

THE **REW**ORK  
WITH ALLISON TYLER JONES

**RE**

# THE SESSION FEE STRATEGY

OR HOW TO QUIT  
WORKING WEEKENDS



# THE THING IS

Do you like working weekends? If so, feel free to disregard.

For the rest of us, who would actually like to attend their kid's sporting events on occasion or be off work with the rest of the world on Saturdays and Sundays, come along.

In every industry there are traditions, best practices, things that have "just always been that way." And in the portrait world, no tradition is more deeply entrenched than the age-old practice of working weekends. I attribute this to the fact that, until recently, most photographers have been men and traditionally, most men have wives, wives who can go to all the kid's events and hold the fort down while their husbands photographed portraits on weekends. Or maybe it's the photographers who transitioned from shooting weddings and events (hello weekends) and just kept working on weekends because that's what they'd always done. But now, here we are in the 2020's, with a lot more women **and** men portrait photographers who are tired of the weekend hustle and **want the option of not "having to" work weekends.**

But wait, YOU CAN'T DO THAT! Because...

"Weekends are when families are together."

or

"Weekends are the only time my clients are available."

or

"Weekend sessions are the most popular time slots."

Is that right?

I'm not saying people don't want to be photographed on weekends. They do. But people also like to save money, so when I changed my session fee structure and started charging more for weekends, a funny thing happened. **I booked a LOT more sessions during the week AND got paid more for the few sessions that I did shoot on weekends.**

Here's how I did it.

# 3 WAYS TO THINK ABOUT SESSION FEES

- 1 Commitment:** Session fees **guarantee that clients will show up** for their sessions, and they are an essential revenue stream in your business.
- 2 Covers Time:** In our studio, I count on the Session Fee to cover:
  - My time** to consult with the client
  - My time** to photograph the portraits
  - The cost of my assistant to prep the studio and upload the SD cards and
  - The time** it takes my assistant to do global edits, initial culling and for me to get the images ready for the sales session.
- 3 Loss Leader?:** There is a school of thought about charging a session fee just to discount it as a loss leader to entice clients in the door. I am not a fan. I believe a **Session Fee commands the respect of the client and communicates that your time is valuable.** When a fee is routinely discounted, it loses its value in the eyes of the client. This tactic might work well for the one-and-done photographer, but I want repeat clients that return year after year.

## FULL DISCLOSURE

For the last 2 years, I've actually committed to **NOT working on Fridays giving us a 3-day weekend**. I do still, occasionally, shoot on a Saturday. Usually 4-5 Saturday sessions **per year** and 3-4 of those are because I set aside one Saturday each month in September, October & November because that's the busiest time in the studio.

### **4-5 Saturdays in a YEAR.**

That's a LOT more time to **hang out with my family** or just do nothing.

So, if you wanted to go about quitting weekend shooting, how would you proceed?

### **And how do you do it without upsetting your clients?**

I thought you'd never ask.

## THE TRANSITION

I started my business in 2005, but I opened my retail studio in 2009 (Recession anyone?) so I chose to proceed more gradually when adjusting my Session Fees due to the economic realities of the time (plus I was a big, fat chicken). Since **100% of our income comes from the portrait studio**, we take time to think things through and consider all angles of how a new policy might affect our client's reactions and changing up our session fee structure was no different. **I don't want to just tell you what our session fees are right now without some context**. I want to show you the transition we made to higher session fees and session fees that were structured to facilitate how we wanted to live our lives. For those of you who don't rely on your portrait work for 100% of your income, I'd suggest ripping off the BandAid™ and make these changes more quickly. On the next page you'll see what our transition looked like.

## HOW TO SAY IT

All of our Fees are collected upon booking. **That means 100% of the Booking Fee is required to be paid BEFORE the client's session is confirmed on our studio calendar.**

What does that sound like to the client during booking?

**"That date looks great for Allison. So I have you down for Wednesday, the 3rd at 2 pm. All I need now is whatever card you'd like to use to confirm that date. I can take that from you now."**

Client Question:

"You mean I have to pay all of that now?"

