
Your Bottom Line

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Dare to be different

Professional photographers generally pride themselves on being creative, free-spirited artists "in-tune" with the times. However, many are conservative when it comes to adopting photographic innovations. Reluctant to venture into new territory, these photographers often become stagnant and unable to develop unique photographic styles and services that set them apart from the competition.

Business owners who are afraid to be different usually jeopardize their studios. Because they don't recognize the importance of employing distinctive approaches to photography, they often lose clients to more aggressive competitors who dare to be different.

Occasionally, photographers make a minor leap into studio innovations. But, by the time they take the plunge, many of their competitors have already adopted the same concepts, minimizing the originality associated with them. This type of practice occurred several years ago when a spotted muslin background, featured in television commercials promoting milk, was simulated by several photographers. Today, a myriad of photographers around the country employ similar muslin backgrounds—resulting in numerous photography studios offering identical portrait styles.

Basic marketing theory states that if business owners wish to be successful, they must deliver a distinctly different product or service that is clearly perceived as valuable by consumers.

Initiating this conviction is not as easy as it may sound, since, as previously mentioned, competitors often imitate innovative photography ideas. Therefore, photographers must strive to adopt concepts that others find impossible or difficult to duplicate.

There are occasions when studio owners can transform "limitations" into beneficial services. For example, I started my first wedding photography business without a studio, and therefore photographed clients in their homes. By emphasizing my traveling home wedding portrait studio as a special client service—

offered at no additional charge—and accentuating my ability to make the images more meaningful by photographing brides in front of their own home decor, clients felt compelled to select my services over the competition.

Typical prospects investigated several photographers before making a choice. Once they discovered that photographers rarely visit client homes for wedding portraits, my business secured more contracts. I promoted a distinct service that most competitors did not copy.

When I finally opened a studio, the home portrait service was essentially discontinued for my convenience. However, because a strong business advantage was terminated, it was necessary to replace it with fresh enhancements.

By offering a wide variety of color print sizes, outdoor candid, and extra proofs, which my competitors did not, I discovered a new device for enticing clients to my studio. My staff realized that although they were talented photographers, other skilled photographers competed for the same clients, forcing us to market unique services, in addition to quality photography.

When prospective customers weighed the advantages and disadvantages of various studios, the scale usually tipped heavily in my direction. This was important, because it is an enormous waste of time to spend an hour with a potential client who schedules her wedding with a competitor—not to mention the lost income from not attaining the contract.

While it is easy to identify successful marketing advantages in retrospect, it is difficult to choose enhancements which distinguish an operation from competitors. However, there is a large array of special features that can be provided to customers as marketing advantages. Photographers must recognize them and invest the effort necessary for success.

Speed is one example. I've mentioned the importance of quick service in past columns and received letters from many traditional photographers who claim that speed is not a client priority. However,

I've observed situations where the lack of speed caused photographers to lose sales. I challenge photographers who disagree with the importance of speed to analyze their own feelings the next time they receive slow service in a restaurant or department store. Impatience is common when consumers are forced to wait for service. Why should photography client attitudes be different?

Recently, during my 30th high school reunion, the official photographer did not sell prints to all of the attendees after announcing that the images he photographed would be mailed several weeks later. Had he promised to return the prints by 10 PM that same night, the photographer may have experienced a stronger response—plus, the opportunity to charge a higher price for the fast service.

Instead, he reduced the excitement of the event by offering a slow delivery service. If he doesn't own his own lab, he could have profited by making arrangements with a reputable one-hour lab for this event. He convinced the reunion committee to contract him this year, but may not be so fortunate in the future if more aggressive photographers offering faster delivery services bid for the assignment.

In addition to speed, front projected special effects backgrounds can distinctively set a studio apart from the competition. Today, many studios also offer one-hour preview services and fast delivery on finished prints. With the arrival of electronic and instant transparency previewing capabilities, clients can view their images within minutes after their sittings. I find no logic in the argument that high-quality photography requires weeks to complete with the continuation of exciting technological advances becoming more readily available.

Offering clients unique services and products is a key to success. This involves actively keeping up with new developments and adding innovative features to studio operations as soon as possible. Distance yourself from the competition in a manner your clients find significant, and your bottom line will soar. 