
Your Bottom Line

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Promotion is a perpetual process

Studio owners must continuously promote their photographic services in order to generate maximum profits and avoid business failure.

The act of promotion is a perpetual process. However, many studio owners believe that displaying award-winning images and securing a Yellow Pages listing is all they need to promote studio services. Therefore, these image-makers never create or implement a continual variety of innovative promotions that could attract more customers to their studios.

For years, my wife and I earned sizable profits by photographing fraternity and sorority members from a local university. Our studio personnel worked hard to provide quality photographic services that were beyond the local competition. But as products and services continued to improve, prices gradually increased. One year, an out-of-town photography operation heavily promoted rock-bottom portrait prices to university fraternities and sororities, taking most of this business away from my studio. In addition, the outside firm cleverly negotiated a two-year contract with the students, making it impossible to recapture this market immediately.

This situation occurred because of the failure to continuously promote photographic services. The studio also fell into the price-quality trap, where increasingly expensive products and services produced high vulnerability to low-ball promoters.

Photographers can learn a lesson from major merchandise retailers, who attain success by constantly promoting their businesses. For example, a "tent" sale is a simple, innovative promotional technique. Why would business owners showcase their merchandise in a tent set up in the middle of a parking lot, and then haul back all of the items that weren't sold? They do this type of promotion to attract consumers who wouldn't purchase such sale items if they were displayed in a store.

To attain success, photographers must strive to match the learned skill level of the fabled promoter who sold "refrigerators to Eskimos".

Advertising and price cutting are two common photography promotions, but neither method guarantees bolstered studio profits. Many image-makers advertise that they create "quality," "innovative," or "award-winning" photography, but other area photographers may also describe their images using the same adjectives. This promotional overlap is likely to encourage consumers to dismiss such advertisements as meaningless "hype".

Another popular promotional technique is price cutting. In many examples, when one photographer offers services for \$100, another image-maker steps in and promotes the same services for \$50. Photographers who undercut other image-makers' prices simply give away profits.

Advertising and price cutting remain relatively successful, but in today's competitive marketplace, professional photographers must initiate additional promotional strategies to maintain studio profitability.

For example, rather than across-the-board price cutting, studio owners might consider a promotion that eliminates sitting fees. By bringing in more clients using this method, photographers could generate healthy profits in other areas of the business transaction.

Independent studio owners generally shy away from "giveaway" promotions, even though these methods have been successful for chain studios. However, giveaway promotions can be profitable, especially if they attract customers who were not initially interested in purchasing photography.

Suppose brides traditionally did not purchase formal, pre-bridal photography. By using these portraits as giveaway items, studios could attract more brides and induce more wedding bookings.

Church directory publishers successfully use the giveaway method to promote their photographic services. By offering a free directory and an 8x10-inch family portrait to each photographed church member, they subsequently earn thousands of dollars in business. Direc-

tory publishers, whose headquarters are usually miles away from the church's town, leapfrog over local photographers who don't realize the opportunities that exist through active studio promotions.

The Olan Mills studio organization built its enterprise through telephone solicitations of specially priced portraiture packages. Its telemarketing efforts continue to be extremely effective, yet Olan Mills faces little competition from other photographers who fail to see value in this promotional technique. Profitable telemarketing results when wholly committed studio owners apply this procedure correctly.

Photographers should institute powerful "big boom" promotion strategies that attract widespread attention to their studios. Patchwork strategies will never result in heavy consumer response.

It's important to realize that all promotional methods fluctuate in effectiveness. If a promotion is initially successful in attracting new business, it should be continued until it can be replaced by a more profitable method.

Enterprising professional photographers never discontinue the act of promoting their services, even if business decreases. This is when studio promotion becomes most critical. Rather than relying solely on superior quality and service to keep a customer base satisfied, studio owners must constantly create new promotional ideas to increase sales, which improves their bottom line. 