**"Yes, that will confirm the date for your session."**



# THE ATJ SESSION FEE EVOLUTION

YEAR	SIGNATURE BOOKING FEE	STUDIO SESSION	LOCATION SESSION	WEEKEND SESSION	PRODUCT CREDIT	REASON FOR REWORK
2005		150 UP TO 6 SUBJECTS	150	150	NONE	I JUST CHARGED WHAT EVERYONE ELSE WAS CHARGING
2006		150	250	250	NONE	REALIZED LOCATION TAKES LOTS MORE TIME/EFFORT!
2009		195	295	295	NONE	OPENED RETAIL STUDIO LOCATION GOTTA PAY SOME RENT!
2010		250	350	350	NONE	
2012	995 NOVEMBER & DECEMBER SIGNATURE BOOKING FEE	250 JAN-OCT SESSIONS ONLY PAID THE REGULAR SESSION FEE			745 PRODUCT CREDIT FOR SIGNATURE BOOKING NOV-DEC	ADDED SIGNATURE BOOKING DURING NOVEMBER & DECEMBER BECAUSE WE WERE SO BUSY WANTED CLIENTS TO BOOK EARLIER
	995 FOR LOCATION & WEEKENDS ALL SIGNATURE BOOKING FEES		500 CHARGED MORE ALL YEAR LONG*	500	445 PRODUCT CREDIT	ALL YEAR LONG BECAUSE I WANTED TO SHOOT STUDIO ONLY AND DIDN'T WANT TO SHOOT WEEKENDS
<b>GAMECHANGER: SIGNATURE BOOKING FEE</b>						
<b>HOW TO TALK ABOUT IT WITH YOUR CLIENTS</b>						
Client calls to book and we discuss available dates: "Due to overwhelming demand, Oct & Nov are Signature Booking months."						
<b>Client:</b> "it's 995 now?!?!?"						
<b>Studio:</b> "No, our session fee is the same, just \$250, but the booking fee now includes a product credit. However, if you'd prefer to book earlier, you would just pay the regular session fee of \$250."						
2013	995 OCTOBER, NOVEMBER & DECEMBER	250 JAN THRU SEPT	500	500	745	ADDED SIGNATURE BOOKING DURING OCTOBER, NOVEMBER & DECEMBER
<b>ALL YEAR LONG: HOW TO TALK ABOUT IT WITH YOUR CLIENTS</b>						
"We want spend more time with less clients so we've decided to have Signature Booking Fees year round so we have more time to spend collaborating on your project."						
2014	995 SIGNATURE BOOKING YEAR ROUND	250	500	500	745 WEEKDAY 445 WEEKEND/LOCATION	YEAR ROUND BECAUSE I REALIZED IT WASN'T PROFITABLE FOR ME TO DO A SESSION FOR LESS THAN THIS--DETERMINED THE BREAK-EVEN
2016	995	250	995 LOCATION SESSIONS USE THE ENTIRE FEE	500	745 WEEKDAY 445 WEEKEND	LOCATION NOW USE THE ENTIRE BOOKING FEE BECAUSE I REALLLY WANTED TO SHOOT STUDIO ONLY STARTED TALKING ABOUT "STUDIO ONLY"
2018	1200 PRICE CHANGE	300 INCREASED SESSION FEE*	1200	600	900 WEEKDAY 600 WEEKEND	*SESSION FEE NOW COVERS UP TO 8 SUBJECTS \$25 PER HEAD OVER 8



# YOUR SESSION FEE EVOLUTION

YEAR	SIGNATURE BOOKING FEE	STUDIO SESSION	LOCATION SESSION	WEEKEND SESSION	PRODUCT CREDIT	REASON FOR REWORK



## BENEFITS TO OUR CLIENTS

SIMPLICITY SELLS.

Creating a Booking Fee that is a single price that covers the session fee plus any eventualities like extra people in the shot, weekend sessions, an extra long sessions, whatever, the fee is high enough to cover it and it's simple and easy for clients to understand.

People hate to be nickel and dimed. "Well it's this much extra for this and that much extra for that." Are they paying more for those extras? Yes, they are BUT the overall booking fee stays the same, only the product credit fluctuates, and, psychologically, it FEELS better. Clients feel like they have credit with you which is a much nicer feeling than, "well that's going to be \$X extra."

## BENEFITS TO THE BUSINESS

Obviously a higher session fee results in higher revenue and that's always good for business. The less tangible aspects of this change are:

- Having that product credit built into the Booking Fee gives us so much flexibility without having to ask for more money. So, just like the clients, it's psychologically easier for US to talk about it because that top number stays the same.
- You've heard it a million times, money spent is money forgotten. When it comes time to apply the print credit to the client's order during their sales session, often they will say, "Oh wow, thanks for that!" This is money that they gave us, but they forgot about it and when we remind them and deduct it from their order, it makes them happy. Win. Win.

## ONE MORE THING

**You may encounter resistance from your clients in the beginning but it's all in how you talk about it and make it ABOUT THEM, the benefits to them and NOT ABOUT YOU.**

Another important thing to note is that we **NEVER use the term MINIMUM INVESTMENT**. I am philosophically opposed to this term (that's just me). You can look at our Signature Booking Fee as requiring a minimum investment and you would be correct. However, Client Facing, we don't use those words because Minimum Investment is something that we are **REQUIRING FROM** our client but a Product Credit is something we are **OFFERING TO** them. Whenever I'm thinking about my messaging in any area of my business, I want to be **OFFERING TO**.  
Something to think about.



# AHA MOMENTS & THINGS TO DO

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