

Here Crystaline Randazzo and Laura Elizabeth Pohl, two humanitarian photographers discuss how they get work today using social networking, organization of their website content and strategies for making contact with employers.

Below is transcript of their conversation. We've added some highlighting of concepts we thought were particularly helpful.

Crystaline Hi everyone, I'm Crystaline Randazzo.

Laura And I'm Laura Elizabeth Pohl.

Crystaline And today we wanted to get together and record an audio interview on how we get work because Laura has been getting emails about this topic since NGO Storytelling began and we thought it was a good time to sort of discuss how each of us individually get work and we thought it could be helpful to you, too.

Laura So let's get started. What's the main way you get work, Crystal?

Crystaline So, I move every two to three years to a new country because of my husband's work in the State Department. And that means I sort of have to build a new client base every place I go. So I spend a fair amount of time — four to six months even — building contacts in that country. I research nonprofit organizations that I think are doing great work, and then I try to track down who their communications director is. And my ultimate goal is to make contact, preferably get on their photographer list of the region, and if possible, if I can do a face-to-face meeting where I present my portfolio, that's the ideal. What about you? What's the first thing you do when you start?

Laura Honestly, I've gotten most of my work through word of mouth and through my website. We've talked about this a lot, where our website has actually generated a lot of work for us, which is why it's important to have a good-looking website, an easily-navigated website, and then a website that has really good SEO. And I know you've spent a lot of time on that.

Crystaline Yeah, I have. Because I come into a country with nothing, I'm writing a lot of posts that have very specific keywords: photography, Nepal, storytelling. And my goal is if somebody searches "photographer Nepal," my website's the first one to come up. So I think that's a really straightforward way to get on peoples' radar.

Laura So, I think we both try to make sure we have an easily searchable website. One thing that I've started doing since I moved back to the U.S. — so I was living overseas for three-and-a-half-years, now I'm back in the U.S. — is to make a marketing plan. And I've never done this before. But I read a lot of books and a lot of websites and a lot of articles about photography marketing and then I made a plan that I started implementing in September of last year. And I haven't seen results from it yet, but I know it takes time to see results. So I'm just going to keep doing it and see what happens.

Crystaline And tell me what kinds of things are on your marketing plan?

Laura So the main thing in my marketing plan is that I'm trying to use social media more strategically. So, trying to engage with people that I want to see my business, and liking their posts, I'm doing a whole Instagram marketing class now where I'm learning how to present my photos and my captions in a way that attracts my ideal client. So I'm hoping that this will lead to something. If not, it's OK, but I've learned a lot about marketing and how important it can be for your business.

Crystaline I like how you say — you haven't seen any results yet. Because I think that's really important for people to know, that a lot of the work that we put in, we don't see immediate

results and sometimes we don't see results at all. I'm trying to think how many organizations were on my last list going into Nepal and I believe I had about 50 organizations that I was actively chasing down. And since I've been there — I've now been in Nepal 10 months, I've had two organizations from that list of 50. What I want other people to know is that it is a lot of legwork and there is return, but it doesn't happen immediately and it generally takes some relationship-building on your part. So beyond contacting communications directors, as soon as I get into country I'm going to every networking event I can possibly go to. I'm seeking out people who are working at those organizations. If I meet someone at a networking event who works for that organization, I take 'em to coffee, I pick their brain about who I should talk to and what kind of work they're doing in the country. I think building relationships is really important to getting business. It's not just a straightforward "I contact this person, I get on a list and I get work."

Laura Yeah, I think that's a really important point — that we need to build relationships. You know, people hear the word networking and they get, like, scared, like, "Ah, I don't know what to say to these people. I don't want to feel like I'm just asking them for work." But, it's about, like having a relationship or even a friendship sometimes. And there is nothing work with that. It's part of running a business, doing that. So what are some of the things you do to try to keep those relationships going?

Crystalline When I come into country, if I don't have any work coming in, one of the first things I'll do is seek out much smaller organizations and try to do a project in the country that I'm working in. I think this gives me a portfolio piece that shows that I understand the region and after I create that project, I go back to that list of 50 organizations that I've been contacting, and I send them, "Hey, this is what I'm working on. I'd love to chat about what you're doing in Nepal." And I think just keeping that conversation open and popping up on people's radars again and again... When their project comes up and they look at that list of photographers that they have, your name is going to stick out because you've been in contact with them. So what about you?

Laura I mean, for me, I like emailing organizations throughout the year if I see some issue they work on has popped into the news. I think that's a really good way to keep in touch, to say like, "Hey, I saw that this is happening in this place and I know you work on that. Are you getting into that? How are you doing?" Another thing I do every year is I send holiday cards to all the clients that I worked with that year. Sometimes even the previous year, if I didn't work with them in the current year. And then for the big clients, who maybe gave me a lot of work in a year, I either send them pies around the holidays, or cupcakes. 'Cause you know like every city has a cupcake shop. So it's not hard to find a place that can send cupcakes to your clients.

Crystalline So, Laura, tell me, do you ever cold call an organization?

Laura I do. And I have to say, for the most part, it hasn't worked out. Although I did recently just cold email an organization with a pretty passionate email. I was feeling very passionate about their issue. And they wrote back right away. It doesn't mean I'm getting work from them. It doesn't mean I will get work from them. But now I'm on their radar and now I have actually made contact with someone, which can be very hard, and I plan to keep following up with them.

Crystalline And I do a lot of cold email, not a ton of cold calls. I have mixed feedback on whether that works because people are busy. There's nothing wrong with trying it out and I'm all for doing anything that works for you. You're charming enough to get someone on the phone and engage them — do it. Everyone should work to their strengths. Be sure that you're aware of their timeframe if you do get them on the phone.

Laura And I'd say have a script. Honestly, you don't want to get on and be like, "Whoa! Someone answered. What am I saying now?"

Crystalline And I think different things work for different people. So, you know, figure out what works for you, what you're gonna follow through on and push it forward.

Laura I agree.

Crystalline So, is there any other thing that you think we've left out in this conversation about how you get work?

Laura I think one trait that we both have is that we're both really responsive. So we respond to emails as quickly as possible. If we're not in the office then you're definitely going to see an out of office from us, which means it will probably take us a little bit longer to get back in touch. But I know we're both very good at replying quickly to emails.

Crystalline Yeah, and I think it's quick response and also how you present yourself from the beginning. Laura and I both, we have client questionnaires where we're asking pretty precise questions about the kind of project that our clients are doing. We also have contracts. And I think that makes people trust us. It makes people feel like, "Oh, this person really knows what they're doing." How many photographers did they contact? Did they contact two, three, and if we're the first to respond and we have, sort of, a professional setup, I feel like that does get us more work.

Laura Yeah, and I think that when you look at our website, when you look at our business cards, when you look at the way our estimates look, we look like a business. We don't look like people who are like, oh, we're dabbling in photography. No. We are very clearly running a business.

Crystalline So we really want to hear from you guys. We want to know if this kind of podcast is helpful, you got something out of it, are there specific questions that Laura and I didn't answer. And we'd love to know how you get work and if you have other techniques than we've shared here, that would be great. We all have something to learn from each other. NGO Storytelling is a way to build community and it's really important to us that we are having conversations with all of you. So please feel free to comment, email. You can email us at hello@ngostorytelling.com.

Laura Thank you!

Crystalline Bye, guys!