
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr. Photog.

Quick service photography

In my very first "Your Bottom Line" column five years ago, I discussed the concept of a quick service portrait studio. At the time, the overwhelming response from photographers was: "Quick service and quality professional photography don't mix!"

However, since then, the economic environment has changed considerably. Quick, efficient service is now a featured element in every aspect of the professional photography process, forcing studio owners, pro lab operators, and other industry personnel to take notice and implement new technologies. Finding ways to offer customers quick and efficient service while maintaining quality is fundamental to success, both today and in the future.

Quick service was ushered into the portrait profession in the last 10 years by the emergence of one-hour minilabs. Currently, there are approximately 17,000 minilabs in the United States. And it's been a natural extension of these minilabs to include a small portrait studio, so that the one-hour operation can offer clients proofs and finished prints in "one-stop shopping" convenience.

Initially, most traditional studio owners severely criticized the one-hour portrait operation and predicted this industry's quick demise. Instead, the Photo Marketing Association and the International Minilab Association estimate that approximately 6,000 portrait studios are currently located in minilabs, and that this figure is on the increase.

Professional color labs used to be extremely slow in producing proofs and finished prints. I remember waiting two to three weeks for wedding proofs and another four to six weeks for prints and enlargements. If labs still worked under this timetable, they would find it difficult to profitably survive, because consumers no longer accept waiting.

Many labs now treat speed of service and quality of results as equally important considerations. One forward-thinking lab is Miller's Professional Color Service in Pittsburg, Kansas, which streamlined lab operations to get work in and out quickly

and efficiently. Proofs are often ready the same day a customer's film arrives at the lab, and are mailed via a next-day delivery service. Therefore, a photographer even 2,000 miles away can potentially receive proofs in three-days time.

Most labs are being forced to follow this kind of example, because photographers will change to a lab that provides quick service and quality work.

But in today's fast-paced world, three days may be too long for a photographer to wait for proofs and/or prints. Consequently, they are seeking alternatives. Some image-makers are tucking minilab equipment in a corner of their studio, offering an in-house lab that produces, at minimum, their own proofs. Other studio owners are rushing exposed film to nearby one-hour minilabs for processing.

Photographers are also placing processed film negatives into a Tamron Fotovix and recording the images on videotape via a VCR. These "video proofs" are then exhibited to customers in a unique, efficient presentation format. Once clients select their poses, the negatives are sent to the lab for enlargements and finishing. As the popularity of the Fotovix spreads, I predict more photographers will likely install a small C-41 film processor in their studios, so they can ultimately create their own video presentation proofs, rather than pay a lab to do it.

It's clear to me that photography customers are most concerned with seeing their proofs and placing their order as quickly as possible. They are more willing to wait for enlargements than for proofs. Therefore, customer service-minded studio owners are scrambling to find still faster methods to deliver results. This is a primary reason for the success of the Kodak Prism and other video proofing systems. These systems produce a still video image identical to the photo exposed on film, allowing a customer to approve results immediately after the portrait session. The ultimate in quick proofing is mounting a monitor next to a camera and allowing clients to see the image the instant it is captured. It's not possible to get any faster.

The consumer response to quick, quality service has been substantial, because of its many advantages. Such service provides instant gratification to the client. If an element of a portrait isn't exactly right, this fact is now immediately recognized, allowing photographers to create another image during the same portrait session. This method of perfecting virtually guarantees customer satisfaction, which potentially leads to larger print orders.

Quick service makes placing and purchasing print orders easier. It eliminates the hassle and delays of customers coming to the studio to pick up proofs and again to place their order. Instead, it catches clients when they are still excited about their studio experience. A fast turnaround also enables a studio owner to ask for a significant deposit up front. With current delivery procedures, quick service does not affect the quality of prints or enlargements, which are still capably processed by labs.

Consequently, the method of providing quick service offers the best of both worlds—the fastest possible delivery on proofs and the highest-quality prints and enlargements.

The business of portrait photography is changing in terms of speed of service and the methods used to obtain this speed. It's more important than ever for professional photographers to respond to the needs of today's consumer, and fulfill these demands using the available technologies. Unquestionably, this formula yields a profitable bottom line. ■