
your bottom line

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Beware of small corners

Many of us may occasionally see our photographic profession and our financial future in jeopardy. We are painfully aware of the increasing competition that seems to come at us from all sides.

There appears to be an ever-growing army of new photographers willing to sell their work—which is sometimes quite good—for prices less than what it costs us to produce our photographs. We see long lines of customers waiting to have their portraits made by the local discount store or retail chain photographers, while our waiting room remains relatively empty. We hear frightening statistics concerning the decreasing number of dollars being spent on portrait photography.

These grim reports force many photographers into a hasty retreat, when in fact, a strong counterattack may be more in order. Like a routed army, many retreating photographers abandon their present positions to seek new strongholds—trying to find a special niche where they can feel safe and secure...at least for a while.

However, if the new stronghold is undefendable and quickly collapses, the occupant can be in an even more precarious situation than before. Such may be the case with the frantic rush to cash in on the current craze in the photography business—the boudoir photography bonanza.

Boudoir photography is certainly not new to the professional photography scene. It has been part of photography since its earliest days.

Although it first began to make a significant comeback a few years ago, boudoir photography already seems to be on the mind of every professional photographer in America. Suddenly, there are articles, books, classes, and seminars on the subject. I know of a number of studios that have dropped all other photography to specialize exclusively in boudoir business. Many others now advertise that they are in the boudoir arena.

I didn't realize how popular the field had become until I recently attended a western professional photographers convention. The feature speakers present-

ed a program on their phenomenal success in boudoir photography with the meeting room jammed tight with people. Those who couldn't find space in the room watched the program on a television monitor in the hall. The trade show was nearly empty during the program. Even many of the exhibitors attended the presentation.

Is boudoir photography a safe heaven, a salvation, for a faltering photography business? Or, is it possibly a false promise—one that can have potentially catastrophic results for unsuspecting studio owners?

At first glance, boudoir photography looks almost as if it were "God sent". There seems to be a rapidly increasing customer demand for it, with many photographers averaging \$300 to \$500 per sitting. And, at this time, no discount or retail stores offer boudoir, nor do they have any intentions of doing so. So what's the problem?

Boudoir photography appears to be such a burgeoning panacea that many professionals are divorcing themselves from any other type of photography in order to exclusively specialize in boudoir work. They believe it will be highly profitable and enjoyable. But, some major disappointments and financial disasters may await some of these individuals and deserve serious consideration. The old adage, "look before you leap," couldn't be more appropriate.

In most businesses, it is usually risky to exclusively specialize in one narrow area. Boudoir photography is certainly a small niche. Most successful studios simultaneously develop clients in many areas in order to provide a necessary balance of business, which will see them through slow times. If boudoir photographers do not maintain other specialties, they are figuratively putting themselves out on the end of a precarious limb.

We must also remember that boudoir appeals only to a narrow segment of the population—generally a small percentage of 25- to 40-year-old women in a particular financial and social group. Most bou-

doir clients see this type of photography as a "once in a lifetime" experience, and thus it is unlikely that they will be frequent repeat customers. More important is the fact that a significant majority of American women are not interested in boudoir photography. Therefore, the potential customer base is comparatively very limited.

Another consideration is the fact that this type of photography isn't easy. Photographing the full-length female figure—especially a woman with an average or less than stunning body—and making her look outstandingly attractive is work for a very skilled and advanced photographer. While some boudoir specialists are excellent, too often others produce work that is less than desirable.

Boudoir clients can be hard to please since many are critical, not only of their facial appearance, but of their entire body as well. This glamour photography requires utmost skill in camera technique, lighting, posing, and photographer/client interaction.

Competition in boudoir photography will increase phenomenally as literally thousands of amateur photographers attempt to get a piece of the action.

As a result, prices will fall, except for those photographers who successfully market their work to sophisticated clientele. At the same time, boudoir photography will lose some of its current special appeal, and its popularity will begin to decline.

Last, but most important, is the possibility of the studio gaining an unsavory reputation among conservative members of the community after advertising its boudoir services (no matter how discreet or tasteful your photographic style). Although it is easy to say: "After all, this is 1986 and people are more open about things like this," society hasn't changed as much as we might like to believe. Across America, in both the big cities and small towns, many people are still fundamentally very conservative. You may see indications of this today, such as the very vocal "moral majority".

Many traditional children and family studios are experimenting with offering some boudoir photography services and showing examples of it in their studio window and showroom advertising.

The problem, however, is that a studio can very quickly lose most or all of their regular family business once they are seen as "a dirty old sex photographer." This type of image can literally develop overnight. It's frightening to think that one small boudoir ad will be noticed by everyone in town—while the thousands of dollars you spend on regular advertising may go unnoticed.

This response may prove that people do read some ads, but the response generated from a boudoir ad may not be what you anticipated. Although it may bring in some boudoir customers, you don't know how many other types of customers it may have driven away.

In some communities, you may even run the risk of being actively boycotted or picketed by ultra-conservative groups, which could result in the loss of valuable school or church contracts. It could significantly affect your routine business—especially the children and family market. As a result, a single \$500 boudoir sitting may actually cost a studio \$5,000 in lost portrait sittings!

In summary, boudoir photography does offer some independent photographers a potentially profitable and interesting specialty. However, it is a limited and potentially soon to be overcrowded specialty—a small corner in the market place. Becoming involved in boudoir photography, especially in some communities, can have some very negative repercussions on existing bread and butter business.

In our continuing search for ways to bolster a sagging bottom line, it is both normal and desirable to experiment with variations in our photographic specialty and marketing practices. We must, however, continually weigh the potential consequences of all our various alternatives.

The evaluation process must begin before making any actual changes in our business. You must weigh the potential benefits against the risks. Only then are you prepared to make a move that will certainly have an effect on your bottom line. ■
