

*April 2012*

## Keith Gentile

*By Louisa J. Curtis*



*Keith Gentile, © Keith Barraclough*

One of the things I enjoy about writing these articles is I know a lot of different people in this industry besides photographers. This month my conversation is with “database mogul” Keith Gentile, owner of [Agency Access](#), [ADBASE](#) and [FoundFolios](#). I’ve watched the growth of his company over the past several years and with all of the changes and excitement that have been going on in his world recently, I thought it would make an interesting article. I was already planning a visit to see their new offices, so this gave me the opportunity to interview him in person. I started out by asking Keith how on earth he had come to work in the database industry in the first place, I mean it’s not like you go to school for that, and how had he come to buy Agency Access?

I worked my way up, starting in the Agency Access mailroom in 1996. From there I moved into research, then sales, then management, and acquired the company from the previous owner in 2000. I immediately made changes in how we provided our database to the artist community. Up to this point, you could only buy a list if you did direct mail as well, but I wanted to offer data on its own. Looking back, did you ever imagine that your company would one day be the largest and most comprehensive in your field? My goal was always to be the best. Five years ago, being No. 1 in the business was one of my three top goals. The second one was a pool, but we ended up having to settle on a hot tub, and the third goal was to start a family, which we've done, so two and a half out of three ain't bad.

You certainly had some major milestones last year – you bought your competition, you moved to larger offices, and you had your first child. What were the most exciting things about each of those three events, and also the most challenging aspects to each of them? The acquisition of ADBASE was definitely exciting and a wonderful accomplishment. At the same time the acquisition was certainly challenging – dealing with all of the lawyers and accountants, both here in the U.S. as well as in Canada, making sure it was the right deal, the right move, that jobs would still be secure, and so on. And then there was the transition itself, including the merging of the two company's databases – that was a very scary thing! I made sure that I put myself out there in video and press releases to keep customers informed. Moving to bigger offices was necessary – we were growing quickly and the staff was uncomfortable. Designing the new space and moving in has been exciting, and so is having a proper lunchroom! We took over ADBASE and FoundFolios August 19th, 2011, and then moved the offices in November, so this move was a massive undertaking, dealing with all the IT and construction. We were literally running the network ourselves at this point, so getting all of the computers up and running was crucial.

Keith told me they deliberately chose happy and inspirational colors, so one entire wall that runs the length of the new office space is a bright orange (as are the lunch room chairs) while Keith's office is bright blue - his personal favorite color. In fact, he joked that together they were pretty much the same colors as the Mets! And yes, he's a fan. He continued: As for having our first child, it's certainly been one of the most intense experiences of my life! As challenging as it is to run these companies every day, the real work is at night – when I get home, I get handed the baby and I'm on the night shift!

I wanted to get back to the topic of the company's growth and how he is handling having a larger staff now. They have always been a very tight-knit company and very family-oriented, but now the staff is up to 40, and growing, so I wanted to know what changes or adjustments has he had to make? It's a challenge, but I plan to keep it family oriented. In addition to a lot of excellent professionals I've been fortunate enough to bring aboard, I have also hired a lot of family and local people from my town – a lot of people I know – and that helps every employee take our success and the success of our members personally.

With the recent growth in your company, you have now added a lot more services and products – was this something you had always envisioned for your company, or did it evolve naturally as time went on? I had always envisioned having extra services – that's my way of separating myself so we're not just a list company. I find this industry interesting and inspiring, so I wanted to be creative as well, and adding progressive services is a great way to do that. My main goal is always the success of the members.

So having worked in the photography industry for some time now, what would you say are the most common misconceptions that photographers have about marketing? Photographers spend money on marketing, but they have a hard time following up properly. We implemented these extra services to help them be consistent. These artists need Agency Access' services. There are four crucial components needed to survive in this business – talent, marketing, sales and finances. You cannot survive in this market if you don't understand it's a business. How do you think the photography industry in general has changed over the last few years, and more specifically, how have those changes affected what you do as a service provider? Finding jobs as a photographer is more difficult these days. Budgets have been cut and there's a lot more competition. This is why marketing and building relationships are more important than ever. We need to look into the future and be prepared to provide services that accommodate whatever needs are coming next. Besides established photographers, we also want to implement services to help newcomers. It all comes back to relationship building.

