

❖ **Santa Photography**

In most situations where someone is going to hire a Santa, they are going to want to take photos with Santa. In many cases they will leave the photography up to parents/guests, take photos themselves for the group, or contract a professional without Santa's intervention. Some, however, will want a more turn-key solution, creating an opportunity to extend his service offerings. There are at least three main options for Santa when he is asked to provide photography: stay out of it, provide a photographer to service the event, or provide the photography service himself.

➤ **Stay out of it**

Certainly this is the easiest; Santa can just say that he doesn't handle such matters and leave it up to the client to seek out their own solutions. This isn't the most service-oriented answer, but it does leave Santa free to focus on the main job. Santa may also refer photographers he has worked with before, but again, leaving that part of the business between the client and photographer.

➤ **Provide a Photographer**

Santa can also act as a broker or agent to hire a photographer who will use his own equipment and personnel to service the event. Santa will negotiate a price from the photographer, and will include those fees and services as part of his own quote and contract to the client. In most cases the photographer will work for a certain price per photo with a guarantee for a minimum number of sales. The client should pay Santa's normal retainer plus the amount of the photographer's guarantee, so Santa's financial exposure is minimal.

As a broker, Santa will need to establish what services your client expects. Will there be a photo set with props and backdrops or do they want a roving photographer taking candid and stand-ups with Santa? Do they want on-site printing? If so, will those prints be sold, or paid for by the host? If they are sold, does the "house" want a cut? What will the price-point be?

Once you know their expectations you can then match up a photographer. Most photographers I know do not have the equipment to print-on-site, and a couple of them do not have the equipment to do a set. It is good to know several photographers and their capabilities, and a general sense of their pricing structure. Knowing that the client has an unrealistic budget compared to expectations can save you a lot of time chasing the proverbial goose. Of course, if their budget is greater than the photographer's fees there is an opportunity for Santa to share in the profits, as is appropriate, since he took on the task

➤ **Supply a Photography Package**

If you are so motivated, Santa can provide the photography service himself. Why would he do that? There are several possible reasons:

- To enhance his marketability, providing one-stop shopping for his customers.
- To have control over his offerings and availability; he is not subject to a photographer's schedule or at the mercies of his equipment.
- To improve his bottom-line by profiting from picture sales.
- To provide the client with free Santa- and photo-services in high-volume situations, where the photo proceeds make the operation self-sufficient. Perhaps even paying the client a portion of the proceeds to get the rights to operate there.

That means investing in some equipment, and having at least one helper. And that helper has to be capable; he can't expect Santa to leave the chair and come fix a jammed printer!

Santa, once he's in the role, must keep an appearance of being unassociated with the photography operation. Santa is not there to make money, he is there to hear the secret wishes of children and bring the joy of Christmas! Never forget that.

Depending on the services offered, one could spend as little as \$200 to easily as much as \$5-10,000 in equipment. And the workflow might require 2, 3 or more helpers. Though the terms and devices mentioned below may be unfamiliar now, they will be discussed at length later in this article. Here are some basic package profiles:

- **Roving Photographer, Online Print Ordering**

One assistant follows Santa as he mingles through the crowd, taking stand-ups with Santa and candids of the event in general. Since there is no structure to who is photographed when, the whole event is uploaded to an online storefront as a single gallery. Equipment required is a camera, a flash, and enough memory cards and batteries to cover the entire event. Uploading is done after the event when Santa has access to a computer and internet. Once uploaded, the client can order prints and photo-products, the storefront takes their cut and the profits are direct deposited to Santa's account

- **Roving Photographer, Very Basic On-site Prints**

As good as the online labs are, people really like to walk away with something tangible... and no, a claim ticket is not what they have in mind. They want a print. Providing them a print, on-site, in short order, can be a bit of a challenge. The most basic setup would be a printer that takes memory cards and produces prints without a computer. The Canon CP800 (discussed below) is such a printer. The problem with this setup is there are minimal tools available for enhancing the pictures, and the card has to be removed from the camera, interrupting the photography. If there is only one helper, he will have to wear the photographer/cashier/print-maker hat. If there are two helpers, the photographer can just swap cards and keep shooting while the other assistant prints and plays cashier.

- **Streamlined On-Site Printing**

As above, but instead of swapping out memory cards, the photographer uses an Eye-Fi card to wirelessly send pictures to a laptop over Santa's portable wifi network. A second attendant monitors incoming pictures, culls the rejects, crops and sweetens the picks, and shows them to clients.

The client chooses the photo to print, which is sent to an on-site dye-sub printer. As client waits, attendant collects fee and explains the gallery access card, which lists the web address of Santa's storefront, and the password required to access their gallery. Samples of products that can be ordered online are on view. When completed, the print is placed in a folio and the folio is put in an envelope with the access card and Santa's business card.

