
Your Bottom Line

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Photo artist or business expert

If you had to choose between being a photographic artist or business expert, which would you select? Although many photographers consider the development of creative and technical skills a priority, increasing business knowledge should be the stronger choice for many studio owners.

Before making this decision, however, photographers must define their career objectives by asking themselves a number of pertinent questions. They must determine the level of stability they seek, examine long- and short-term profit goals, calculate operating costs, and establish how many employees they need.

I believe that photographers who under-emphasize the importance of business management to concentrate only on the artistic aspects of their careers are flirting with financial failure. I have observed many talented, creative photographers losing money while business-oriented photographers with average technical skills financially succeed. Although it is not impossible to be competent in both areas, it is rare to find people with this combination of talents. Since the inception of photography, the majority of photographers have strived to develop only their creative and technical abilities. However, the need for strong management skills must be re-evaluated by professional photographers interested in stable and lucrative careers.

There are a number of options for learning about photography, including self-education, apprenticeships, trade schools, and university programs.

Teaching yourself can be difficult. Self-education often results in technical, artistic, and business management deficiencies. It also can involve many serious and expensive errors. A positive way to regard costly mistakes made through ignorance is, "I'm paying tuition toward self-education".

An apprenticeship program is an excellent alternative. Individuals can gain an abundance of knowledge and expertise by working for an established pho-

tographer. In the past, working as an apprentice was the only way to learn required photographic and business skills. A young person would work with a master craftsman for three to five years and learn every aspect of the business. It was not uncommon for the apprentice, who often lived in the building that housed the photography studio, to take over the business when the mentor retired.

Today, most young people are not willing to invest the necessary time and effort into someone else's business. They want to be on their own and reap rewards for their skills immediately, which drastically reduces their training period. With the exception of possibly acquiring a photography master's bad habits, apprenticeships are worthwhile learning experiences.

Technical trade schools and university programs are also available to the novice. While these programs may present the best overall approach, they often lack adequate business management education. Years ago, one of our employees who graduated from a university photography program, spent four hours in the darkroom completing an assignment for which he had to make 8x10 black-and-white prints from a single negative. He emerged from the darkroom with a broad smile and presented us with four quality 8x10 prints. He was surprised to learn that we were not delighted with his efforts. He didn't understand that the time he spent developing his prints cost the company more money than it would make selling them. Although the prints were impressive, they were a financial loss. The university taught top-quality photography with no regard for business considerations.

So what's the bottom line? A photographer cannot be successful in this field without a sufficient understanding and application of basic business management principles. We can go to many photo seminars to learn techniques, but bottom line financial success is determined by business sense. There are few photographers who would not profit from learn-

ing better business skills, and attending only photographic seminars limits the ability to learn management concepts. Because business management and finance principles apply to any business, photographers can learn important ideas and concepts from many speakers who are not involved in the photo industry.

One of my specialties is business promotion and management. While much of my experience is in the photography industry, my knowledge applies to other businesses as well. I am currently helping several friends develop their businesses, including an auto mechanic and dance school owner. I am also providing assistance to three college students who are opening a fine arts conservatory. The fundamental methods for achieving success in these widely varying businesses are all the same.

If photography is your hobby, you don't have to worry about learning business and marketing. But, if photography is your business, then you'd better make a continuing effort to learn the business of photography. 