
Your Bottom Line

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Bait and switch

Although advertising unavailable products at low prices in order to entice customers into stores for more expensive purchases describes typical "bait and switch" techniques, the practice of attracting customers into photography studios with high-quality samples and producing mediocre work is equally deceptive.

When I first joined PP of A, I believed my studio produced above-average portraits. While my studio created better work than many of the local studios in the area, I felt surprise and envy once I began attending print competitions. After studying so many "perfect" images, I wondered, "How do the top trophy winners create so many wonderful pictures? Are they really superior photographers?"

I travel frequently and have visited numerous studios, including those owned by award-winning photographers. On one occasion, I arranged a meeting with a photographer who won many print competition awards. While driving to his studio, I envisioned a savvy, successful professional working in a beautiful, well-equipped location. Arriving at a shabby studio, I found a large display of "ordinary" prints among his award-winning images. My disappointment sparked a personal investigation.

My skepticism rose as to the true abilities of prize winners after enduring a number of similar experiences over the years. I learned that many of them could create exceptional prints specifically for competitions, while exerting little effort toward producing the same caliber of images for customers. In fact, some photographers actually hired subjects to pose for a particular competition print concept and made hundreds of exposures over days, weeks, or months to acquire "the right image" on film.

After selecting the best exposure, they sent the negative to an outstanding custom color printing lab, employed professional retouching and airbrush artists to enhance the image appearance, and hired a framing expert to cut precise mats to complement the print's display. Conse-

quently, the final work presented before the judging panel bore little resemblance to the original print or negative. Therefore, if an award was granted, is it more a tribute to the lab technician, air brush artist, finishing artist, and professional mat designer who augmented the image than to the photographer? Naturally, these photographers promote their ribbon-clad photographs to attract new clients, and then often deliver merely average products.

Another deceptive practice involves photographers who attract customers with their celebrity-status, then hand assignments over to an associate or freelancer. While employees might produce excellent portraits, the customer is paying the price for the award-winning photographer's "expertise".

In many ways, this situation parallels a patient hiring a top surgeon, at top dollar, to perform a critical operation, only to learn that an intern actually handled the surgery. The patient has legitimate cause to feel victimized, as do studio customers who are duped by deceptive photographers. Perhaps photographers who operate in this manner should exhibit the following disclaimer over their desks, "The photography displayed may not be representative to the quality of work you will receive."

No one has discovered the perfect solution, but I speculated on one alternative: Enlisting a team of expert evaluators to visit studios and carefully examine photographers' operations before certifying them—much like an accreditation board evaluates colleges and universities. Of course the costs and logistics of such a procedure would make it impossible to implement, as well as uncovering a measurable definition of quality, but professional photographers must promote the concept of ethics and create higher evaluation standards.

Therefore, we should improve our current method of quality assessment, and install new requirements for print competitions. For example, competition judges should request that photographers sub-

mit a small, unretouched, unenhanced contact print along with the final print, and a written report indicating the people responsible for print enhancement.

I feel that professional photographers should handle all competition print preparation steps themselves. It's time for photographers to stop asking enhancement artists to transform flawed negatives into competition-quality images, particularly with the growing development of electronic photography. In the near future, it may be common for photographers to do nothing more than photograph a subject on a sea of white seamless paper, and hire computer operators to create a spectacular, award-winning creation out of it.

Ultimately, photographers must rely on professional ethics, and encourage other professional photographers to strive toward creating masterpieces on their own. Photographers must continually monitor their own ethics. If studio owners cannot hire honest photographers who incorporate the same ethical convictions they embrace to produce the caliber of work promised to customers, they should turn down assignments. It's difficult to turn away business, but it is also unethical to accept payment under false pretenses.

In today's world, customers feel inclined to file law suits when they believe they are treated unjustly. Why wait for customers to take you to court? In the long run, your accounts will reflect a healthier bottom line if you deliver what you promise to your customers. ■