One major change as to how we communicate these days is Social Networking, so I asked Keith for his thoughts on that topic and how important is it for the company to participate? Do you feel one works better than another, for example, between your own blog The Lab, and Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter? Does each one have its own merits, or are they all potentially a distraction? I do think social networking is important and we have to stay up on technology. Our blog is very important because it's about educating the community. I feel that LinkedIn is the best professional networking platform because it is more business savvy and there are more discussion groups. Facebook and Twitter are both great if someone is following you, but Facebook allows you to show more personality. And how important is it for you to be sponsoring events and staying present in the photography community? It's extremely important to stay involved and support the community, so we certainly plan on continuing to sponsor many events. We often talk about new photographers, and how we can teach them what to do with their marketing as they are just starting out. I was curious though, if Keith had any advice for photographers who have been in the business for a while, versus someone who is just beginning their career? As a consultant, I encounter just as many photographers in a mid-life crisis mode as I do newbies. I think people are too used to the way it was. It's important to understand where the market is going and have a plan for the next five years. A lot of older photographers never had to market before, so our job now is reinventing them, but it doesn't happen overnight. Established photographer or newbie, it's important to sell yourself to the creatives, so think out a proper five-year plan. And remember, the planning never stops: When I make my own five-year plan, after each year I add another year and tweak it where necessary.

And last but not least we have the **ChatterDozen** quick questions:

Some of you may recall in my last article with Halley Ganges, owner of Go-Studios, that Halley is a Libra. Coincidentally, Keith Gentile is also a Libra, born on October 12th, Columbus Day. So you may notice some similarities not only in the way they approach running their businesses, but notice also how some of their answers to the **ChatterDozen** quick questions are similar!

- 1) What is your favorite word? **Entrepreneur.** When I was 6, my mother asked me what I wanted to be when I grow up, and I said "an entrepreneur." She asked if I knew what that meant, and I said, "A guy who owns his business and calls his own shots." It was my first big word!
- 2) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? **Monday morning.** As much as I love my family, I really love coming to work ... I get excited to get going! Since the baby arrived, there's a rule that I can only work on weekends from 6 to 9 a.m. – it's a good rule, but I still have a burning desire to get to work on a Monday and build the business! (Very similar to Halley's answer!)
- 3) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? **My uncle is the closest person to me who has actually passed.** He stepped into my life when my parents divorced and helped me a lot with my business; he was a lawyer. When I was younger he tested me for my classes, and we watched baseball and played video games together. He lived next door, so I would also do odd jobs for him. And he paid well!
- 4) What is your favorite TV show? **Right now, it's "Fringe."**
- 5) What was the last movie you saw? **"Moneyball."** It was really good, I like true stories and it was also educational at the same time.
- 6) What is your favorite music, song, or band? **Alternative music such as Pearl Jam and Nirvana**
- 7) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? **The 50s.** I liked the white T-shirts, with the cigarettes in the sleeve, the leather jackets, and of course the slicked-back hair!
- 8) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, perhaps to somewhere you have never been before, where would you fly to and why? **Greece or Key West.** Greece because I proposed to my wife there and Mikonos was the most beautiful place I'd ever been. Key West because we've been there on vacation and really liked riding around on the scooters ... and naturally, the weather too!
- 9) What is your favorite food? **Chicken parmigiano**
- 10) And your favorite color? **Blue**
- 11) How about your favorite animal? **Dogs.** No particular breed, we always had mutts growing up.
- 12) If I handed you an Oscar, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? **Thanks to my parents and to my uncle, Steven Schapiro, who played a huge part in my life. Then my wife, Victoria, for all the support and for sticking by me – she's the mastermind behind all of this! Special thanks also go to Jim Starace, Dan Caruso, Mark Hanlon, Genive Purchase, Lori Capone, Andy Parsons, Linda Whitehead and the rest of the wonderful Agency Access staff, as well as everyone who's supported our company.**

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