

Your Bottom Line

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Capitalizing on alternative opportunities

Attendees of the Professional Photographers of Canada national convention in Calgary last year were treated to a "Chuck Wagon Breakfast" on the sidewalk, directly under the Calgary tower. This complete cowboy breakfast included an authentic chuck wagon, western decor, flapjack griddles, and a working wood burning stove that was used to keep the coffee warm.

This catering company obviously decided not to compete in the already overcrowded, highly competitive lunch and dinner catering market. Instead, they chose breakfast and developed a refreshing and unique protocol. As a result, they have a flourishing business with virtually no competition—so far. Competition will come but, by then, this group will have made its reputation, have a strong customer base, and a good bit of profit. The approach these folks used to survive in the catering business works equally well in any business, including professional photography. While so many professional studios are suffering declining incomes, a select few are forging ahead.

Trying new ventures makes your business distinctively different from the competition and people like to frequent places that are different. You have to work to identify new marketing opportunities, then go after them with a vengeance. Some ideas will fail. Others will be raging successes and you will be on your way.

"Photo Frankie" was practically destitute when he started taking photos of construction workers on the job. He made the photographs early in the morning and brought back 8 x 10-inch prints on speculation just before quitting time. He eventually made enough money to open a studio and a one-hour lab. It worked for Frankie because no one was offering this service.

The key is to find unique opportunities and turn them into successful business ventures. Take a look at what the competition is doing. Then, brainstorm to find ideas that aren't being implemented and go for it. There are many services that large, corporate competitors simply cannot offer.

For example, people spend a significant amount of money on pets. Look at the size of the new Pet's Mart stores. I recently met someone who photographs

more than 1,000 runners as they cross the finish line in a local fun run. He makes more than \$10,000 with this one event. The town I live in has a chili cook-off each year. It's a perfect opportunity for a professional photographer. With electronic imaging, you can put text on the print, such as the name of the festival, the date, and the names of the participants. How could they turn it down if you price it competitively? Flea markets are growing in popularity. You could photograph each booth on speculation.

A key factor in most of these opportunities is speed of delivery. If you don't have your own lab, team up with a local quick-service lab. Some photographers have gone so far as to put a lab in a mobile van. Electronic technology makes it easier than ever.

You can offer party photography services. Take your studio to the clients. Go to service clubs and photograph members before, during, and after their meeting. Emphasize a program of in-home family portraits. Photograph clients' "toys"—boats, cars, airplanes, or whatever their hobbies are. Put a new twist on dance school photography. Investigate providing on-site portrait services to retirement communities.

I was extremely impressed with an idea that involved photographing freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, then offering a large composite color poster for each subject. When I started promoting this idea to photographers, I was deluged with reasons why it wouldn't work. For example, who would pay for the printing of the color poster? The answer: Sell ads to local businesses for insertion on the poster. Then, give each business several laminated posters to hang in their places of business. You can then have businesses all over town put up your posters, which will boost sales next year.

To make the promotion successful, you must offer the students a unique style of photography that will ring their bells and, at the same time, please their parents enough to buy extra prints. And, when these undergraduates become seniors, they will come to you whether or not you have the official school contract.

The opportunities are out there. The profits can be huge. All you have to do is come up with the ideas, develop a marketing plan, then make it happen. ■