
Your Bottom Line

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Look Mom...no photographer

Watch out, you may soon be replaced by a computer chip! As ridiculous as this may sound, new developments in the fast-paced field of electronics, such as the photographer-less portrait studio, may give image-makers some stiff competition.

The electronics explosion has a powerful effect on the photographic industry. Most of these advancements aid photographers, such as electronic infrared strobe controls and autofocus cameras. However, the new photographer-less portrait studio may threaten image-makers' livelihoods.

Although the prediction seems farfetched, Photo Visions, a sophisticated do-it-yourself photo booth, was introduced last year. Photo Visions booths produce high quality photographs and are usually sold to high traffic, one-hour lab owners who don't have space for more traditional studios.

A customer or small group enters the booth and the lab operator loads a roll of 12-, 24-, or 36-exposure color negative film into the camera. Clients immediately see their image on a television monitor located next to a video/still camera.

Customers pose themselves, making camera and lens adjustments, and when their image on the television screen is satisfactory, they release dual electronic flash units to illuminate the scene. The finished roll is removed and processed within 30 to 60 minutes in the minilab.

The picture quality produced by photographer-less studios can be surprisingly good. There are few customer complaints because subjects themselves performed the photography. A number of Photo Vision "studios" have already been sold and some average 25 or more sittings a day.

A variation of Photo Vision recently introduced is the Daicolo unit, which functions similarly to Photo Visions, but utilizes more traditional electronic flash studio lighting. The Daicolo system freezes exposed images on television monitors for several seconds so subjects can examine and compare final images.

The most interesting and potentially powerful new photographer-less portrait studio also exhibited at the same trade show is the Auto Portrait Studio, which blends old and new technology. The unit includes a traditional posing stool and Camerz SLR camera equipped with a zoom lens and custom-made, color TV receiver in place of a traditional viewfinder.

The system also features wireless remote control and employs a simple special effect system to create backgrounds.

Pictures are sent via video camera to computer chip or hard disk, then later retrieved on a large, high-quality monitor. Using video images paper proofs significantly reduces paper waste. Noritsu, a manufacturer of one-hour minilabs, acquired marketing rights to Auto Studio, and plans to test market the unit this summer.

How do these three portrait "studios" affect traditional portrait photographers? The impact of do-it-yourself studios will be small at first, but is expected to grow dramatically. Image-makers shouldn't consider photographer-less portrait studios a threat, but a new challenge. If you provide quality and distinctive photography that new auto studios can't produce, you have little to fear.

On the other hand, if your images look as if they were created by a photographer-less operation, you risk substitution by a computer chip and your bottom line figures could be replaced by a zero.

Creativity is the key to maintaining a thriving business. If ever there was a challenge to move ahead and provide the public with better quality and more interesting photography, this is it. ■