

Part 5

Building Rapport with Subjects is Crucial in Portrait Photography.

By Martin Lea Photography

How do you build a good rapport with subjects during a photoshoot as a portrait photographer? It's a popular misconception that lots of people feel comfortable in front of the camera. In fact, it's actually quite rare to find people who do feel totally at ease in front of one. Many models start out being very



self-conscious. They are young and mostly become models by getting scouted. They get more comfortable with the experience of having a photographer point a camera at them over time. So exactly how does a portrait photographer build rapport with their subjects? Photographers are a mixed bunch. Some are very shy whilst others are very outgoing and gregarious. Is there a right and a wrong way to go about it?

Put Yourself in Your Subject's Shoes

One of the best learning experiences I had was on a short evening course at City Lit for studio portrait lighting. The class was split into groups and it was expected that everyone should volunteer to sit for the other photographers in their group. I've always hated having my picture taken until that point. Many of the other photographers were adamant that they were not going to sit for the others to practice their portrait photoshoot skills. I found myself overcoming my own resistance and putting myself in the firing (or should I say the shooting line!)

It was a real education and I could understand how boring and uninteresting it can be if a portrait photographer makes no effort to interact with the sitter and build rapport and merely fiddles with the settings on the camera. It taught me how to put myself in my subject's shoes and just how important it was to chat with them and make the whole experience as fun and enjoyable as possible.

I'm still not a natural in front of the camera. However, if someone wants to take a picture of me, I don't dive for cover anymore. It is true that most photographers make for bad subjects in the same way Doctors make bad patients and it's advisable for lawyers not to represent themselves..... I think it's God's way of attempting to teach us all a bit of humility (& in some cases failing miserably too ;))

Make Conversation with Subjects

Chatting with your subject and making them feel totally at ease is an essential part of a portrait photographer's toolkit. Building a positive rapport is really crucial and there are many ways to do this. You can ask the subject simply about themselves. Maybe you can delve deeper into finding out why they are doing the shoot. You can even challenge yourself a challenge to find out certain bits of

information about them & share some of your own tastes & experiences too. Examples of this can be pets, hobbies, travel experiences, food, musical tastes, star signs, etc. As humans, we all have the need to bond with other humans. By finding commonality we help to take down our own and other people's defences, both conscious and unconscious.

It also reminds me that as a human being I have something to learn from everyone. In some portrait photoshoots, I've learned some amazing life hacks as well as potential future investment opportunities. I've learned about technology to avoid and great books to read and places to visit. Let's face it as human beings we all like people to show a bit of interest in us. It helps the human interaction process. It's also possible to use very open body language and even mirror subjects' own to start off with.



Learn From Other Photographers

Another method I read from another portrait photographer is asking subjects if they have had a positive life-changing experience and asking them to talk about it. The chances are that as they speak about this, they will feel good about themselves. This will allow them to relax and feel more at ease. Their body and their face will then intuitively project this sense of well-being.

It can also help if you take a few minutes to explain how you will direct them. I pay particular attention to their head. That way they understand when I say look left or right whether it's their left or right or mine. If someone is very experienced & comfortable in front of the camera you may still need to remind them of simple but essential tips such as being aware of the position of their hands. If someone is very nervous then I empathize & share how self-conscious I used to be. Then I tell them I overcame this in the process of having my picture taken. The only way out is through: the philosophy which I have found applies to just about all life's obstacles.

However, during a portrait photoshoot, I make it a point never to ask people to relax. In so doing I am drawing their attention to the fact that they are not currently relaxed. It's better to suggest taking a short break if the sitter is uptight. You will take more than enough images during the photo-shoot. There are usually opportunities within a session to change the lens, adjust the lighting setup, or the location. This can easily alter the mood and feel of a session. It's good to have a few little reset techniques for a portrait photoshoot. These can be seamlessly included in the experience with the practice.

Since most people have cameras on their phones and use them but don't know much about them. It can be good to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it & how they can incorporate this. No one likes to feel excluded and when it's just a 1 on 1 relationship then it's even worse. Many times, I have explained what I am doing and why and the sitter shows an interest. Many times, they share back their own experiences whether in front of or behind the camera.

It's another way to share and find common ground. I am sure we all have experiences of sharing a little bit about ourselves imagining we were the only ones who experienced a situation or feeling. Then we had someone relate exactly the same thing back to us. Human beings are all social creatures and we long for connections with other humans.



DON'T FORGET TO BE YOURSELF!

As you shoot more and more portrait sessions you will become more and more natural at this. Finally, I suggest you be yourself. As someone who has been fortunate to get a second chance at life, I've realized the importance of authenticity. If you are willing to share some of yourself with other people then they are more likely to share themselves too.

A famous portrait photographer once said that the photographer appears in every portrait. I am not sure I agree with 100%. If being my authentic self means I can capture the authentic nature of the sitter then for me that's an even better result. In effect, a good portrait should do that. It should capture something authentic in the subject.

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I am a portrait photographer from London UK, who takes professional portrait & headshots of people for business and personal use. I am also a London event photographer covering all types of events from small private gatherings to office work parties, large festivals, and conferences.