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# Your Bottom Line

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## Too many seminars?

Until recently, the only avenues photographers had to improve studio operations were trial-and-error experimentation, tips from fellow professionals, convention programs, and formal accredited photography schools.

Today, image-makers are bombarded with circulars, advertisements, and announcements touting upcoming seminars. Recent issues of photography magazines feature extensive lists of independent programs, in addition to those sponsored by professional organizations. I receive at least one seminar announcement every week! Each class, reputedly superior to previous presentations, is designed to help photographers earn greater profits with less effort. The claim sounds too good to be true.

The man who pioneered seminar use for photography education was Oklahoma wedding photographer Bill Stockwell. Every year he traversed the country, offering traveling wedding programs and introducing "fantasy," "misties," and a host of other unique portraiture styles. While assisting photographers to develop efficient studio operations, Stockwell charged a tidy fee for his presentations.

He demonstrated it was possible to earn more dollars giving formal lectures than photographing subjects. Consequently, it seems everyone is jumping on the seminar bandwagon, from those with original ideas to photographers proposing merely a new twist on an old theme. They each hope to make a fortune informing others how to run their businesses.

Professional image-makers are motivated to perfect their photography and attract additional customers, so they dole out \$50 here or \$200 there, anticipating each new class will provide the magic formula for working less and generating additional profit.

However, photographers are in a quandary. Is there a secret for success, or are they chasing the proverbial brass ring while making seminar speakers richer and themselves poorer?

The lectures of many enterprising pho-

tographers highlight legitimate methods to improve studio operations. However, because a great deal of non-informative programs also exist, it's often difficult to discern between the two, and a "let the buyer beware" situation evolved. How do photographers choose among seminars?

First, consider the class' topic. If you've previously studied the subject, chances are you'll learn little from repeated information, even if the program is taught by another speaker. If you failed to learn facts from prior instruction, ask yourself if you listened the first time. If not, why waste time and money on another lecture?

Opt for presentations focusing on refreshing or even radical concepts—these have the maximum effect on your studio operation. However, I find most photographers shy away from seminars detailing new ideas, preferring instead to hear traditional techniques with which they are comfortable.

Second, determine the seminar leader's qualifications. If the instructor offers worthwhile information, she probably "paid her dues" speaking to local and regional photography groups. At that level many average programs are weeded out. Unfortunately, some superior classes may also fall by the wayside at this point because professional organizations in every field tend to represent the status quo. That is, they devote more attention to conventional, rather than revolutionary ideas. However, you usually can be assured of valuable instruction by qualified speakers if you attend seminars sponsored by national organizations and companies.

Third, add the cost of attending the seminar. To calculate this figure, combine fees for the program, transportation, lodging, meals, etc., plus dollars lost from missed work. Most independent photographers don't consider missed work an expense, but it can be the highest cost. If the resulting amount is too great, perhaps a less expensive presentation is the best choice.

Technology helped us create an excit-

ing new alternative to seminars—instructional videotapes. Now that videocassette recorders are part of nearly every photographer's household, a growing number of program speakers produce recordings of their lectures.

Videotapes boast a myriad of advantages—they are priced considerably lower than seminars, can be viewed repeatedly at your leisure, and many have performances by program leaders that are superior to the speakers' in-person presentations.

Unfortunately, videotapes don't offer viewers hands-on experience. However, since this type of instruction rarely is part of typical classes, it is a minor limitation. To glean hands-on experience, photographers can attend Winona International School of Professional Photography, or similar institution.

Whether your photography education consists of seminars or videotapes, remember, a small amount of skepticism is healthy. In other words, don't believe everything you hear—speakers may greatly embellish favorable and minimize negative aspects of their personally developed techniques. If a magic formula for success exists, I haven't found it.

In addition, unique ideas that succeed brilliantly in one community may not be effective in another. It's a mistake to adopt every element of speakers' innovations. Instead, select the concepts that interest you most and refine them to fit your market.

For the most part, photography is a learn-by-doing profession. Attending seminars and viewing videotapes are only the first steps in a well-rounded photography education; next you must put the hard-earned knowledge to work. Hands-on experience and dedication are the keys to success—and a healthy bottom line. ■