Optionally, the addition of an aircard allows photos to be uploaded to the storefront during the event for more immediate review and purchasing. The attendant exports photos to storefront using client number and password from access card. The client can then go online within a half-hour of sitting and order prints and photo-products. Profits are direct-deposited to Santa's account.

- **Photo Set, Premium On-site Prints**

Most of the event photos take place on a set, with backdrop, props, and professional lighting; be it strobe or continuous. Photos still transfer by wifi, but since the camera is pretty stationary, an AC adapter for all-day shooting can provide power.

Since the clients are easily delineated, each sitting is placed into its own gallery, with individualized passwords so only that client can see his/his child's photos. An attendant collects a sitting fee, which includes one print in a photo card holder. Sitting fees in the \$6-8 range seem reasonable, leaving \$5-7 after supplies to pay for assistants and provide profit. Payment can be made by cash or credit card (processed with iPad/iPhone using SquareUp.com and swipe fob).

Another attendant photographs the sitting. Parents are welcome to snap their own after Santa's photographer is done (the sitting fee is already collected).

Photos automatically and wirelessly transfer to laptop. Lightroom auto processes incoming photos: auto-curve, sharpen, noise removal. Attendant culls, crops, and tweaks.

❖ Types of Fulfillment

- **Online Proofing with Mail Fulfillment**

- **Photo Sales Sites with Self-Fulfillment**

- ShootProof*

- ShootProof is the most basic of the services I've reviewed, and can be the cheapest. If your needs are modest (hosting 100 or fewer photos) you can do it for free. They allow you to sell digital downloads of photos, which is painless with proceeds being deposited straight to Paypal with no action required on your part.

- Or, you can list any type of printed materials you want to sell. The trick is, you have to handle the printing and shipping. So, say you want to sell 8x10 prints, and you list them for \$10 each. When a customer places an order you are notified by e-mail, you order a print from your local photomat, let's say Walmart, who sells 8x10s for \$2.85. You go and pick up the print, stick it in a padded mailer, address it and ship to the customer.

- Between gas, the mailer, the label, the postage, and the time to do all that, you really aren't making much. Of course, you could always charge \$20 for the print, but there is a tipping point between having a good number of orders, and having almost none because your prints are just a bit too expensive.

- **Photo Sales and Fulfillment Sites**

- What these sites provide is gallery space for displaying your photos and a storefront to handle sales of photo products: prints, greeting cards, calendars, mugs, and on and on... really a huge range of products. These galleries can be event based or customer based, so you could have one gallery for all the attendees of a party, or individual galleries for each family's sitting. Further, the galleries can be password protected so that only authorized customers can view the photos. The previews can be right-click protected and/or watermarked to prevent "theft". The service takes care of everything once you create the gallery: from order taking, to billing, to fulfilling (including service after the sale). You just wait for the profits to roll in.

- **SmugMug**

SmugMug is the Cadillac of photo sales sites, with a super-clean interface, premium lab, and lots of customizability. They offer three levels of service: basic, power and pro, at \$40, \$60 and \$150 per year, respectively. The only option that would probably interest professional Santas is the Pro, because it is the only plan that allows you to set prices and share in the profit from photo sales. It's also worth noting that the Pro plan is available for \$20 per month, so if you want to set up sales for 2-3 months around the season only, you can save some money. Both SmugMug and ZenFolio (below) allow you to create coupons to e-mail your clients to spur more sales (especially useful a week or two before you take the site down for the season).

SmugMug, as mentioned, has a premium lab that fulfills your orders for you; you don't have to lift a finger. They offer a wide variety of products that range from high-quality prints to mugs to tee-shirts.

- **ZenFolio**

Zenfolio offer much of the same functionality of SmugMug with just a bit less "polish", IMO. But, their premium service is also only \$100 a year (they do offer a Premium Business plan which is more expensive, but the additional features are not really applicable to Santas). They do not offer a month-to-month plan, so there is no way to only be a seasonal seller.

➤ **On-Site Printing**

- **Dye-Sub Printers**

While it is possible to do an acceptable job with ink-jet printers, I think the better option is a dye-sub. While ink-jets and color laser printers use tiny dots of varying sizes to make up colors, dye-sublimations printers actually print pixels and mix the colors to create the proper color. The prints made by dye-subs are impervious to water and fingerprints, they are dry the instant they print, and the color and quality are on-par with what consumers expect from a photo lab. The ink and paper are unitized so both run out at the same time, which ultimately makes refills easier. There are LOTS of options on the market, but these are two I have researched the most and know that people use for event photography.

Canon Selphy CP800

The CP800 is a very compact photo printer, designed for the home user or photo enthusiast. It prints only 4x6 and requires about 40 secs to create a print. Due to the speed of printing, investing in a pair might make sense. The printer sells for as little as \$80 at retail outlets. The ink and paper supplies cost about \$34 for 108 prints, or 31¢ per print.

