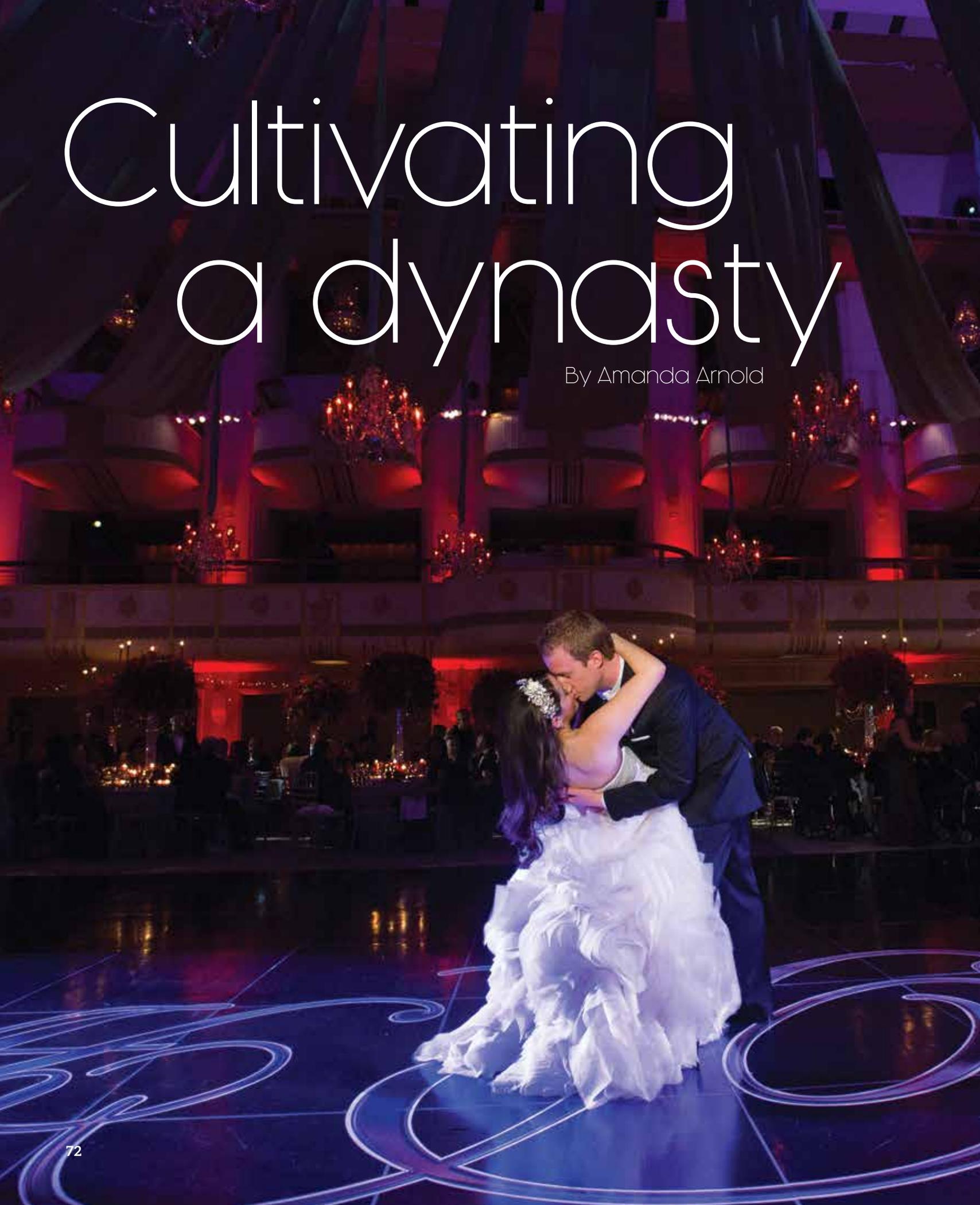


# Cultivating a dynasty

By Amanda Arnold



## How family businesses benefit from multi-generational insight and leadership

Fred Marcus was a Holocaust survivor. He escaped Germany for Cuba, where he lived for nearly two years, teaching himself photography by taking pictures of immigrant families on Cuban beaches and developing the film at night in his bathtub. In the early 1940s, he received the green light to emigrate to the United States, where he set up Fred Marcus Photography in a basement on West 72nd Street in Manhattan. He began making portraits and photographing events, often for the same families he'd first met in Cuba.



