
your bottom line

by Dr. Henry J. Oles
Cr. Photog.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em

The one-hour portrait studio is spreading like wildfire across the country. Touted in this column in January, 1985, as soon to become "a dominant force in the portrait industry," the one-hour portrait studio is, in fact, gaining popularity among professional photographers.

Since January, a significant number of quick-service portrait studios have opened as adjuncts to one-hour processing labs. In addition, a few free-standing one-hour studios are now in operation and countless others are in planning stages. Industry sources anticipate the opening of at least 5,000 "portrait mini-studios" by 1995.

Some readers told me: "It will never happen." But isn't that what people said when the first McDonald's hamburger joint opened thirty years ago?

Think about it. Why is McDonald's so successful? Because it gives people what they want within seconds after they order it. How profitable do you think Wendy's International would be in its battle against arch rivals McDonald's and Burger King if its restaurants made customers wait 15 minutes for their orders?

Before the world had ever heard of Clara Peller, Wendy's focused an entire advertising campaign on the "Step Aside" theme which poked fun at competitors known to make customers wait for their food.

People in today's fast-paced society want their immediate desires satisfied NOW. They don't want to wait, even if only for a few moments. And they won't wait, especially if an alternative is available.

The photographic industry isn't much different from the fast-food business. As one-hour mini-portrait studios increase in popularity, professional photographers are going to be forced into quickening their turn-around time. Customers will not wait four to eight weeks for portraits when alternative one-hour portrait studios are available.

In order to battle this impending competition, professional photographers

should take a long, hard look at their current studio operations.

If you already have your own in-house lab, you need to consider improving its response time. Perhaps you now mail out proofs within five to seven days after sittings. You should be asking yourself why this takes so long. Contrary to what you may believe, your lab *can*, in all likelihood, process your proofs more promptly. Its equipment is certainly capable of quick turn-around. Remember, a print or negative spends the same amount of time in the developer, whether it gets delivered in an hour or a week. It's simply a matter of scheduling. Your lab personnel may have to work late in order to promptly process your proofs, but this may be the price you have to pay to remain competitive.

If you do not own your own lab, you might seriously consider installing one. This need not be expensive; there are a wide range of low-priced negative processors on the market today. A regular color-head enlarger can be used to make custom proofs with a "print and repeat" easel. This method allows proofing time for a twelve-print roll of film to range from 2 to 3 minutes. Automatic dry-to-dry color print processors have come down in price and economy-priced batch and rotary drums also are available. Finally, to make sure that you, the photographer, do not waste valuable studio time by being in the darkroom—hire a lab person to do your daily proof work.

If it is impossible for you to operate your own lab, an alternative is to form a symbiotic relationship with the finest quality one-hour lab in your area. The lab must agree to do your proof work on a wholesale basis while maintaining your professional standards. This may sound impossible, but it isn't. Many one-hour labs would appreciate receiving wholesale work to run during their slow hours, and most of them provide a quality of proof processing that may equal, or even exceed, the quality of the proofs produced by a professional lab. Remember,

you don't have to sacrifice quality for speed. If you demand the finest quality possible, your lab will have no choice but to provide it.

In order to successfully compete with the coming one-hour portrait studios, you must get your customers' proofs into their hands within 24 hours or less. They will be more willing to wait for their finished work than they are for proofs. By offering a one-day turn-around time for proofs, you cut the total wait time down by 30 to 50 percent. Eventually, it will be necessary for you to reduce the time required to produce finished orders, but for now, getting your proofs delivered to clients within 24 hours will keep you in the competitive ballpark.

It's hard to change, but a business cannot survive if it doesn't adjust to current industry trends. Professional photography is long overdue for a change. Therefore, the changes that will occur within the next decade will be extremely significant. Some will thrive on the challenges and grow, and others will drown. You can survive and prosper from future industry changes if you start planning and implementing new methods of operation NOW, before the competition forces you to.

Of course, faster service is not the only ticket to future success. Many other changes, such as electronic imaging, the need to advertise, or radically shifting photographic styles, may soon influence your studio operations.

One thing, at least, is certain. Keeping on top of industry trends and meeting change with open arms will keep your bottom line in the black. ■