

# August

## New portraiture agency profile



The last decade has been a time of industry-wide consolidation in the photo agency business. Most of the former independent agencies have been bought up by large corporate agencies such as, Getty Images, Corbis and Jupiter Media. Many believe this is leading to the commoditization of photography as these agencies seek to be the one-stop-shop of photography. These newer corporate agencies are now beholden to their shareholders forcing them to constantly grow their market share and pricing competition has become ferocious. Many photographers see a continuing reduction in the value placed upon their work. Not only the creative value of the image but also the real monetary value. Couple this with the elimination of personal relationships between agency and photographer, and agency and client, and many feel there has to be a better model.

Enter, August. A new agency solely dedicated to high-end portraiture. Launched in June in New York the agency was co-founded by two industry veterans, Bill Hannigan and Thea Vaughan, both of whom have spent time at the big agencies. They met while both were at Corbis and they were together again doing a stint at MediaVast, (parent company of Contour Photos and WireImage), when it was acquired by Getty Images. It was at this point that they decided it was time to do their own thing. When asked if August was launched in reaction to the corporate agencies and their models Hannigan said, "I would be lying if I was to say no. But it is not so much a reaction against the big agencies as our confidence in knowing that there is another way to do things, a model that embraces both the creative and business elements of photography. These things should not be in conflict."

Vaughan and Hannigan are both graduates of art school photography programmes and desired a return to working with photography at a deeper level. The August model is to focus on working with a small group of the top portrait photographers working today for exclusive syndication of their work. To quote from their website, "August is dedicated to representing an elite group of portrait photographers who capture the icons and





innovators of our time.” They launched representing Martin Schoeller, Jill Greenberg, Nino Munoz, Sheryl Nields and Brian Bowen Smith and have since added Art Streiber, Warwick Saint and Mark Zibert. Vaughan and Hannigan say they have no desire to grow just to grow but are focused on working with the right photographers, as Vaughan says “photographers who are passionate about their portraits, care deeply about the craft and have a unique style and vision”. They plan to add photographers who fit the vision when the time is right and they say they are focused on how syndication fits within the overall career goals and sensibilities of the photographers. To this end they seek to work with photographers where there can be tight communication with their studios and agents to help achieve their career goals. They see syndication not only as a way to generate revenue for photographers but also as a key vehicle for them to build their names and brands around the world.

This all seems like a dream come true for a photographer but what about the realities of the competition. How does an independent agency like August compete with the global mega agencies? Hannigan was formerly the head of Corbis Outline, Corbis’s portrait division, and Vaughan had launched the commercial assignment business at Corbis, and they pulled directly from their experience with the big agency—both the pros and the cons. They said they want to differentiate themselves not only to the photographers but also with clients, and the key to doing so, they say, is a return to customer service. They have also hired Dan Terry, former sales manager of Corbis Outline, who has 15 years experience with selling exclusive work. Hannigan also said they would not be satisfied with parity when it came to the website and technology and went to great lengths to design a production system and website that focused on speed and the images. “Clients want to get to the images quickly, they expect this now, so we designed the site for speed but we also made the presentation a showcase for the images,” says Hannigan. They also cite their singular focus, portraiture, as a big advantage, “it is all we do and the experience and



knowledge you get when you deal with us is immediately apparent”.

It is obvious that both founders are passionate about what they do and are striving for something unique. “Put simply, we care,” says Vaughan. “We care about the art and the craft and if other agencies want to be the one-stop-shop we want to be the artisan you go to for something special.” In the corporate consolidated landscape of today’s photo business August could be something special indeed.

—PAT QUINN