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# Anatomy of a studio start-up

Planning and marketing savvy generate \$150,000 sales

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**T**he exquisitely well-planned and executed photography studio commercials hit the television waves like dynamite, during December 1987. These fast-paced television spots effectively projected an exciting "hot" image of About Faces, a new Austin, Texas, glamour studio.

Aside from their quality, the TV commercials were intriguing because photo studios rarely advertise on television—particularly with such flare. Most professional photographers fail to advertise effectively, and those that do advertise, frequently create amateur-looking ads and place them in "cheap" media. Yet, influential advertising is a critical component for success. It is difficult for most businesses to reach their full potential without it.

A new set of commercials promoting Valentine's Day portraits replaced the Christmas television spots. Later in the year, a barrage of fresh commercials were televised. About Faces demonstrated an exceptional method for introducing a business and gaining the public's attention.

The studio, owned by Bill Boulton, is located in a busy, high traffic part of town, in a newly renovated, shopping strip. As part of the studio's window display, a large translucent screen features a changing slide presentation of impressive "before-and-after" 30x40-inch portraits of beautiful women. The presentation is so powerful, passersby become glued to the screen.

Boulton was not new to Austin, and had already "paid his dues" in photography. He earned a photojournalism degree from the University of Texas, Austin, in 1980, but decided not to pursue a news photography career. After working in a camera store for a short time, Boulton purchased his first studio for \$2,000—a seventh floor, 127-square-foot passport photo studio.

Boulton successfully transformed this little space into a \$100,000-a-year business. However, he wasn't satisfied—he was looking for a more expressive and unique photography outlet. He sold the small studio to his employees in 1986, shortly

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after attending an Eastman Kodak marketing seminar in Houston. The seminar speaker shared the success story of John and Trish Perrin, Portland, Oregon, who operated "On Broadway," a studio specializing in makeover glamour photography. Boulton decided to emulate and expand the work of the Perrins by opening his own makeover glamour studio with revenue from the small studio sale.

Boulton knew that he chose a difficult time to open his new business. The Texas economy was deteriorating quickly, specialty businesses were dropping like flies, and financial institutions were closing. Nevertheless, Boulton felt he could catch the public's attention and be prepared for an economy turnaround.

Many photographers open studios on a shoestring budget. They rent undesirable space in cheaper areas of town and make minimal investments on improvements and advertising. As a result, they earn a low income. Even talented photographers usually work for years before becoming established. Boulton wasn't willing to wait.

He approached his new venture with a plan, and hired professionals in respective fields to help launch it. Real estate professionals assisted with finding the business location, a space planner created interior partitions, and a friend with excellent interior design skills designed the studio environment—everything from gentle curves in the walls to color.

An ad agency helped Boulton choose the studio name and logo, which was designed to be catchy and meaningful. The ad agency also began planning his introductory advertising plan, with an emphasis on television. He budgeted \$50,000 for the first year, and purchased blocks of television time to cut costs of individually placed ads.

The professional consultants were expensive, but Boulton felt it it saved him

money in the long run. After all, he reasoned, people come to him for his professional expertise—why shouldn't he employ qualified professionals in other fields? The approach paid off.

A key component of any makeover glamour studio is the makeup artist. Boulton paid special attention to hiring the right person and interviewed several before choosing a photographic makeover stylist who was knowledgeable about how subjects appear on film when photographed under studio lights.

The studio opened on December 14—six weeks later than scheduled. However, the results of Boulton's intensive television and print advertising surpassed his expectations. He received up to 200 calls a day. His first answering machine almost burned up! He soon booked six sittings a day for several months in advance.

Boulton was completely unprepared for this initial deluge of inquiries, and was frustrated because only 30 percent of his scheduled clients were showing up. To be assured interested clients would arrive as scheduled, he initiated a non-refundable \$75 prepayment plan. This procedure cut the total number of appointments, but encouraged client commitment.

Everything about Boulton's studio is non-traditional. Contemporary backgrounds are important to his photography and he concentrates on creating a wide variety in his studio. Boulton is currently experimenting with background projection to offer clients greater selection.

Boulton no longer schedules sittings via telephone before formally booking a slot, and insists that each client come in for a brief in-studio consultation.

"We want About Faces customers to be 100 percent clear as to the kind of work we do before they get in front of a camera," Boulton said.

During the consultation, he explains

photography prices and company policies. The photography sitting itself revolves around creating a "fun experience" for clients.

For the makeover, which lasts an hour, a client is seated in a brightly lit, mirrored area, so she can watch everything that happens to her. She is then taken into the wardrobe room to choose a number of outfits for the sitting.

The actual sitting takes another hour. The first exposure is always an instant Polaroid color print, which gives the makeup artist, photographer, and client an opportunity to see how she appears on film. During the session, subliminal selling takes place, with words of encouragement, such as "Boy, this is going to look just great on your wall."

"We began using transviews but we are back to using traditional color proofs," Boulton said. "Each proof is placed in a fine leather folder. There are no price sheets. We don't want the client to have preconceived attitudes that they want two 8x10s."

Boulton tells clients that the average client spends between \$150 and \$750, so, they are comfortable making a \$350 order.

About Faces offers a few photography packages, but they are not emphasized in the sales presentation. The studio only sells proofs or small prints to clients who buy an enlargement.

Boulton seldom receives complaints about prices. His customers know in advance what to expect. "Today," he said, "clients know what film and processing cost. What they are paying for is for me to create the image."

Former clients frequently return six months after their sittings just to have lunch with his staff, and frequently recommend the studio to friends.

The first year Boulton generated sales of \$150,000, but lost money even before paying himself a salary. Some might say his first year was a bust. Boulton strongly disagrees.

"Few new studios make profit the first year. Many studios never gross \$150,000 a year, even after many years of operation. I didn't expect to break even the first year," he said.

Boulton expects to do considerably better. His future annual gross profit projection is \$500,000. He knows it won't happen immediately. The Texas economy has to increase and he must continue building his client base first. But Boulton has positioned himself well in the Austin market. He is operating a modern entrepreneurial business and using aggressive marketing and selling approaches. ■