Fred Marcus Photography staff (clockwise, from top left): Felix Feygin, Stephen Pellegrino, Brian Marcus, Tara Shillingford, Carla Schauffler, Leslie Farinacci, Andy Marcus, Holly Haffner, Juan Cespedes and Frida Caceres.





Romaguera Photography family staff (standing, from top left): Roch Eshleman, Ralph Romaguera Jr., Ryan Romaguera, (seated) Cindy Romaguera and Ralph Romaguera Sr.

The story is told by Brian Marcus, Cr.Photog., grandson of Fred Marcus, and it's quite a legacy to uphold. Fred passed away in 2001, and Brian and his father, Andy Marcus, M.Photog.Cr., are now partners at the helm of Fred Marcus Photography, which occupies three floors in that same 72nd Street building on the Upper West Side. Andy has led the studio for nearly 40 years, and Brian joined him 15 years ago after a four-year stint in Los Angeles doing film production. None of the Marcus men went to photography school, and both Brian and his father began assisting on shoots when they were in high school. "I was never pressured to be a photographer," Brian says. "It was just in my DNA."

#### **MAINTAINING THE EDGE**

You might think joining the family photography business would be an easy way to enter the field, and it does have its benefits, Brian says. "I'm definitely lucky to have had the history and the background that I have had." But he adds, "I've also had to earn my position throughout the years—to be leading the



company into the next generation.”

Brian compares Fred Marcus Photography, which photographs the weddings and events of some of New York’s wealthiest, to the Waldorf Astoria hotel: Guests expect a high level of quality and customer service when they check into the Waldorf, and clients expect the same of Fred Marcus. Brian estimates that as many as a thousand of the studio’s customers are descendants of families Fred first photographed decades ago. “They will say, ‘Your grandfather did my father’s wedding,’ or ‘Your dad did my bat mitzvah,’” Brian says. “Maintaining that reputation that is really the driving force is the difficult part of running a business that’s been around for so long. It’s not as easy as you might think. I mean, that brand and name have obviously been fantastic for me. But evolving and breaking into the next decade—it’s really an amazing challenge. But it’s something I truly personally enjoy—to continuously rebrand and impress year after year.”

The secret is to maintain the hallmark values that have defined the brand—consistency and unparalleled quality and customer service—while keeping pace with the latest trends in aesthetics, style, marketing, and technology. Brian recalls his elderly grandfather attending weddings to shake hands with clients long after he was physically able to handle the photography work. That hands-on, highly personalized approach to customer service is maintained by Brian and Andy, who say they make themselves available to clients 24 hours a day. Even though they have a staff of 12, “There is never a phone call that we aren’t going to take. And we are extremely hands on,” says Brian. That means no sales people, no outsourcing of post-production, printing, or album design, and developing lasting friendships with clients. “We are definitely doing 90 percent of the work,” he says. “There is nothing that gets by without me or my dad touching it.”

At the same time, hard decisions have to be made about what to modernize and what to retire. During his tenure, Brian has worked to bring the Fred Marcus website, social media, and branding up to date. “Before I came onto the business a lot of people knew about Fred Marcus studio, but I don’t think they knew about it because of our personalities,” he says. He revamped the website to give potential clients a taste of “who





The Peters family (clockwise, from bottom left): Hayden Conley, Mark Elliott, Austin Conley, Karen Peters, Larry Peters, Tanner Killian, Brian Killian, Chase Killian, Janine Peters-Killian, Madison Killian, Gavin Elliott, and Melinda Peters Elliott

we are, and not just what we do,” and it’s tweaked daily to keep it fresh.

