

How to Set Up a Newborn Studio at Your Local Hospital

In May of 2009, Mary Buck opened a newborn photography studio at a hospital in her town. Within the past two years, many photographers have asked for advice on how to set up a studio at their local hospital. The following article has been written to address this request:

Hospitals compete with each other just like any other business. The more services they provide, the more likely they are to attract more customers (patients). A recent trend in hospital design has been to model after upscale hotels and include personalized services. An in-house photographer is just one way a hospital can stand out from its competition.

A hospital in your area will most likely have some sort of photography service already in place. To get your foot in the door, you will need to describe how your service is superior and how the hospital will benefit from your program. In my area, the most prevalent photography service is, "Our 365." They hire part-time contractors and train them to take pictures in the hospital rooms using their digital systems. The other type of service available at many hospitals is a kiosk center, where the patient lies the baby on a table and a camera overhead takes a picture. This type of impersonal service provides only a marginal quality image. Imagine then, how a professional photographer can add value to a hospital's repertoire of services. The parents of a newborn deserve more than ordinary, dispassionate photographs of their new little bundle of joy. A newborn photo can become a family heirloom to be treasured for years. This is the type of message that can be conveyed to the hospital administration.

A newborn program at a local hospital can be a perfect complement to a studio infant program. However, it may not be for everyone. It requires a lot of patience; babies cry, moms are in pain, doctors and nurses are making visits to the rooms, etc. Before you consider contacting your hospital, make sure you are a good fit for a program like this. Schedules are not always exact; a 10:00 appointment may be stretched to 10:30 because the baby has not been fed, or the doctor has not made his or her visit. You have to go with the natural flow of the hospital routine and plan on sessions running off-schedule.

There are many steps in setting up a newborn program at a hospital. The first one is to make a list of hospitals within an acceptable range of your studio or home. Whether it is 10, 15 or 20 miles away, the distance is up to you. Next, contact each hospital and find out what type of service they currently have and if they have a contract. Speak to a nurse in labor and delivery for the initial information. Now that you have a viable list of hospitals to contact, you will need to contact the Director of Women's Services. If there isn't someone in that position, you should contact a decision-maker in the hospital administration. A CEO would be a good contact person; however, you will most likely be in contact with their administrative assistant. Keep in mind that a hospital may be in the middle of a contractual obligation with their existing service, so even though they may be

interested in you it still could take time to begin your services. Follow-ups are extremely important - my program took nearly a year to set up.

Follow-up and make an appointment with the decision-maker so you can offer your proposal in person. The one-on-one presentation will set the stage for your personalized photography service. During your presentation, explain why you are a better candidate than the current service. Provide samples of your work and emphasize your abilities and specialization with newborns. Have a clear-cut list of what you require from the hospital and what you will provide.

Some hospitals will require vaccination records and even training in order to be a vendor on the labor and delivery floor. For example, I have to be tested every year for TB, and I had to provide proof that I had the chicken pox. Every hospital has their own requirements and they can be very picky. Even if you don't agree with them, you must cooperate in order to be accepted.

The process of establishing contacts and meeting with hospital administrators could take up to six months, or even as long as a year, as it did with me. Once you are accepted into a hospital, the next step is to prepare your marketing materials and set up the studio. I created a new brand for the newborn program, which is also what I use at my studio. It is called **Nuovo Amore**, (Italian for "new love.") I include my logo on all my material. The best way for the patients to find out about your services is through a postcard or brochure that is given to them prior to their check-in at the hospital. Ask the nurses to insert your marketing piece in a packet that is given on hospital tours or in a welcome bag for new patients. If the hospital has Lamaze classes, that would be another outlet in which to advertise.

Once you have begun the marketing efforts, you are ready to start your program. The easiest way to get clients is to have a sign-up sheet at the nurse's station. If the hospital will allow you to go into the rooms, you can also visit patients and introduce yourself and the program. Many times the new parents are indecisive (a lack of sleep will do this), so leave a brochure with them and tell them you will check back with them later. I have found that visiting patients in their rooms is very advantageous because most people do not sign up in advance.

My studio is located in a multi-purpose room and is approximately 15' x 10'. The room is occasionally used as a meeting room by hospital staff, so I have to be flexible with the layout. I have a key for the room and I always keep it locked when not in use.

My equipment and supplies are minimal for this space. However, I did have to spend around \$500 to equip the room. The following is my list of supplies:

- White reflector and stand
- Background stand
- Continuous light with softbox

- Light stand
- Canon 20D camera (an older camera that I kept as a back-up)
- White balance target
- Credit card terminal
- Cheap black-and-white printer for printing invoices
- Felt squares
- Round Pillow
- Beanbag
- Newborn Poser
- Blankets
- Heating pad and portable heater
- Step ladder
- Diaper covers and hats
- College football theme caps and mascots
- Tulle, ribbons, headbands, hats
- Laptop (I bring my laptop from my studio each time)
- Calculator
- Pens
- Paper
- Client cards
- Samples of packages
- Brochures and postcards
- Sony SnapLab digital printer

Many of the items listed above I already owned, so I did not have to purchase them for my hospital studio. The Sony printer allows me to print an express package. I purchased the printer several years ago for \$1500. I doubt I would have purchased it just for the hospital because of its high, upfront expense.

The studio and preview sessions last about 45 minutes. I take approximately 30-35 photos using 8-9 poses. The poses are simple, easy, and usually go quickly unless the baby is crying. I do not have the luxury of waiting for a baby to fall asleep, so many of the poses are with the baby's eye open. Since I started using a heater, the babies cry less and sleep more. The poses are:

- Baby on side
- Baby on back
- Baby on tummy (only if baby is sleeping)
- Baby on tummy with blue or pink ribbon
- Baby on daddy's hands
- Baby with outfit (parents supply an outfit)
- Baby with blanket wrap
- Baby with hat, or with college sports team mascot (the college football teams are a real hit in GA)

- Daddy leaning over kissing baby on the cheek.

I do not photograph naked babies at the hospital due to hospital hygiene restrictions. Instead, I use diaper covers, which work just fine. Babies and parents have hospital-issued medical wrist bands and ankle bands. I do not remove these, since parents understand that this is all part of the newborn experience. Surprisingly, most parents do not want their photos retouched. They want to be able to remember their newborn's pink, mottled skin.

After the session is over, the parent fills out a client card and model release. Some parents do not want to sign the model release, and I do not pressure them to do so. While they are filling out the paperwork, I download the photos and prepare a slide show in Pro-Select. The previews can take 15 -30 minutes. I have packages and price lists in Pro-Select, so I am able to print the client an invoice along with their credit card receipt. I always include a "re-order form" with their paperwork. I order the packages from Meridian Photo lab, and they drop-ship directly to the client within four days of the order.

I usually schedule three sessions in a two-hour period. Although my session average is much lower than at my studio, I find the job very rewarding. It also is a fantastic opportunity to build relationships with young families. I always send a thank you card to the patient a month or so after the session. At this time, I also send them information about my studio services especially the First Year Infant Program.

A program at your local hospital has numerous benefits. It can help build a client list and supplement your income stream. Additionally, working at a hospital is a satisfying and enjoyable experience. I have been overwhelmed by the welcome and acceptance I have received from the nurses and doctors. I truly feel blessed to have been given this opportunity for expansion during a period of economic downturn.

If you are interested in setting up a program at your local hospital, you can contact me at marybuck1@bellsouth.net if you have additional questions. You can find out more about my Nuovo Amore program at my website <http://www.nuovo-amore.com>.