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When a studio portrait just isn't good enough

Doting parents hire personal photographers to capture the moment

By Jennifer Alsever

MSNBC contributor

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Shannon Stauffer can easily take snapshots or get retail studio portraits of her children. But instead, the Harrisburg, Pa., mother paid \$1,000 to hire a professional photographer to catch them in action — all year.

Photographer Hollis Healy spent several hours following Kaelyn, 4, and Mason, 2 — playing, at Easter, on their birthdays, in the park and in the case of Kaelyn, at ballet class. Stauffer said she didn't want portraits with a fake backdrop in a studio. "Hollis captures their true expressions, their natural happy expressions," she said.

Professional photographers, hoping to stand out in a crowded market and build loyal clients and more referrals, are pushing year-long contracts and day-in-the-life shoots that capture people inside the hospital's labor and delivery room, on vacation, at soccer games and even at the office and the classroom. Some of those long-term packages also include studio shots, such as black-and-white photos that document a woman's pregnancy or an infant's growth.

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Hollis Healy

Photographer Hollis Healy takes a baby picture as part of a long-term contract to create a set of family photos.

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their own personal photographer," said Jessie Kimmel, whose Canadian studio, This Moment Now Photographic, started offering first-year-of-life photo sessions this fall for about \$500 to \$1,000, including one 8x10 print and a set of digital "negatives." She's on-call with a pager for parents who want her to photograph the birth of their babies.

Consumers increasingly want relaxed, more natural portraits, and the kinds of shots seen in fashion magazines and art galleries, said Skip Cohen, president of Wedding and Portrait Photographers International, an association with 6,000 members. Photographers are catering to that demand and trying to turn wedding clients into lifelong customers who will go on to buy photos for their families.

"It's this concept of continuity marketing. If they liked your work the first time out, why not be there for other events?" Cohen said.

Healy, who was hired by Stauffer, said she started offering the \$1,000 to \$2,400 yearlong packages to clients after being asked to take more candid photos and in one case following three children inside their classroom and on the playground. Her business, In the Moment Photography by Hollis, just 18 months old, is growing every month, in part due to the photojournalism-style shots, she says. "People work and run kids back and forth, and they're longing to hold onto their history because it goes so fast," she said.

Rene and Paul Krueger bought a \$1,300 yearlong maternity and newborn package from photographer Marilee Langner in Boulder, Colo. Langner, who also shot the Denver couple's 2005 wedding, photographed Rene at the end of her pregnancy and came to the hospital the day after their daughter, Chloe, was born in August. She will take pictures of them and their daughter every three months and be there for Chloe's first birthday party. At the end of the 12 months, they will get a coffee table book in addition to any images they want to buy.

Rene Krueger said Langner got arty shots the couple themselves wouldn't have seen, let alone pull off. "She got the emotional shots, even pictures of the baby crying, and somehow made it look really beautiful," said Krueger.

So far, Langner has sold 10 of these kinds of First Year contracts, which include six photo sessions and cost \$1,500 to \$2,500. She hopes the service will be lucrative, because few customers tend to come back six times in a year.

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The candid shots aren't limited to families. Bethesda, Md., photographer Mark Sincevich shot a series of photos of a London executive from morning at work until night for \$1,800 plus design and printing fees. The assistant bank president wanted a record of her day and her 40th birthday party that evening, he said. Sincevich made her a coffee table book with pictures taken during the day.



Those kinds of clients may be good news to professional consumer photographers, who face the high costs of digital equipment, growing competition and an onslaught of do-it-yourselfers with digital cameras.

Photography is becoming a harder profession in which to make a living, said Holly Stuart Hughes, editor of the New York



Hollis Healy

Shannon and Tom Stauffer with their son Mason, 2, in a photo taken by photographer Hollis Healy as part of a long-term package.

trade magazine Photo District News. "People say, 'Why should we pay a lot of money for a professional photographer when my Uncle Harry has a digital camera?'"

Hughes said wedding photographers, some who

charge up to \$6,000 for a day, try to woo customers by dropping prices, offering DVDs with music, sound and captions, and giving customers more flexibility when previewing and ordering prints online.

The photojournalism style started with weddings, where photographers become invisible capturing artful and more unposed pictures of brides and grooms during the engagement, getting ready for the wedding, the actual ceremony and even at events the next day. "I just hope they don't hire a photographer for the honeymoon," Sincevich said.

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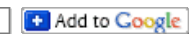
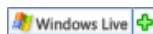
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