
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photog.

Do you keep missing the boat?

Over the years, I've come to the realization that old expressions are often based on collective thought and experience. For example, the saying, "Opportunity doesn't wait around forever," is founded on truth and extremely relevant to professional photographers.

Although many professional photographers complain that their misfortunes are caused by other individuals or situations beyond their control, I believe that the culprit can usually be found in a mirror. Obstacles to success can often be discovered within each individual. Unfortunately, many professional photographers are unwilling to be introspective, which restricts their ability to make professional and personal improvements.

One major limitation for professionals in the photography field is a conservative attitude. A "conservative" photographer is more likely to hold on to comfortable old techniques that have been successful in the past, than adopt new concepts which can enhance their businesses. These individuals tend to maintain the status quo and refuse to adapt to changing times and conditions. While there are positive aspects to viewing the world in a conservative manner, reluctance to try something new restricts photographer growth.

For years, many photographers have been reluctant to embrace new concepts. For example, color film was first placed on the market by Eastman Kodak Company in the early 1940s. However, color materials did not become popular among professional photographers until the mid '60s, even though many amateurs used it all along. In fact, many professional photographers had to be forced into using color by a demanding public.

There are numerous other examples of photographer reluctance toward adopting new technology, such as roll film, which was extremely slow to replace sheet film. Electronic flash was available for more than 20 years before it became popular. I remember colleagues telling me that electronic flash was not as effective as hot lights or flash bulbs because the light went

off so quickly that it couldn't fully expose all the emulsion layers, which resulted in inferior negatives. It also took an eternity for NiCd batteries to replace dry cells. Many photographers still refuse to accept 35mm cameras as a valid professional tool today.

The general hesitation toward accepting new ideas continues. Only recently have professional photographers considered front projection, one-hour processing labs and portrait studios as viable professional alternatives.

A brand new technology now entering the professional market is instant proofing, which involves video capture of the same image recorded on film. Eastman Kodak Company first explored this territory with its Prism Previewing System. As exciting as the concept is, it has not yet been a big hit with professional photographers. In fact, it may take years before pros become serious about offering video proofing services to their clients.

While the photography profession has survived the general 20-year time lag between innovation and implementation, I am not sure that our fast-moving world will continue to allow such slow responses to new ideas. Few business professionals today have the luxury of bypassing opportunities and maintaining a status quo. Those who miss the opportunity boat often sink. But professionals who stay alert and take advantage of opportunities which serve the public's needs can forge ahead.

The discount store industry is a prime example of how missing available opportunities can turn prosperity into failure. A few years ago, many people said that the discount store market in the U.S. was saturated and wouldn't grow any more. This may have been valid for an ordinary newcomer, but there was plenty of room for an aggressive marketer who knew how to capture public attention.

Remember the old Grant City stores? Remember Woolco? As big as these companies were, they didn't last. Remember when K-Mart was on top and how popular Sears Roebuck and Company once was? What happened? Was the entire market collaps-

ing or did management miss the opportunity boat too many times? Actually both situations occurred, but not every discount store missed lucrative opportunities.

While discount store leaders were fighting for survival, a new upstart by the name of Walmart Discount Center jumped into the scene, starting in such an unlikely location as Arkansas. The company quickly spread throughout the country. Today, Walmart opens more than 100 stores a year. How did this small company from Arkansas outdo the big guys? Walmart simply knew how to best serve the public and the collective masses responded. The Walmart style of management and general operation was superior, enabling the discount store to flourish amidst a crowded market. Now, Walmart is opening another discount chain known as Sam's.

What is the analogy between Walmart and professional photography? Too many photographers cry the blues, as Grant City and Woolco undoubtedly did, and do nothing to improve their situations. We can all learn a lesson from the Walmart phenomena by recognizing that opportunities exist, even when they appear to be bleak. It's a matter of approach. As long as the public wants professional portraits, the market is open and waiting for innovative development.

There are more opportunities available today for large and small photo studios than ever before. But, to capitalize on these prospects, photographers cannot rely on methods from the past, no matter how successful they've been. Woolco and Grants did that and now they don't have a bottom line.

Walmart instituted new, productive approaches and the public responded. Sam Walton is one of the richest men in the United States. Opportunities are out there. When you hear them knock, let them in! ☐