What distinguishes a great wedding studio? Andy Marcus, chief photographer for the Fred Marcus Studio in Manhattan, says it’s two things: consistently high quality and unique product offerings.

In business for over sixty years, Fred Marcus Photography caters to Hollywood and Park Avenue, and its client list boasts celebrities like Eddie Murphy, Donald Trump, Mary Tyler Moore, and Howard Stern. To continue to appeal to this demanding audience, Andy tries to stay ahead of the curve. “One of the things we do that’s unusual,” he says “is to suggest to brides that instead of doing one album, they should do two—one for traditional photography, which includes poses and family groupings along with a handful of unposed candids, usually in color, and a second, more photojournalistic album, in black-and-white, that provides a behind-the-scenes look at the wedding, less posed and more real-life.”

Andy is also the rare wedding photographer who shoots with virtually no direct flash at receptions. “For the candids, we shoot all available light—no direct flash. It makes for much more unobtrusive coverage, and gives a completely different look than you see in most wedding albums. It’s been very successful for us.”

He does it by shooting Kodak T-Max P3200 film (exposed at EI 1600), and expensive, high-speed lenses. “We’re shooting f/1.2, with very selective focus. We do very little to control the overall lighting. The party is what it is, and we have to deal with it.” In really dark ballrooms, his still photographers will follow the videographer and shoot from the light of the video cameras.
While he doesn't aim a flash at wedding guests, he does light the perimeter of the hall with remote strobes that are fired remotely with Pocket Wizard digital radio slaves. “They really help you capture the ambience of the event,” he explains. “In many wedding albums, the backgrounds in the reception pictures can be very, very dark. We want the decor to show. We have three or four strobes strategically placed around the room to light the space. They’re on lightstands, kind of hidden out of the way. If the room has a white ceiling, we bounce them off the ceiling. We use Dynalight strobes, which cast a very soft light. The beauty of the Pocket Wizard system is you can put each light on a different channel. That way, if you’re shooting directly into one of the perimeter lights, you turn it off from the camera.”

The consistently high quality for which the Fred Marcus Studio is famous due primarily to the thorough training of staff photographers and video crew. “All my guys come up through the ranks,” he says. “Starting out as lighting assistants, they learn the basics by watching how to light and how to pose. It usually takes several years, before an assistant graduates to shooting.”

It takes that long because, “as a wedding photographer, you have to wear many hats. You have to be a good corporate photographer, being very polite and diplomatic. You have to be an architectural photographer, because you need to get good shots of the inside of the space, whether it’s a hotel ballroom or church. You have to be a good photojournalist to capture all the little moments going on. You have to be a fashion photographer, because the gown has to be presented perfectly. You even have to be a food photographer, if the family has set out an elaborate spread.”

Andy is also very sensitive to what a bride wants… and plans elaborately to make sure his studio can deliver it. He listens carefully. “Every wedding is exactly the same as the next, format wise. They really are. What makes the weddings interesting and different, and what makes wedding photography fun, are the individual people. So that’s where we place our focus. Each bride has her own idea of how the album
will look. Some people want more black-and-white than color. When you’re showing a bride your work, you have to be subtly attuned to how she reacts to it. ‘Oh, I love these black-and-whites,’ for example. You need to get a feeling of what people want, then arrange the actual coverage of the event so that they’ll be happy.

“It’s also not enough for the pictures in a wedding album to be good. They also have to tell a story, so that years from now, the subjects will be able to relive these five hours by looking at a handful of pictures. You have to tell a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. To get that story, you have to anticipate. What will happen next? It involves coordinating with the party planner, with the orchestra, when toasts will be made, whenever something special will happen. I guess my point is, that quality comes from a lot of talking and listening— not only to the bridal couple, but other people who are working the party.”

“We typically start two hours before the invitation time, and get all the family photographs and formals out of the way. This way, once the guests arrive, the bride and groom are free. Also, it’s when the wedding couple is ready. Most brides look perfect at the very beginning. Makeup, hair, gown, everything is 100 percent. If you wait to do the formals until after the ceremony, the makeup is smeared a little, there are footprints on the veil. Problems arise.”

Andy changes equipment when shooting, using multiple lenses and camera bodies, so that if there’s a problem, such as a shutter not syncing with a flash properly, it doesn’t ruin the entire event. Afterwards, he stores the negatives in fireproof safes. (He shoots studio portraits digitally, but weddings are on film.) And he never mails film to his printers, but has it hand delivered. “I take as many precautions as I can,” he says.

What was it like for him, working his way up in a family business? Was it difficult working for a demanding father who had started out with nothing and grew his studio to prominence and success?

“No, I liked working for my father, and I love weddings,” he answers. “I started when I was fourteen, and can honestly say I wouldn’t want to do anything else.

“When I first came into the business,” Andy recalls, “I asked my father, ‘How come we don’t do fashion photography? How come we don’t take pictures, you know, of cars and other cool stuff? Why only weddings, parties and portraits?’ He said, ‘Come with me.’ He opened the Yellow Pages, and looked under Portrait Photographers. This was back in the ’70’s and there were maybe four or five names in the phone book. Then he said, ‘Now, look up Commercial Photographers.’ So I did, and there were hundreds of names, maybe thousands. Then he said, ‘Do you want to compete against a handful of guys, or a whole army of hungry photographers?’” Andy Marcus got the point, and has never looked back.

—Pete Kolonia