
Your Bottom Line

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

Service with a smile

My philosophy in business and life proclaims many roads to success. When I hear some independent photographers complain how difficult it is to be successful, often what they are saying is: "I want success, but I want it to come to me," or "I want to do photography my way and charge what I want for my skills." They seem to forget that success requires meeting their customers' needs.

Independent professional photographers have a distinct advantage over the large studio chains because they are directly involved in the day-to-day business activities and can provide their customers with a wide variety of fringe benefits far beyond the scope of large operations.

Customer fringe benefits do not have to be costly. A smile, a friendly hello, and legitimate concern cost nothing. A clean and well-organized studio is expected, as well as high-quality, creative photography. But, because special services are easy to overlook, studio managers should schedule meetings to discuss these services with staff members. Many customers are rushed and tired of impersonal service; this is the very reason why "the little extras" will surprise and please them, as well as reflect in your bottom line.

Many professional wedding photographers complain that weekend amateur/professionals and even total amateurs are damaging their business. They are often so busy complaining that they never take time to determine the real reasons why they are not getting more clients.

There are many advantages to being a weekender. Besides the low overhead, many part-timers take a sincere interest in their clients, while the full-timers often treat weddings as a time-consuming hassle. Business growth does not have to mean cold and impersonal treatment, but it often does. Many successful small studios do not maintain success when they become large because they disregard the special touches that once made customers choose them.

On the other hand, many large studios often do not take advantage of the many

opportunities they can offer their bridal clients. For example, formal pre-bridal portraits are produced most effectively in the large, well-equipped professional studio by full-time photographers. However, many studio owners do not pursue formal pre-bridal sittings, because they are "too much trouble". By projecting this attitude, these photographers diminish one of the unique reasons clients hire well-established wedding photography studios. They also place themselves in the same league as the advanced amateur with whom they compete for candid wedding assignments.

I started in this business as many of you did, as a weekend professional candid wedding photographer. I learned very early in my career that low price alone did not attract business. To increase my business, I offered 100 recently engaged girls a complete wedding album for the ridiculously low price of only \$50. I wanted to demonstrate our work so much, I was willing to photograph weddings for less than raw material cost. Not a single girl called to find out more about our services. Cheap prices were not the key. So, I tried another approach.

My studio invested a lot of effort to give clients the very best service and photography. Even when we photographed our 125th wedding of the year, and the fourth wedding in a single day, we became totally involved by expressing legitimate enthusiasm with everything we did. It worked. Not only did the increase in bookings indicate our success, but the post cards from honeymoon hotels, Christmas cards, and birth announcements told us we were doing something right.

Because we wanted to distinguish ourselves from the competition, we granted the bride's wishes. If she wanted photos of her rehearsal dinner, we were there. If she wanted photographs of her getting dressed at home, we were there. If she wanted photos of her checking into the hotel, we photographed it. We charged extra for the additional hours, but we offered the service.

When we started the business, color film was entering the market. Most of the competing photographers in the area used only black-and-white and discouraged color photography requests. I noticed the interest customers had in color, so we immediately started photographing with color negative film. I also noticed that the brides loved outdoor candid and realized the importance of backgrounds. So we started experimenting with front-projection backgrounds.

By adding these personal touches, one wedding would bring us six more. In a very short time, we became the most popular wedding studio in our community—and we were also one of the highest priced photographers in the area. We were paid very well for that "extra mile". Had we not left that community, we would probably be photographing weddings of the next generation of our 1960s and 1970s bridal customers. We gave our clients value and they responded. Value is the key. It's not a secret formula. It is available to anyone and it doesn't apply to wedding photography only.

Look at your work. Does it truly represent the best work you can perform? Do you offer variety? How do you treat your customers? Are you going that extra mile for your clients? If not, you should be if you want your business to grow and if you want to justify your pricing. Do it right and your bottom line will reflect the difference. ■