

When I first started out, I wrote all the underwater photographers whose work I admired. Almost none of them replied. I gnashed my teeth and swore that "when I made it" I would always return calls, letters, etc from people just starting out. I hated those photographers that did not bother responding to me.

Over the years, I tried very hard to respond to people who wrote me. However, I discovered that it just didn't do any good. I've discovered, sadly, that it's far better for me to ignore someone's emails than to respond. There's a saying that is very true: "The worst thing that you can do is to do a favor for someone."

Read on for an email exchange with a persistent suitor.

Subject: with gratitude  
Date: 4/21/03 2:28 PM  
Received: 4/21/03 6:39 PM  
From: xxxx

Dear Mr. Wu,

thank you for your letter, I am proud that you wrote such things to me. After reading it I am grateful and feeling ashamed at once. Grateful for your personal comments, which I will use in my future to form my personal career, and ashamed that I kept you away from your family and work for such a long time on a Friday evening.

When considering my style, please do not forget that I had been written that ominous letter from Antarctica for two weeks, continuously thinking about it (even when filming), and - what was even more difficult - searching for a computer to send. I was a fool, I admit. Or not, perhaps.

Please forward my apologise for your colleague. Sorry for the complications, and in return, let me wish you good luck.

Sincerely,

XXXXX

Subject: reply as you demanded  
Date: 4/19/03 6:22 AM  
To: xxxx

Dear Mr. XXX:

When I first started out, I wrote all the underwater photographers whose work I admired. Almost none of them replied. I gnashed my teeth and swore that "when I made it" I

would always return calls, letters, etc from people just starting out. I hated those photographers that did not bother responding to me.

Over the years, I tried very hard to respond to people who wrote me. However, I discovered that it just didn't do any good. I've discovered, sadly, that it's far better for me to ignore someone's emails than to respond. There's a saying that is very true: "The worst thing that you can do is to do a favor for someone."

Once I responded to someone, he would almost invariably continue writing me. There are roughly two groups who contact me: people who want to work as a field assistant, and people who want photographic advice from me. The people who write me asking for photographic advice often are beginners. If I answer one question, then they ask more and more. The questions are usually very basic, and I start wondering why this person doesn't just go out and read a book. (In fact, I wrote a book on underwater photography in order to answer many of the questions people had for me.) It's difficult to tell the person not to write me any more, so I end up, after answering him a couple of times, just ignoring his emails. This was hard for me to do for the first few years, since I still remember how I felt as a beginner. But there are just so many hours in the day. In fact, it's now 10:20PM on Friday night, and I am writing you after a long day since Deanna forwarded me your irate message. I have a staff who takes care of things like this, so I can actually spend some time doing what I like to do. I spend about 1% of my time actually diving; the rest is sitting in front of a computer like anyone else who runs a business. Most photographers don't even have a staff to take care of things like this. Most of us are having a hard time even making a living and paying the rent. It seems like a glamorous profession, but the reality is not at all glamorous.

The second group of people who write me want to work for me as a field assistant. Now, as much as I would like to respond, how am I supposed to respond? Do you really think that I will consider taking someone who I have never met on a trip with me as my assistant? Would you do that if you were in my position, and you had an important project and a small crew that had to get along and work well? I can only consider taking people on extended expeditions that I personally know well. At least one person a week writes me, like you, all of whom have great qualifications. I just do not have the time to respond to every one of them personally. Therefore I wrote a very long form letter, which I am sending to you again -- I ask my staff to send this form letter to everyone who writes -- explaining my situation. Here's a relevant quote:

>> Do you need an assistant when you travel?<<

I am asked this question a great deal. The answer is a qualified no. I already have a stable of friends and local divers who help me occasionally on my travels and locally. Quite honestly, it would be very difficult for me to bring anyone on a trip unless I have already worked with them and knew them. If you are local, perhaps we can meet (I live on the Monterey Peninsula in California). If you are not local, the best way for us to get to know each other is through one of the four or five trips a year that I lead to diving areas such as Palau, New Guinea, the Galapagos, Kenya, etc. For more information on my trips, please consult my web page.

>> I love photography and diving. Can you give me a job?<<

I get asked this question all the time. The truth is, I sometimes need to hire office assistants. I have three people working in the office for me now. However, these are office jobs. They don't involve diving or photography.

I hope you understand that I am a very busy person, but I have thought about the feelings of others, and I have tried to establish a procedure which answers these people's questions. I have my staff handle these situations.

In this case, I've tried my best to put a procedure in place that answered your questions. Yet you persisted. I did discuss your email with Deanna, and we put your name in my database. But again, how can I possibly consider bringing anyone who I have not met in person? The only way that you will go farther in this field is to have personal contact with other professionals. The only way that you would possibly have a chance to work with me is to meet me personally. I am almost always willing to sit down and have coffee with someone if they are in town, and if they ask politely and professionally, without harassing me or my staff. But I will certainly not want to meet with anyone who is pushy and takes offense so easily. As a matter of fact, I asked Deanna to ask you to stop emailing me, since it was a waste of your and my time. She put it as politely as she could.

I wish you the best of luck, but if you want to work with someone in the future, you should perhaps take a different approach.

Remember what I said that the worst thing you can do is to do someone a favor? Here's another example. I donated the use of my photo to a scientist who needed a shot of fish schooling in her article. She never really said thanks, or recommended me for a job, or sent me a card, or even bothered to send me the article. We had to write her to ask to see how the photo was used. A few years later she wanted to use the photo again -- and I said no. She was quite upset with me, and told people that "I was difficult to deal with." It would have been better for me to never volunteer to help out in the first place. There's a lesson in there somewhere, and it's not the last sentence. I hope that you can see it. If you can't see it now, you will certainly see it after you've run your own business for several years.

Signed,

Norbert Wu

>From: xxxx

>To: office@norbertwu.com

>

>Dear Mrs. Office Manager,

>

>please forgive me to use this e-mail address, which - according to you -

>is strictly reserved for those who are really important for your company.

>However, I need to criticize your style with which you rejected my

>message.

>

>The problem is not with the rejection itself, but with the way you did

>it, and after all this, I cannot accept the answer from you. I have a

>slight impression that you didn't even read the whole letter. It wouldn't

>be a problem, since it was addressed especially to Mr. Wu: but I doubt

>that you get messages from underwater cinematographers who already have a

>three month experience in Antarctic underwater filming on every single

>day.

>  
>You left me highly dissapointed. I am sure that a company like yours  
>would really have to follow a totally different approach, especially with  
>those who are dedicated in natural history filmmaking. Looking forward to  
>get an answer, even if it is only a single word, from Mr. Wu himself.

>  
>Sincerely,

>  
>XXXXXX

>  
>  
>  
>>David,

>>  
>>Norb received your original email but is very busy on various projects  
>>and therefore unable to personally respond.

>>  
>>He will keep your name in mind and will contact you if he needs any help.  
>> Please do not contact our office as we receive many emails such as this.  
>> Thanks!

>>  
>>Best of luck to you,  
>>Office Manager  
>>Norbert Wu Productions