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# your bottom line

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## Giving photography away

It seldom takes more than a few minutes for the conversation among photographers to turn to the topic of radically increasing competition and price cutting, especially in the portrait segment of the photographic marketplace. Not too many years ago, if a person wanted a portrait or wedding photograph, he or she automatically sought the services of the local professional photographer.

Today, the public seems to have a myriad of choices from whom to purchase photography, including the local discount store or just about anyone who owns a camera. The business is being increasingly divided among huge studio chain operators, such as Sears and J.C. Penny photographers, and literally millions of amateurs who are often willing to work for the cost of film, processing, and a little extra for their trouble. As a result, the traditional professional photographer is being squeezed out of business.

It's typical for independent studio owners to pour forth a host of reasons for their current dilemma, none of which seem to be "their fault". Seldom do they consider the real source of the problem, and as a result, they are unable to take meaningful, constructive action. Freud termed this as rationalization or simple excuse making.

Rationalization makes you feel better about your situation, but it does nothing to solve the original problem, which will likely become worse. Instead of blaming other factors—big business or the state of the economy—we should consider, no matter how painful it might be, whether or not we, ourselves, are the real source of our current problem. Perhaps we are the guilty ones "giving photography away."

During the past twenty-five years, several large companies were organized to offer the public discount package portraits on a high-volume basis. Most of us sat back in disgust as a parade of 39-cent, 99-cent, and \$9.95 operators siphoned off ever-increasing shares of our market. We said we couldn't stay in business with those prices. We never took a serious look

at how these profitable operations work.

In the "old days" couples wanting wedding photography had to secure a professional studio service. Wedding formals were done in the camera room and only professional photographers had studios. But then twenty years ago, professional photographers began using the church altar as a background for wedding formals and more recently at attractive outdoor locations. It was more convenient for both the client and photographer rather than in the studio. These changes cracked the wedding photography market wide open for an amateur who lacked a studio.

Often, professional portraitists heavily promote candid, outdoor environmental portraits—again opening the door to hordes of amateurs who can use our same "studio". It makes prospective customers ask, "Why go to an expensive professional photographer?"

It seems as if every new trend—many of which we originate and often encourage—further opens the door for increasing competition. Instead, we should be seeking to promote styles of photography that customers embrace and yet involve techniques that can only be done by the well-equipped, highly-trained professional.

For example, in your wedding portraits, do you provide services that are unlikely to be available from the bride's Uncle John? Do you encourage formal studio portraits, either before or on the wedding day? Do you use multiple lighting setups? Do you offer a tasteful selection of special effects? Do you bring an assistant to help the bridal couple with the details of posing? If you don't, you are giving away your wedding business.

You may claim that you have no control over your client. You are wrong! You can persuade your client to "want" what you promote in your studio samples.

In studio portraiture, do you offer your clients a unique selection of portrait styles and backgrounds? Or, are you still using an old, plain brown canvas backdrop? Have you significantly changed your pos-

ing styles in the last twenty years? Have you ever studied your customers to see what photography styles they really want?

Most lecturers only tell you how to make a better traditional portrait. What about unsatisfied consumers who want non-traditional portraits?

Do you have the most up-to-date equipment in your studio? A front projection system is a classic example of an innovation that many professionals ignore. However, it is a tool that permits the user to create many unique and popular photographic styles that are impossible for an amateur to match.

It is highly unlikely that non-professional competitors will invest in sophisticated equipment such as a front projection system. First, the cost is prohibitive. Second, the unit must be used in a fully-equipped studio. Third, amateurs won't have the ability to use this type of advanced equipment properly. Too many photographers continue to avoid developing their own specialized studio tools, such as a front projection system which give them a leading competitive edge.

The point is: we must stop giving our business away. We must immediately develop a variety of marketing and photographic approaches that please the public and are unique to the fully-equipped, professional studio operator.

If the discounters seem to have more and more of our business, then we can play the merchandising game as well or better than they can. Only when we wake up to some of the real reasons for the sales decline, will we be able to stop giving away both our business and our bottom-line profit. ■