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# Your Bottom Line

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

## Will the real boss please stand up?

Many photographers opened their own studios in order to become completely independent and have the freedom to run the company exactly as they saw fit—and be their own boss.

However, one may become so entrenched in the role of “boss,” that ultimate masters, the customers, are forgotten. A business is operated to serve their needs. If you fail to deliver what consumers desire, they are likely to turn to someone who will.

Or, perhaps consumers will not spend their hard-earned dollars on photography at all. The product image-makers create a luxury, rather than a necessity like food or clothing. Photographers must be extremely sensitive to customers’ wants and needs in order to better market their work.

Often, photographers concentrate on the “art of photography,” disregarding the “bread and butter” portraits that clients may seek. Some frequently pay little or no attention to the preferences of the photo buyer. Instead, they assume they know what the customer wants better than the customer himself.

I cannot count the number of times I have heard the following opinion voiced by speakers or written on the pages of professional journals: “We must educate our customers.” This means we should attempt to tell customers what they want. I cannot recall seeing or hearing the comment, “We must be willing to be educated by our customers and understand their desires and needs.” This is the way we, as photographers, should be thinking in order to increase our business.

While I fully agree that photographers can display examples of more elegant photography to customers, many may prefer a flatly lit and simply posed portrait, perhaps even accompanied by what some would consider a garish, scenic, pull-down background.

One recent study reported that consumers are nearly as satisfied with portraits produced by retail store photographers as those created by professional independent

studio photographers! Are some photographers forcing prospective customers to do business with competitors by insisting on photographing and displaying only expensive, polished portraiture?

When was the last time you evaluated your customers’ portrait desires? Perhaps you never have. Instead you may believe that by working “by the book” you are guaranteed success. However, a consumer’s wishes often do not correspond to the book’s advice—and bookish representations may not reflect current trends.

When a visiting photographer sees portraits showcased on my studio’s walls, he may indiscreetly question the flat lighting or the selection of backgrounds, especially the “new wave,” computer-generated, front projection backdrops. However, the photographer may not be aware that a significant number of the photo buyers in my market do not like “shadowy portraits”. Many customers prefer flat lighting. Even though the professional photographer may think the subject looks better with a 2:1 modeling ratio, the customer is the boss when it comes to his or her unique taste and style.

However, as client preferences shift, photographers must quickly adapt to those changes. It was the customer who forced photographers to use color materials instead of black-and-white. Consumers wanted it and insisted photographers deliver it. Just a few years ago, it was the customer who demanded photographers produce casual, environmental wedding photography.

Today, many of our younger subjects demand more creative backgrounds to replace the subtle, old masters style used since the horse-and-buggy days of portraiture. Many customers request soft focus and lighting. I predict, however, that it won’t be long before sharper, more dramatically lit portraits are in vogue. Again, photographers will have to conform to this change.

These developments in portrait style need not take one completely by surprise. Cycles occur in photography. When one

trend disappears, a similar one will surely reappear at another time. One doesn’t have to be a prophet or an M.B.A. to know that any business must react to buying trends and the sooner it does, the sooner the public will flock to its door. Unfortunately, far too many studios fail to incorporate new styles and fashions in their portraiture, instead focusing on a past-oriented, or established style.

Changing styles are the measure of constantly evolving societies. Each new generation wants a fashion unique to its own. Remember how strongly you wished your high school yearbook would be different from a sibling’s? Recall how you wanted your own wedding photographs to be unusual? New portraiture styles can result from new technology, or a return to a past, nearly forgotten, fashion. Constantly changing vogue is accepted in the fashion world—and the same forces affect the photography business. We crave the latest fashions in our clothing, and the newest computers for our businesses, why shouldn’t our customers desire the latest trends in portraiture?

The next time you think you know what is best for your customers, consider your clients’ desires. Take time to find out what they want and strive to produce it to satisfy their needs.

When someone asks, “Will the real boss please stand up?” remain seated and let your customers stand. They are the ultimate bosses. Our egos may have to be lowered a peg or two, but once we learn this important lesson, our bottom line will soar. ■