes the viewing of a variety of portrait products. Not all of her sessions are done with her Canon EOS 5D, so when she shoots film she sends it to Bay Photo Lab for scanning. She carefully chooses about 40 images because any more than that can be

collect a deposit and print out a receipt for her clients.

The canvas wall portraits, fine art prints and Heritage books are the kinds of products that promote an upscale reputation for her studio. They help to position Laura Cottril Photography as a maintainable staple in the high-end market for family photography. However, Laura knows it's not the prestige of her products that will bring her return customers and referrals: It's the pleasure she provides people during the creative process.

"My goal is for clients to enjoy their sessions so when they look at their portraits they think about something funny or special that happened that day," she says. "I try to help people lighten up about having their photograph taken. I like to laugh and I use humor to help put people at ease."

This approach endears Laura to her clients. (After one session, a rambunctious child even asked to meet later for a play date.) It also helps with uptight adults. "When people are amused, they relax and open up. That's when their expressions are more real. So the experience is just as important as the portrait itself," says Laura.

As Laura searches through images for her website, she comes

across one of a family dog and an infant in an instant of mutual regard. Caught at the decisive moment, it is an image that Laura loves. It's funny and real, and a perfect example of why Laura's skill, professionalism and lighthearted personality make her such a good fit for families looking for a lifelong photographer today. Visit www.lauracphotography.com.



Donna Mackay is a freelance writer and photographer from Palos Verdes, California. She also has a background in photojournalism and television production.



ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © LAURA COTTRIL

overwhelming. If light retouching or head swaps between images are needed, she does that in advance. Then she projects the enhanced files using ProSelect software.

With ProSelect she's able to screen side-by-side comparisons of images, project the actual sizes of wall portraits, and design photo montages and sample album layouts during the presentation. Not only that—the program interfaces with SuccessWare, a studio-management software that allows her to add pricing. The program calculates the total sale, and she can immediately