Sony UP-DR150

This is a professional dye-sub photo printer that can create a 4x6 print in about 8 seconds. It can also print 5x7 (15 secs) and 6x8 (20 secs). The printer itself retails for about \$1800, but you can get reconditioned ones in the \$800-1000 range and I've seen used ones sell on eBay for \$300. Paper and ink supplies run about \$235 for 1100 prints, or 21¢ each (not including shipping or tax).

- **Camera**

I shoot with a Panasonic Lumix FZ20, which I choose largely for its enormous zoom, stabilization, good aperture across the full zoom range, and a hot-shoe. The hot-shoe will allow me to trigger a softbox strobe. The main problem with the Lumix is the rather slow shutter response, which can really be important when trying to capture children's expressions. I may upgrade to a DSLR (with firewire tethering, ideally) if the photo sales warrant it.

- **Lighting**

I am looking into CFL-based softbox lights, since I am no fan of strobes, I also think strobes are more frightening to children. These lights allow you to use in-camera metering rather than a handheld meter, so setup is much simpler and intuitive. There is also no need to buy and set-up radio strobe controllers, and slaves; which can be expensive and complicated. Finally, since the lights are always on, they can benefit the photos parents take as well.

- **Eye-Fi**

Because my tripod mount covers the battery/SD door on my camera, I use an AC adapter and an Eye-Fi card so I never have to open that door. The Eye-Fi card is a memory card with a wifi transmitter built in that will send images wirelessly from your camera to your computer as you shoot. The range is only limited by the size of your wifi network, which could be hundreds of feet for even a basic setup. Since the card is sending pictures as you shoot the card never fills up, so it never needs to be swapped for an empty one. If there is one downside to the Eye-Fi, it's that it impacts your camera's battery life. That is why I use an AC adapter whenever possible.

It is worth noting that the newer generation of Eye-Fi cards will allow direct connection to you laptop or iPad; no wifi router required. The newer cards require a newer camera, though: one that supports SDHC cards. Most cameras made in the last couple of years do. The combination of a camera in one hand, and an iPad in the other, no wires between, displaying shots taken seconds before on its big, bright screen is pretty compelling!

- **Aircard & Router**

If you are going to use an Eye-Fi card (above) you will have to be in a wifi coverage zone. Your client's location may already have wifi you can use. But to be honest, setting up your card and computer to use a new network can be a pain, and then you are at the mercies of the client's tech guys. A better option is to provide your own. All you really need is a wifi router, it does not need internet access to allow wireless shooting. A small wifi router can be picked up from Walmart for \$20 bucks.

A better option is a wifi router and aircard combination. An aircard is basically a cell-phone for your computer, and usually plugs into a USB or PC-card slot. It provides a wireless internet connection from almost anywhere. Cradlepoint is a great manufacturer of aircard routers, which accept USB or PC-card aircards and create a wifi network for multiple devices to share the connection. Cradlepoint even has portable aircard routers that have batteries so you can shoot completely wirelessly.

Also, there are all-in-one aircard/wifi combinations available like the MiFi and Overdrive, where the aircard is built-in. These are both shirt-pocket sized devices that both receive internet and create wifi zones. One advantage of having an aircard is you can immediately upload picture packages to your online storefront, and grandma in Iowa can see the pictures right away (while the kids are still excited about meeting

Santa!). Of course, mobile internet comes at a fee, usually with a 2-year commitment attached.

- **SquareUp.com**

I also use my internet connection to allow my (wifi-only) iPad to process credit-card transactions through SquareUp.com. This is a no-monthly-fee service that collects only when you process a transaction. Their share of the transaction is about 3%. They even provide a free dongle that plugs into your iPad or iPhone (and apparently Android, too, though I've not tested that) that lets you swipe cards. Even the shipping of the dongle was free, so there is little reason to not try it out if you ever have need to accept credit cards.

- **Lightroom**

Adobe Lightroom is a photo-management system, with tools for correcting images, creating slideshows, and filing and retrieving. It is usually a \$300 package, but can be found for as little as \$150 on special. You can set up Lightroom to automate many tasks. For instance, when a photo transfers wirelessly to the laptop, Lightroom automatically imports it and applies a couple of typical presets (sharpen, noise reduction, color balance) to give your helper a head-start. He then marks the rejects, crops for composition, and then makes any manual tweaks necessary. He can also effortlessly set-up a slideshow for the customer's review, and drive the printer; all in Lightroom.

In addition, Lightroom can upload directly to many online photography storefronts and labs (all three mentioned above, in fact). It can upload to galleries, which can be event-based or customer-based. So, for example, you could have one gallery for all the attendees of a party, or individual galleries for each family's sitting. All of these gallery and security settings can be set inside Lightroom with no need to visit the storefront's website.