
Your Bottom Line

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Mom-and-pop studios...revisited

It's been quite a while since a column published in *Professional Photographer* generated as many responses as my June "Your Bottom Line" column, in which I predicted the demise of mom-and-pop photography studios, perhaps by the year 2000—an opinion many readers contest.

The reactions aren't surprising since I presented information threatening to a traditional view of studio owners' livelihoods. However, we owe it to ourselves, our families, and our profession to prepare for the years ahead. Often, the future isn't difficult to foresee because it's simply a result of trends originating in the past that continue today.

One need only examine recent business developments in the United States to see that traditional family businesses are dying and the number of corporate-owned operations is growing. I've witnessed this evolution in companies managed by my own family members. My grandfather ran a neighborhood grocery, and although he offered special services to customers, including credit, free home delivery, special orders, and even seasonal homemade products—all at highly competitive prices—the family store shut down about 10 years ago. Today, family-run groceries are nearly extinct.

Corporate ownership is fast becoming the norm in field after field. My uncle, a retired independent optometrist, frequently laments trends within his former profession that force most young optometrists to ply their trade within large organizations such as Sears Optical or Pearl Vision centers.

Another of my grandfathers managed a pharmacy years ago, when nearly every such business in the country was locally owned and operated. Today, the vast majority of pharmacists punch a time clock and practice their profession in mass merchandising organizations. Even the medical profession has experienced the trend toward corporate ownership. In certain areas of the country, many or most doctors work for HMOs. My father was a dentist for 49 years. If he were graduating

from dental school today, chances are he would be employed by a dental clinic.

Mass merchandising of portrait photography is well ensconced in our country—and has grown dramatically during the past 25 years. In fact, corporate-owned studios receive more than half the money spent on portraits. Surprisingly, many image-makers are unaware of this.

Perhaps lensmen simply ignore the obvious. Or, maybe photographers don't realize mass marketers exist because these businesspersons often do not participate in association activities, such as conventions and seminars. However, mass merchandisers are alive and well—and not necessarily the enemy.

They simply represent a new marketing strategy strongly supported by the public. After all, if the mass marketing of photography failed to earn consumer backing and acceptable profits, it wouldn't exist. Even mom-and-pop studio owners, who decry the prediction that their businesses will close, shop at corporate-owned operations instead of traditional businesses.

Image-makers likely to be affected by mass merchandising must estimate their studios' position one, five, 10, and even 20 years from now, and plan business strategies accordingly. Mom-and-pop operations have a number of alternatives to closing their doors.

First, not all traditional studios will shut down by the year 2000, although their numbers will certainly decrease. The most vulnerable photographers are those who approach the field strictly as photo hobbyists and artists. Instead, to survive, image-makers must devote more attention to the *business* side of studio operations, even if it reduces time ordinarily dedicated to the *art* of photography.

Much of today's interest in image-making equipment and innovative lighting and posing methods will yield to a greater focus on business management and marketing techniques. Studio owners most likely to succeed will attend business training functions and schools, such as PP of A management and marketing seminars

and Winona International School of Professional Photography, have a business degree, and manage their time wisely.

Opportunities abound for traditional photographers, such as owning a franchise studio operation. Enterprising mom-and-pop restaurant owners of the past who changed their tune and now manage highly profitable McDonalds franchises may earn a great deal more than they gleaned from their previous businesses.

One fact is certain—photographers can no longer drag their feet before embracing new technology and ideas. If they do, aggressive volume operators will implement innovations first.

Change is often frightening; however, it also creates exciting new growth opportunities ambitious studio owners can take advantage of, such as acquiring a business education or owning a studio franchise operation. While we can't control change, we can control our business reactions to it in order to manage a prosperous photography studio. No one is predicting the image-maker will share the fate of the blacksmith.

To maintain a healthy bottom line, plan for the future. The Boy Scouts of America has an excellent motto... "Be prepared".

