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# Your Bottom Line

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## Licensing pros and cons

Some critics of free-market professional photography argue that photographers should earn licenses before being permitted to work as professionals. More than a simple business license or sales tax permit, this type of certification would require formal training and testing similar to that which doctors or other professionals must complete in order to practice.

Proponents of licensing allege two major benefits of such a requirement. First, it would protect the public from unethical and incompetent photographers. Second, it would reduce the number of professionals, and the remaining pros could raise prices and make the occupation more profitable for themselves. Both of these ideas may sound worthy, but putting them into practice leaves much to be desired both financially and creatively.

It is true that licensing would force aspiring image-makers to attend helpful courses before starting in the profession, but such formal training would probably consume at least a year's time and be expensive. Even worse, it is apt to bring repetition rather than originality into the profession. Much of the real creativity we see in photography is the product of individuals who were never exposed to traditional styles. A formal education can make it very difficult for a person to break the bonds imposed by established standards.

More importantly, consumers do not need the "protection" that authorization would provide. Photography does not directly affect public health—like medicine: therefore, a high level of security is simply not necessary. An inferior photographer could hurt a customer in emotional ways by blowing a once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunity. But if an important and non-repeatable assignment, such as photographing a wedding ceremony, is botched, the studio can be sued for damages under current laws. Also, there is no guarantee that even a fully certified photographer wouldn't occasionally fail an assignment.

Licensing could reduce the number of practicing professionals and allow an in-

crease in prices, but we must remember that portrait and wedding photography is a luxury item. If fees rise substantially, the public may be inclined to make fewer visits to studios, buy fewer portraits when they do patronize photographers, or worse, simply eliminate our livelihood from their budgets. After all, today's photo equipment often enables amateurs to do photography on an acceptable level without a pro's help.

A system for sanctioning professionals could also help unify photographers and provide a platform from which we might organize and resist changes thought to be bad for the industry. However, an incident that occurred in West Germany, where licensing is required, proves again that perhaps the best policy is to just leave the free-enterprise system alone.

In this episode, several non-licensed photographers set up one-hour portrait studios in camera shops and began earning substantial profits. Unfortunately, their success aggravated licensed professional photographers, who had the government shut them down. The camera shops liked the business generated by one-hour studios, however, and responded by buying and installing PhotoVisions do-it-yourself portrait booths. Now the public serves itself, and the only profit-makers are the portrait-booth manufacturers and camera shop owners. Consumers aren't receiving the quality portraits that the one-hour operations provided, those who ran the studios are out of jobs, and the licensed professionals did not gain any business.

Before professionals seriously consider the positive aspects of licensing, they should make themselves aware of the negative side as well. In comparison, the free-enterprise system we use really isn't so bad. ☐