

---

# Your Bottom Line

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

## How pros can keep the leading edge

Years ago, professional photographers did literally everything by themselves. The pioneers of image-making not only made their own film, mixed ingredients for developing chemicals, processed photographs, and performed their own print finishing, including framing; they also solicited business—marketing and advertising in today's jargon.

In addition, capturing an individual image was usually a laborious task. Need for light made photographers work outdoors until the development of more sensitive film made indoor photography possible, and even then, exposure times were long and uncomfortable for human subjects.

The first flash photography required igniting carefully measured quantities of flash powder, creating an explosion that filled the studio with light and smoke. Most early studios, however, were elaborately furnished with a variety of elegant backgrounds and furniture, and the results were very successful, all things considered.

By comparison, today's image-makers enjoy simplicity and convenience of operation. Film comes from little boxes. Modern electronic flash lighting allows us to create light at any time or place, and light meters ensure proper exposure. Automatic cameras wind the film and cock the shutter. In fact, many modern-day photographers do not even process their own film or make prints. They simply pop the exposed film into an envelope and mail it off, then wait for the customer-ready color prints to reappear in the mailbox.

It's only natural for the 1980s photographer to feel thankful for working today, and not 100 years ago. However, the wonders of the modern world are also a curse. Modern innovations have made the life of the photographer easy—so easy that many image-makers shy away from doing anything "hard". In doing so, pros risk losing the leading edge.

The result? A very serious problem that threatens the future of the image-making profession. Photography is becoming increasingly simplified, the gap between amateurs and professionals is narrowing,

Many professionals are too busy concentrating on big profits to do much work. Consequently, much of the work previously done by professional photographers is now performed well by amateurs—so that the need for highly trained and experienced professionals has actually decreased.

In the old days, a customer who needed a photograph *had* to hire a professional photographer, the only person qualified to expose and process photographs. But today, anyone can buy an auto-focus, auto-exposure, auto-wind, "auto-everything" camera—equal to or better than the professional's camera—and send film out to the very same laboratory as the professional, paying the same price for processing without a middle-man markup. Besides having access to the same technology, "amateur pros" tend to be more daring, more inventive—perhaps because they are unaware of the "rules" that often limit pros' adventurousness—and can truly rival professional services.

Not only amateurs divert photographic work dollars. Retail discount studios, employing minimally trained youngsters to operate automated equipment, perform a huge percentage of professional work. Department store photographers, for example, don't even look into a viewfinder—they look at a television screen. Instead of focusing the camera, setting the f/stop, and adjusting lighting, they press three buttons. One button zooms the camera on the subject; another raises and lowers the camera, and the third takes the picture. A few weeks later, the portraits come back from the lab, printed and packaged for presentation and sale.

What's the answer? Certainly not to go back in time and make photography "tough" again; closing up shop won't work either. There really is only one reasonable alternative—to routinely produce a kind of photography that amateurs can't easily duplicate and that excites the public. This means learning new techniques and applying them to everyday work.

Wedding photographers, for example,

should promote formal pre-bridal portraits, including full-length poses—these require studio lighting capabilities, which most amateurs don't have. Candid wedding photographers can strive to produce unique special effects that family shutterbugs cannot duplicate. For wedding videos, two or more high-quality cameras and professional editing, either in-camera or in the lab, can create a "love story" multimedia presentation—and amateurs haven't discovered dissolves yet.

Portrait photographers, as well, can develop creative and contemporary styles and techniques that are not used by the amateur. High-grade glamour photography is difficult for the amateur to copy. Special-effects backgrounds, for proms and special events, can also significantly distinguish your work.

School and commercial photographers—due to their special training, equipment and markets—face less threat from amateurs, but may become more vulnerable as amateur ranks grow larger, stronger, and wiser.

Whenever people perceive a money-making opportunity, they want to take advantage of it. No matter how advanced you think you are as a professional, don't be surprised to find a thundering herd of competition following you. If you stop too long or move too slowly, the competition, be it amateur or professional, will catch up and possibly overtake your business. To protect yourself, make a determined effort every day to push further—to increase the distance between you and "them".

Professionals in any field have a responsibility to stay aware, constantly using the best new ideas and products. Certainly this forging ahead involves work and risk, but it's a practice that will help photographers become better at their craft and maintain their share of the market.

Are you losing your leading edge in today's innovative marketplace? Your bottom line will be a measure of your success. ■