

# Your Bottom Line

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## Cost-effective studio promotion

A terrible thing happens when you don't promote your studio: NOTHING! Promotion is fundamental to the success of any business, but it is usually the weakest link for most businesses. This is especially true with professional photographers. Most studio owners lack self-promotion skills and this is directly reflected in their profit statements.

It's a vicious cycle: The less a studio is promoted, the less business it has; hence, lower profits mean even less money available to conduct new promotions. And, this is at a time when there is growing competition from discount store chains that actively promote their portrait services.

Business promotion can be very expensive. Purchasing advertising space in newspapers and magazines can cost thousands of dollars. Although the advertising may bring in more business, it may cost more than the profits it produces, thus leaving the business in worse shape than it was originally. However, effective promotion does not have to be expensive. It can, in fact, be free. It simply requires thought, planning, and effective execution. The result can be healthy growth for your business with little or no drag on your profits.

Studio owners have a unique advantage over most other businesses: The public is fundamentally interested in photography. Most people will stop and look at a photographic exhibit almost anywhere. Nearly everyone takes pictures and, sooner or later, visits a professional photographer. Many exciting new things are happening in the photographic field right now, such as digital imaging, and people are interested in learning about it. Capitalize on this natural interest by presenting programs on the topic to local groups.

Service clubs, such as Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, etc., have weekly meetings with formal programs. An intrinsically interesting program on photography would be a welcome change from the regular business speaker. The names of your local service clubs are available through your chamber of commerce. Write or call each club president and explain your program. Chances are excellent that you will be invited to present your program and they may even buy your lunch.

Of course, you will not be able to give a commercial presentation directly promoting your studio. You can provide a general program while letting the audience know about you and your business. The amount of business this type of promotion can generate is amazing. With a little effort, you should be able to visit at least a dozen or more clubs and reach many of the key people in your community.

Joining the chamber of commerce is an excellent way to meet key business owners in your community. One purpose of the chamber is to encourage members to do business with each other. Several years ago we were building a new home and happened to attend a chamber breakfast meeting. One new member in the air conditioning business spoke briefly about his company as part of his introduction. Several days later I gave him a \$20,000 contract. Since then, we've done more than a hundred thousand dollars worth of business with him.

Our local speedy printer built his business to a rousing success by very actively working the chamber members and providing quality products with outstanding service. He made his name synonymous with his company. It worked for him and it can work for photographers.

Better than simply joining the chamber is to become active on committees or the board of directors. My wife attributes a significant amount of the studio's success to her time on the board; and benefits continue to this day. People buy from people they know and trust.

Religious groups and activities are opportunities that are frequently overlooked. However, you can't just go to church on Sunday and expect results. Again, get active, start meeting and working with the members. And, whenever possible, use your photographic talents to cover major events. Make yourself known as "the photographer." Give away prints in select situations. It will pay big dividends later.

The list of organizations in which you can participate is nearly endless. The presentation can be given to the PTA or at a retirement home. If you are ever offered the opportunity to make a presentation to lo-

cal school kids or a college class, jump at it. It wouldn't hurt to pass out sample photographs as well. The kids will talk about you when they get home.

You don't always have to play a speaking role, however. Some professional photographers have been successful in putting up photographic print displays in public places. I know studio owners who have displays all over town, including inside nationally known fast food outlets. Everyone likes to look at photographs and these displays bring attention to your studio. That's called self-promotion and it works.

If you get an exciting new piece of equipment; win an award; attend a convention or a special training program, send a news release to your local newspaper. They love this kind of copy and will almost always print it. That type of item in the paper is infinitely more productive than a paid ad. Sometimes you have to blow your own horn to attract customers.

"All of this takes time," you complain. Yes, it does. It's hard work but, odds are, the local discount store studios in your area won't be doing this type of self-promotion. It is a perfect opportunity for the local independent studio owner. But, it won't happen on its own. Self-promotion is part of running your business and a few hours invested in a presentation will quickly pay for itself—and it may be fun.

Start planning your presentation today, as well as your procedure in becoming a recognized speaker. The more impressive and informative your program is, the more successful you will be. Truly effective promotion of your studio using these techniques can be highly cost efficient and it is one of your best tickets to a stronger bottom line. ■