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# ***Your Bottom Line***

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

## **Life holds no guarantees**

For more than five years, I've presented a variety of suggestions designed to help professional photographers operate prosperous studios. However, readers should not assume that the column's helpful hints guarantee success. Many factors affect studio performance and inevitable mistakes must be handled intelligently.

For example, when a photographer searches for a new studio location, the general rule is to choose a community with a sufficient population and minimum number of established studios. However, before making a final decision, potential studio owners should consider the possibility that few studios exist because the community cannot support more. Cultural differences may also affect photography sales, with members of some communities more interested than others.

Photographers considering a relocation should be aware that small towns that appear to be in dire need of improved photography studio services are often deceptive. Although an established local photographer may own out-dated equipment and charge high prices for mediocre-quality images, a new studio generating high-quality photography for lower prices may not be well-received. It is possible that Pete, the established local photographer, has serviced the area for years and never has to bid for contracts because he already photographs every high school senior, wedding, and baby in town. If members in a community are accustomed to hiring a photographer who is also a long-time friend, they are not likely to patronize a new studio, no matter what specials are offered.

A newcomer who places an impressive full-page ad in the Yellow Pages may feel confident that it will attract more attention than Pete's 1/2-inch ad. However, many local residents may not peruse the Yellow Pages. When they need a photographer, they telephone Pete.

Although this situation is more likely to occur in small towns, monopolies also exist in large cities. I am part-owner of a company that opened several ultra-modern shopping mall studios, which offer a variety of qual-

ity photography, one-hour proofs, a comfortable studio environment, and next-day finished prints. With these inducements, the staff had difficulty swaying customers away from major chain store competitors.

Customers were so "brainwashed" into patronizing the Sears Portrait Studio that it was difficult for them to consider an alternative. It was frustrating to walk through an empty camera room, then peak through the Sears studio windows and witness up to 30 clients, seated on uncomfortable wooden folding chairs, waiting their turn to be photographed. Fortunately our studio bookings increased, but only after a long period of hard work and financial investment.

How can new studio owners break the monopoly that established small-town photographers or department store portrait studios have on the market? By slowly and painstakingly working their way into the community—a process that can take years. Of course, an alternative is to purchase Pete's studio, and make sure he stays onboard for six to 12 months to insure a smooth transition. But with a Sears operation, buy-out is not an option.

To succeed, photographers must be open to new marketing ideas. Some of the most "ridiculous" ideas could be the most successful, while concepts considered to be "sure winners" may fail. And, an idea that flops in one city may be effective in another.

When first opening the shopping mall studios, I believed that offering convenience and high-quality photography would attract a 25 percent walk-in business. Unfortunately, only 5 percent of the clients were impulse buyers. Although I now know that this strategy is unsuccessful in this community, it is possible that it may flourish in other locations.

Nothing in this world guarantees success. The most photographers can do is approach business decisions with a maximum amount of information and flexibility. When business conditions change, studio owners who are prepared to make alterations to well-planned, aggressive business approaches, increase the likelihood of a successful bottom line. ■

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