

Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photog.

Are you a dinosaur?

If you have children, you have probably taken them to a place that was special in your childhood only to be disappointed when their reaction was, "This is so boring." Though painful, perhaps there is a very important lesson to be learned from this negative reaction. After all, we are a product of our environment and your children have been raised in a strikingly different environment than you were. The whole world is moving faster and is much more complex than it once was. That which was exciting to you may be boring to them.

The community I live in was once famous for an area known as Aquarena Springs. Over the years, a resort/amusement park was built and expanded at the springs.

It wasn't that long ago that nearly everyone in Texas and the surrounding states either had heard of or visited Aquarena. Throughout the summer months and on holidays the parking lots overflowed onto a nearby golf course. Today, the park is but a ghost of its former self. What happened?

The park didn't keep pace with the times. It never changed, but the people did. The visitors became more sophisticated and the park wasn't growing with them. The crowds have been dwindling and some speculate it may eventually close.

The Aquarena story is not unique. It is happening every day in literally millions of cases. It is happening in your studio as well, whether you know it or not. Perhaps you are involved in perfecting your photographic style but, chances are, you haven't taken serious notice lately of how your customers are changing. Customers today are younger and have a whole different set of priorities. Are you staying tuned in to their needs? Chances are you're not. And, that means someone else, perhaps someone from their generation, will tune in and take over the business you thought was coming to you.

I know because I did exactly that when I was in my 20s. I promoted the new styles of photography that the "old fuddie duddies" in my community refused to do. My business soared while theirs diminished. They made it so easy for me to take

over. Now, years later, we may find ourselves in that same situation. It's so easy to let it happen. You don't even know it's happening and when you do catch a glimmer of reality, the usual response is to condemn the desires of the younger generation. "After all," you say, "what do they know about good photography?" When the real question should be, what do you know about serving their needs?

Unless we are willing to accept a gradually diminishing business as our generation matures, we'll have to fight each day to stay current. Charlie Clark of Galion, Ohio, is a perfect example. Though in his 40s, he acts and thinks like a college student—and his photography reflects it. Many of his colleagues think he's a little crazy. He responds jokingly by calling himself "Crazy Charlie." Crazy Charlie does what his young clients want. He's tuned in to the current generation and they like it, and respond by coming from miles around to have their senior portraits made by him. If Crazy Charlie gets to photograph the seniors and sell them a package of prints worth several hundred dollars, it's an opportunity someone else missed. By staying in tune with the customers he serves, even at the expense of negative comments from his contemporaries, Charlie runs a highly successful studio operation.

Electronic imaging is an innovation that can very easily pull photography out of the doldrums. A few forward-thinking studios are starting to purchase electronic imaging systems, not for retouching negatives, but to enable the creation of abstract special effects such as pixelization, color reduction, charcoal effects, etc., in their portraits. The thinking of these innovators is to show customers, especially seniors, unique styles that will attract them to the studio because they will be the first to offer these special effects. It's one more promotional tool.

We all have a choice in business. We can go the route of our local, outdated tourist attraction or we can fight to stay current with changing trends or even develop new trends. Which choice do you think will generate the stronger bottom line? ■