How to become a fashion photographer

[From the "How to get a job in fashion" series](http://www.fashion.net/howto)   
  
A career in fashion photography doesn't have to be an impossible dream. Three industry insiders tell Ben Widdicombe their tips for getting started.   
  
With its huge audience, high pay-checks and glamorous international lifestyle, fashion photography may seem like one of the world's most sought-after professions. But for every fashion photographer who makes it through the door of a top magazine, a thousand others find their niche fashion advertising, art photography, celebrity portraiture or even paparazzi work to make a living.   
  
Allure magazine photo editor Clio McNicholl, photo agent Gloria Cappelletti and New York fashion photographer Eva Mueller agree that breaking into the industry can be hard. But they have some tips for beginners on setting up a portfolio, submitting work to magazine picture editors, choosing the right photo agency and even getting shown in a gallery.

Setting up a portfolio

A photographer's most important tool is her portfolio, and this is particularly true for beginners who don't have an established reputation.   
  
"Having been around, I know how hard it is to get in the door," says Allure magazine photo editor Clio McNicholl, who receives around 50 unsolicited portfolios a month. Conde Nast's Allure, with a monthly circulation of almost 900,000, is a prime target for beginners wanting to get their work seen. "If I don't know who the person is, I ask them to send me some promotional material. Generally I only see people who are coming with a direct recommendation from somebody I know," she says.   
  
Many photographers find that websites offer an inexpensive way to showcase a relatively large quantity of images. Eva Mueller (www.evamueller.com), a Munich-born fashion and beauty photographer who has been living and working in Manhattan for ten years, points out that computer editing is also a method of keeping down retouching and printing costs.   
  
But despite the medium's advantages, most industry professionals will still need to see an old-fashioned book before they hire you. By all means use the web as your calling card, but have something to show them when they call you in for a meeting.   
  
Many fashion photographers find the sharp, bright imaging of 4 x 5" transparencies show off their work to best effect. Tear-sheets (literally, pages ripped from a magazine) are great if you've been published, but good quality, 8 x 10" prints are also OK. Have at least 20 in your book, and be prepared to leave them for at least a week.   
  
"I like to see a common thread throughout the book," says Clio McNicholl, who says she can tell within three images whether she likes a photographer's style. "Tell a story: not necessarily having all the pictures relating to each other, but I like to have some sort of sense at the end of it that I've seen that photographer's personality come through in the pictures."   
  
The images you choose to showcase in your portfolio should be thematically linked to the job you're trying to get – still-lifes or product shots if you're going for an advertising gig, for example. But also throw in one or two other images to demonstrate your range. Strong portraits are always a safe bet, as they tend to stay in the mind of the viewer.   
  
Once you've got your portfolio together, the next challenge is to get the picture editor to use you.

Picking your picture editor

"Most people who cold call me haven't done their research, which is the world's biggest mistake," says Clio McNicholl. "The single biggest thing that people should do is their research. They should know what the magazine does, and see how you can apply that to what you do. And they should at least know the name of the photo editor."   
  
When you submit work to photo editors, remember that you're "showing" rather than "selling". Editors almost never buy the specific image they see before them; they're looking for a photographer who can execute future commissions. You'll need to be persistent in sending out your work, and ruthless in editing what you choose to show.   
  
The best way to grab an editor's attention is to show previously published work. But there's a down-side. "Because there's such an over-supply of photographers, a lot of magazines really take advantage of that fact," says Eva Mueller. "Some mags have a decent budget, but a lot of magazines just cover your expenses, they don't pay for your time or anything. And a lot of magazines don't pay at all." McNicholl says Allure's rates start at $350 a day for unknown photographers, up to $130,000 for a fashion spread.   
  
A photograph is a document just as much as an article or an essay, and picture editors are looking for concise images which clearly communicate an idea or an emotion. Celebrity portraiture, for example, should reveal an aspect of the subject's character, preferably one that is in harmony with the accompanying written profile. Women's magazines all over the world buy hundred of stock shots every month – typically young women having fun with their boyfriends, hanging out with friends, or maybe moping home alone with their stuffed toys – all of which express a sentiment commonly dealt with in feature articles. If your work speaks clearly, you'll stand a much better chance with picture editors than with vague or ambiguous images.   
  
When you're submitting your work, remember:   
  
- Call the magazine ahead and get the name of the person to whose attention the submission should be marked - Label everything with your name and telephone number - Send working prints or transparencies, not originals - Include a stamped, self-addressed envelope if you want the work back   
  
Eve Mueller has one last warning about dealing with magazines: "Another bad thing is not getting paid in ages – months and months and months. Some clients really take advantage of the fact that there are so many photographers out there: they make you pay for the whole shoot, they alter your pictures and don't tell you when they drop the story. Sometimes they're just really disrespectful toward the photographer."   
  
