
Your Bottom Line

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What ever happened to mistys?

It's been about 20 years since Oklahoma photographer Bill Stockwell conducted cross-country lectures on how to incorporate creative innovation into wedding photography. As the first major traveling seminar speaker, Stockwell made a lasting impression on the photography industry with his style of blurred and multiple-exposure photography. Much of the ingenuity of wedding photography today is a reflection of his original teachings. However, Stockwell's main concept of "mistys" and "fantasys" seem to have disappeared.

Why has this once very popular concept vanished? Do contemporary customers dislike this photography style, or are there other reasons? Recently, I asked a number of young photographers their opinions on Stockwell's photography concepts. Their dumbfounded expressions indicated that they hadn't heard of Stockwell or his ideas.

Additional research confirmed that a variety of factors are responsible for the decreased interest in Stockwell's exciting photographic techniques. The primary obstacle is a lack of photographer enthusiasm—not consumer aversion. In fact, many of the wedding photography clients I surveyed were receptive to the idea of purchasing Stockwell-style images.

When Stockwell first introduced his concepts, the majority of his colleagues ridiculed them. They believed that customers would not pay for "mistakes," such as double exposures and out-of-focus images. This is not an unusual response to new ideas. Fresh photographic approaches are often condemned before they are accepted. However, Stockwell was very persuasive, and although other photographers balked at his photographic innovations, his approaches were popular with customers.

The few photographers who aggressively marketed Stockwell's pioneering photography style were amazed at the number of imaginative images they were selling—and the magnetic power those photographs had for attracting new clients. Eventually the photographic industry experienced an avalanche of interest in Stockwell's concepts, and a large number of wedding

photographers began successfully promoting "mistys" and "fantasys".

Wedding albums were changed so dramatically, it appeared that photographers forgot how to photograph clear, sharp images. Everything was a "misty"! But too much of anything can be damaging. Customers started to reject the overabundance of "mistys" and began favoring sharp, traditional photography. As a result, photographers misread the customer's desire for variety, and gradually deserted the Stockwell photographic style.

In addition, because these creative images required extra effort and expertise, studio owners became less enchanted with producing them. Sadly, professional photographers gave up a style of photography that was more challenging to create, and therefore more difficult for part-time and amateur photographers to copy.

Stockwell's death left his concept without a teacher and promoter. Today, most wedding albums are void of "mistys" and "fantasies," even though current technological advances in the photography industry make them easier than ever to produce.

This does not mean that Stockwell's ideas are permanently part of the past. I recently came across several photographers who make Stockwell's photographic concepts a key element in their wedding imagery. As a result, they are attracting a healthy number of clients and making excellent profits. In fact, some of these studio owners have continued to offer this style of photography since its inception.

Many clients view these photographers as "current". An old idea is now considered new, and since most photographers do not offer the technique, only a handful enjoy a relatively competition-free market.

There are several lessons to be learned here. Just as too much of a good thing can be bad, total rejection of an innovative concept can also be harmful. The most successful approach is to blend a variety of photographic styles.

It is also important to remember that concepts in imaging and marketing are cyclical. They come and go and then

come back again. Several years ago, I predicted the resurgence of black and white photography. Today, many photographers successfully specialize in black and white photography. In the years ahead, photographers will again embrace Stockwell's "mistys" and "fantasys". These techniques may never become as prominent as they once were, but Stockwell's photography style will become an important tool for attracting business and increasing sales.

Because there is a limited number of innovative ideas available for professional photographers to offer, it is poor business practice to reject creative concepts—especially if studio owners neglect to conduct research and keep abreast of customer preferences. You can always find effective "modern" ideas by reviewing forgotten old ones. Have you kept a library of *Professional Photographer* magazine? You might find it very interesting and rewarding to look back 20 years for "new" ideas.

Always remember, colleagues don't purchase photography—customers do. If clients like an idea, offer it regardless of what other photographers may say. To maintain a healthy bottom line, never forget business fundamentals which stress the importance of servicing clients with impressive products. ©