He overhauled the Fred Marcus Photography logo after more than 70 years, which was particularly difficult because the original was his grandfather’s signature. “You have to make these hard decisions to update the brand and modernize it,” Brian notes.

Allowing updates can be difficult for the older generation in a family photography studio, but change is a necessary part of business. “You have to be accepting to change, and that is one of the hardest things to do in life,” Brian says. Communication has been key between him and his father. You have to be aware of the changes in your field and “use the younger generation to step in and really solidify that change with new ideas,” Brian says. “Communicate together, hold on to some stuff from the past, but be smart enough not to hold on too tight so that you’re not adapting to new things.”

#### IN WITH THE NEW

Ralph Romaguera Sr., M.Photog.Hon.M.Photog.Cr., CPP, API, F-ASP, founder of Romaguera Photography in Metairie, Louisiana, agrees that allowing the younger generation power within a multi-generational studio is paramount to keeping everyone congenial

and ideas fresh. “What I suggest to other dads and moms who are working with their kids is to let the kids be a part of the business. Let the kids be a part of the decision making. When dad or mom keep their hands in it too long, where it’s their way or no way, that is the wrong way.”

At Romaguera Photography, “everybody does everything, but everybody has a special task,” Romaguera explains. Son Ralph Romaguera Jr., M.Photog.Cr., CPP, does event photography; son Ryan Romaguera, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, runs the studio; and son-in-law Roch Eshleman, Cr.Photog., manages the business. Meanwhile, wife Cindy Romaguera, M.Photog.Cr., focuses on production work. “The three boys do 99.9 percent of the work, and we have a wonderful staff,” says Ralph. “Besides the four of us, there are 17 other people.”

Ralph attributes much of the continued success of his studio to his sons’ drive and innovation. “When it was just me in the beginning, we were wedding photographers, and then it grew to school photography. With the boys it grew to more schools and sports and yearbooks and all kinds of opportunities that a photographer, if he pursues them, can really still make a great living at. We are growing 25 percent next year, and we already have a very nice business. It’s be-



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cause of their enthusiasm and their interest in expanding. The business has really grown because of their ambitions.”

#### **CONNECTING WITH A YOUNGER MARKET**

“I always say I should have had more children so I could have a lot of good employees,” says Karen Peters, Cr.Photog., of Peters Photography in London, Ohio. Her husband, Larry Peters, M.Photog.MEI.Cr., CPP, launched the studio in the 1970s and found success taking unique portraits of high school seniors, growing from 200 to 700 clients in one year. In 1990, they hired photographer Brian Killian, M.Photog.Cr. Brian hit it off with the Peters’ daughter Janine, who after attending photography school married him and became Janine Peters-Killian, M.Photog.Cr. Brian and Larry are the studio’s lead pho-

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tographers; Janine handles child photography.

But the family labor doesn't stop at the second generation: "All of our grandchildren help," Karen says. Because Peters Photography focuses on high school senior portraits, the grandchildren's insights have been invaluable in connecting with the studio's target market. "There are things that we would not be up on that we have to listen to and say, OK, we need to do something like that," she says. Grandson Chase occasionally blogs for the studio and provides advice about what and how often to post on Instagram. It can be hard to keep up with where the kids are on social media and how to reach them, so that kind of firsthand knowledge is gold, according to Karen.

### IN THIS TOGETHER

One of the most appealing aspects about a family business is that it doesn't die with one generation. The Peters' estate calls for the business to be handed down to their family, and the Romagueras' states that the business will be handed down to all three sons, each owning an equal share.

In the meantime, it's a comfort to know that your workers are emotionally and financially invested in your business. "It's their

future, it's the future of the family, and it's the future of the family business," says Karen Peters. "They're not just an employee." •

