
your bottom line

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Shop your competition and learn

In order to set your prices intelligently, you must know what the current price standards are in your area. It would be foolish to begin selling 8x10s for \$5 when the going rate is \$15. It would be equally foolish to try to market 8x10s for \$50.

Because photographers know so little about their competition, we sometimes find great disparities in pricing within a market area. Shopping your competitors is an excellent way to learn about how they operate, and how your studio compares with that of other photographers doing similar work in your area.

I am suggesting a shopping routine far more sophisticated than just an anonymous telephone call asking for a few prices. I mean a shopping spree that involves not only calling your competition but actually visiting their studio(s). And, if you wish, going as far as having a portrait sitting made and purchasing a minimal order.

You may wish to do the shopping yourself or have a member of your family or studio staff be the customer. If you have a good relationship with your competition, you may wish to share what you learn with them.

Another alternative is to have your local professional organization conduct the entire comparison and then tabulate the information and make it available to all the members. One would hope that the membership is professional enough to utilize the information gained in a positive, self-help critique and not use it disparagingly against a competitor.

To ensure that this does not happen, all reports should be presented orally and no written information should be distributed. You may wish to go so far as to have each individual involved sign a pledge to not utilize any of the information gained against their competition in any way. The whole procedure should be a learning experience.

I suggest that you plan a very objective and formal portrait shopping spree. Consider hiring an intelligent young mother and her teenage daughter to do the shopping and provide them with a definite set

of instructions of things they are to say and do at each studio. Your shoppers should make written notes of their impressions regarding the way they were treated on the telephone by studio personnel. They should fill out a very complete evaluation form after every studio visit and they should be asked to give their opinion of the quality of the photography, including proofs and finished prints. The shoppers should also state their thoughts about each studio's prices.

The information can be tabulated and summarized for presentation. I suggest that the actual prints received be displayed, exactly as they were delivered. You need to see specifically how your own services compare and where you may need to improve.

As part of the program, the shoppers should also visit the local volume studios, such as Olin Mills, K-mart, and Sears. You need to know how these photographic studio chains operate as well. In fact, it might be very instructive if you personally had a portrait sitting at a studio geared for volume business.

In its April 1978 issue, *The Professional Photographer* ran the very controversial article, "Competition in Transition," in which shoppers visited two studios—a master photographer and an 88-cent-per-8x10 chain photo studio. In this case the shoppers reported that they were actually happier with the 88-cent print than with the master's.

Some photographers operate at two different levels—one when they make photographs for merit competitions and another when they service their customers. Master's work at master's prices should be far beyond the quality of the 88-cent special.

Our business operations are certainly not secret. We put ourselves on display every time we open our door or answer our telephone. Yet we often have the wrong idea of our customers' and colleagues' perceptions of us.

Teachers, for example, regularly get two kinds of feedback on their classroom performance: teaching evaluations from

their students and evaluations by a member of the administration or a colleague who discreetly enters a classroom unannounced in order to see for himself what is happening. This is done not so much to be critical as it is to be helpful. Learning how our own colleagues perceive us can be painful, but their impressions can be very valuable to us.

There is nothing unethical or illegal about shopping your competition, whether you are doing it yourself for your own competitive information or if it is done as a group project.

I predict that the information you gain will be some of the most useful data you will ever gather about your studio operation and how it relates to other studios in your area. You will be looking at pricing, packaging, customer relations, advertising, displays, and other factors pertinent to studio operation.

Too often photographers look at other photographers in their area only as competition, and act as though they were at war with them. If photographers in your area have this attitude, they are actually fighting the wrong people. The real competition for all photographers is the infinite variety of ways the public can spend their leisure dollars other than in photography.

Photography is a luxury, not a necessity; consequently you have to constantly work to attract customers and their business. By learning what works best in attracting customers on a regular basis, all the professional photographers in your community can improve their customer image and share in increased sales and a more attractive bottom line at the end of the year. ■