There is a way to avoid having to deal with photo editors, however: and that's to have a photo agency do the selling on your behalf.

Finding a photo agent

Photo agencies exist to liaise with clients and sell photographers' work on their behalf. They benefit everyone from start-out photographers, who may not have many industry contacts, to seasoned professionals, who are too busy to take care of business dealings themselves.   
  
Gloria Cappelletti is an agent with the Management Artists' Organization (MSO) in Manhattan, which represents a stable of prominent fashion photographers including Stevein Klein, Michelangelo di Battista, Stefan Sedanoui and Alexei Hay.   
  
"First of all, it's vital to be known, and an agency is in daily contact with clients and publications," she says. "That's the best way for a young photographer to be able to have a connection with them, because usually the photographer is busy taking pictures, and the agent is busy talking to clients. And that's the way it should be. Usually the photographer doesn't have enough time to take care of everything."   
  
Agencies can also re-sell your work in several different markets, acting as a mini publicist and giving career advice. There are so many agencies – and so many photographers – that Cappelletti says it's important to research which one may be right for you before making an approach.   
  
"The young photographer has to understand their target, in terms of their personal goals the direction the photographer wants to take," she says. "Everyone is different."   
  
Agents recommend treating your first contact with them as seriously as if it were a job interview. You should also consider whether they already represent someone whose style is significantly similar to your own – there may not be enough work for both of you, and the other photographer could resent the competition.   
  
A photo agency is not the only place that can sell your work. If you're more interested in concentrating on your personal vision than taking commercial work, you can also considering exhibiting in a fine art photography gallery.

Getting a gallery

Once derided as a scientific curiosity with no artistic value, photographs are now one of the hottest growth areas in the international fine art market.   
  
While gelatin silver prints are the staple of fine art photography, you'll find a healthy interest both in contemporary photos using antique methods (such as Chuck Close's daguerreotypes), as well as modern printing methods, including Cibachromes and C-prints.   
  
Like any artistic undertaking, art photography is unlikely to pay you a living wage for many years. Although many artists sell their work directly from the Internet, critical attention and the strongest sales come from a relationship with a Gallery. While there is now at least one photo gallery in most major cities, the center of the world art photo market is New York. Manhattan boasts around 100 galleries dealing in photographic prints, and prices there tend to be strongest. A comprehensive list of New York and international galleries is available at the websites of the bimonthly listings guide [Photograph](http://www.photographmag.com/), as well as the [Association of International Photography Art Dealers](http://www.aipad.com/).   
  
Before approaching any gallery with your work, you should telephone and request details of their submissions policy. Many galleries review new work only at set times of the year, and even to get in the door of some places you will need the recommendation of somebody known to the gallery directors. (Sometimes it helps to drop the name of a well-known critic or museum director, even if your connection to them is tenuous.)   
  
If a gallery is interested in taking you on as an artist, they'll probably want to see a representative sampling of your work. Even if you have one or two knock-out images in your portfolio, a gallery will want to know that you have a mature body of work with a consistent standard throughout. Remember that many artists join a gallery simply by having their work go into the back-room inventory, where it will be shown to specific collectors, rather than having a public exhibition. Not everyone is offered a solo show.   
  
The most important thing to remember about working with a gallery is to maintain a proper business relationship. Every print you give to a gallery should be inventoried by you – not them – and you should understand when and how you can expect payment in the even of a sale. Industry standard is that the artist receives 50% of the retail price of a photo.   
  
You should also discuss whether you are free to have relationships with other galleries, or if your gallery expects exclusivity. If you have a New York gallery, for example, but then arrange to have a show in Los Angeles, sometimes the New York gallery will expect a cut (typically 10%). However, in return for that, they are expected to deal with details like paperwork and shipping. Each relationship between artist and gallery is unique, and you should get as much as possible in writing at the beginning.

Understanding the business

Unfortunately, it's not enough for a designer to be creative; you also have to have some business sense. As fashion gets more and more corporate driven, it's important to be aware of the business climate and understanding the mechanics behind it. By religiously reading trade papers like "Women's Wear Daily" you will get a lot of valuable information. If you want to run your own company, you need to be extremely organized and learn at least the basics of economics. A lot of fashion schools are currently increasing business classes in their curriculum. "Our students have to be smart enough to know how to negotiate a contract, or to pick a business partner," says Carol Mongo. It's perhaps telling that many of the designers that are really successful today, like Calvin Klein or Tom Ford, are involved in every aspect of the business -- from licensing strategies to ad campaigns to actually designing the clothes.