
Your Bottom Line

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

Target an untapped market

Which population group in the United States is the fastest growing, yet spends the fewest dollars on portraits?

- a. young married couples;
- b. senior citizens;
- c. high school students.

The answer is senior citizens, who account for an infinitesimally small number of portraiture purchases each year. We need to discover why this population segment fails to purchase photography of themselves, and determine how we can attract the over-60 customer.

Senior citizens often possess more disposable cash than young parents, high school seniors, and newlyweds. Also, older persons have an incentive to buy portraits of themselves—a photograph depicting grandma or grandpa can be a special remembrance for family and friends in years to come.

If the over-60 market has money to spend on photography, and good reason to purchase portraits, why don't they? Too often the reason is that they are ignored by lensmen, who are probably chasing other, more familiar markets.

Instead of competing with other portrait photographers for the same business—high school students, family groups, wedding portraits, or young children—locate an unserved niche and direct your energies toward that group. It may be years before competitors discover your little “rose garden”. By then, you will be well established in that market segment, have made a great deal of profit, and be ready to explore a new frontier while competition grows fierce within the old market.

The second reason senior citizens do not purchase portraits is that image-makers have not developed a photography style flattering to the age group. We often photograph senior citizens, along with children and young adults, in the traditional head-and-shoulder pose against a simple background.

This type of photograph may be complimentary to younger customers. However, a head-and-shoulder portrait of the

mature subject is likely to magnify wrinkles and other age-related characteristics because, when combined with a simple background, it focuses attention on the face. The problem has an easy solution: Photograph senior citizens in a three-quarter or full-length pose against a complimentary, elegant setting.

For example, a portrait of a mature individual seated in a high-back chair, book in hand, surrounded by well-stocked library shelves and a glowing fireplace emphasizes the customer's stature and lends an air of distinction to the photograph. This atmosphere can also be projected in a portrait featuring a senior citizen behind a majestic oak desk, glasses perched atop his or her nose, gazing at a magazine or newspaper. Also, photographs taken outdoors against a backdrop of greenery give the image a lively, fresh look.

To add an extra personal touch to portraits, show the subject involved in a special hobby. Several years ago, we created an elegant portrait of a senior citizen knitting—an activity she enjoyed. The photograph is invaluable to her relatives.

Senior citizens and their families will be thrilled with photographs that flatter their loved ones. In fact, you may sell a large number of canvas-mounted wall portraits as relatives clamor for loving remembrances of parents and grandparents.

Now that we can create photographs specially tailored to mature persons, we must develop a new marketing approach geared to that population group. You cannot hope to entice senior citizens to purchase portraits by displaying photo samples of children or teenagers. Display in your studio three-quarter or full-length poses of mature subjects involved in an activity and surrounded by an attractive environment.

In addition, use creative marketing promotions to target the over-60 market. For example, in conjunction with senior citizens' homes' staff, develop a mailer to send to residents. The mailer can include a 4x5 sample print and an advertisement, endorsed by the homes' staff, touting

your studio's services. Or, sponsor a “dress up day” at senior citizens centers—schedule a time with the centers' staff and photograph senior citizens on speculation. You may be surprised at the response you receive.

Also, attend local meetings of newly-formed senior citizens associations, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, and explain your studio's services. You can offer a special discount on your photography to association members.

Actively solicit the business of the over-60 population group now. Don't wait to begin senior citizen promotions until a grieving relative approaches your studio clutching a small snapshot of a deceased loved one, hoping you can enlarge that small image into a wall portrait.

The beauty of photography lies in the freedom and scope the field offers. Owning a studio gives us choices: We can either chase one another in a competitive frenzy, or reach beyond other photographers to discover new markets that we quietly develop on our own. Over-60 consumers are not currently pursued by chain studios; and creating distinctive portraits for senior citizens and effectively marketing this work is one of many possibilities to raise our bottom lines.

Photographer Paul Castle is writing a book on portrait photography promotions. If you have developed successful methods to market portraits to mature adults, Paul would appreciate hearing your ideas. You can write to him at: Box 1268, Twain Hart, CA 95383. 