
Your Bottom Line

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

Sexual harassment threatens everyone

Some male portrait photographers exhibit characteristics of "lady's men" when dealing with female clients.

Perhaps this stereotype dates back to the first days of photography in France, when many of the early photographers reputedly lived the crude, bohemian life. However, nothing justifies the cultivation of this reputation by current professional photographers.

With the cultural environment focusing on sexual harassment, such a reputation could potentially result in the loss of significant profits. Photographers could be put out of business by a thoughtless remark or gesture.

Compounding this problem is a negative public image of male photographers. Consumers expect and fear this type of deviant behavior; therefore, it is easier to be offended by comments that would otherwise be considered innocent. Consequently, sexual harassment is not only defined by explicit behavior, but by unintentional activities as well.

In my opinion, the "Don Juan" image is a widespread problem in photography, but probably not nearly as pervasive as the public thinks. Whatever the public image, sexual harassment is a topic that must be addressed.

My wife, who operates our studio camera room, often hears shocking stories from female clients about photographers stepping out of line. Accusations range from sexually oriented quips, to inappropriate touching done under the guise of "making adjustments". Because of these experiences, or from reports linked to specific photographers, women often refuse to patronize certain studios.

This consumer fear translates into lost business and dollars for photographers. If a prospective client doesn't feel comfortable in a studio, she simply won't spend money for professional photography.

A reasonable person cannot deny that a certain amount of sexual undertones may occur during a professional photography session. The current popularity of glamour/boudoir portraiture makes this risk even higher.

However, photographers who make an effort to perform professionally can minimize or terminate these problems. For example, in glamour/boudoir portraiture, it's highly advisable to keep a female assistant in the camera room when a male photographer is photographing a female subject. Also keep the door open, even if just a crack. If a male photographer cannot afford to hire a female assistant to be in the room, the door should be completely opened. At no time should a male photographer ever work with a female client when they are the only people in a building.

Photographers must use utmost care to make certain that flippant comments are not perceived as offensive. For example, a model recently told me that she resented being called "skinny". While complimentary appraisals may be totally innocent on the surface, they may produce significant implications.

Most importantly, male photographers should never touch a female client, even if the client gives permission to do so. Adjustments in body pose and clothing can be verbally directed, or carefully carried out by a female assistant.

Many male photographers might argue that women don't mind being touched or encouraged with sexy comments. Some women may not care. But that's not the point, especially since photographers cannot determine what clients think. It's best to play it safe.

Male photographers are trapped if they falsely interpret clients. If a woman comes in for a glamour/boudoir sitting, it doesn't mean she is sexually "available". Some men may perceive women as "loose," because they consider certain clothing, speech, or mannerisms as sexually suggestive. However, in most cases, men are not given a license to react. Male photographers may think they are allowed to respond to what they consider a provocative cue, when, in fact, they misinterpreted the action and received no permission.

Over the past few years, society has undergone rampant changes. Behavior that once was tolerated or even encouraged

by women can be devastating if conducted today. One thoughtless action can easily result in a business-ending lawsuit. Even if a claim isn't decided legally, these actions could damage reputations that not only hurt the accused individual, but the industry as a whole.

Photographers must collectively promote professional behavior in every respect. It is irresponsible to ignore a situation involving a colleague, because inappropriate behavior by one photographer negatively affects other studio owners.

You may not agree with recent sexual harassment decisions, and perceive established guidelines as too stringent. But this opinion will not help if you are accused of sexual harassment.

Although this column discusses the problem of male photographers harassing female clients, female photographers can be similarly guilty, although such a scenario happens in fewer instances. Still, the weight of the problem is no less important.

This situation isn't unique to photographers. For example, physicians constantly face the issue. In my 20 years of teaching at the university level, I never counseled a female student without making absolutely certain the office door was open, even when the building was filled with hundreds of people. As the president of Environmental Projection Systems, I must continue to exercise extreme caution with my behavior. The recent Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas affair reinforced a need to be careful and prudent; however, even this approach is not an absolute guarantee.

Your bottom line faces many obstacles, but none more potentially serious as the threat of sexual harassment. As professionals, photographers must undertake a responsibility to control their behavior. ■
