
Your Bottom Line

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Would you buy from you?

Photography studios attain greater potential for success, if photographers view their business practices from the customer's point of view.

Ask yourself if you would choose your own studio for professional photography services. Would you pay your prices for the work that you produce and recommend your studio to friends?

I have met a number of photographers who unrealistically view their own abilities as the "best and most creative in the field," yet have difficulty understanding why they do not attract customers. To combat this problem, photographers must frequently investigate their business practices by asking themselves difficult questions, giving honest answers, and acting on the information. Don't wait for bleak year-end bank accounts to improve business operations.

The first difficult question to answer is, why should a potential client spend money on professional photography? Then, figure out what services can entice them to purchase your product. These questions are not unique to the professional photography industry, they apply to all businesses.

A business owner is much like a fisherman who must carefully choose the right bait, time and place to fish, and technique for luring fish to take the bait. If the hook and bait are too big, the fish won't bite. If the equipment is too small, only small minnows may nibble. But, if the hook and bait are the proper size and amount, there is greater potential to catch "the big one".

Start your self-analysis by studying your advertising. Every studio advertises—only the methods are different. Photographers begin advertising the day they exhibit their first prints. Store-front displays, radio commercials, print ads, and television spots are common advertising sources. Begin examining your promotional techniques objectively and learn what the competition is doing. It is likely that many professional photography studios in the area profess to be the "most creative in

town". Did you ever hear a studio advertisement stating they are the "second best in town"?

Potential clients make their own judgments, so you must convince them that you have the best value, which means the best photography for the price.

Also, photographers who provide a superior variety of poses are usually viewed as more creative and better than the competition. Remember, customers can perceive the value of selection easier than how well a photographer meets print competition rules.

Once you capture the attention of potential clients and get them into your studio, you are not guaranteed a sale. There are many ways to destroy a business transaction before it even starts.

To avoid this dilemma, study your telephone techniques by asking a friend to pose as a prospective customer. How do you sound on the phone? Do your telephone people say the right things to draw the customer in, or are they cold and impersonal? Take a serious look at how you handle a customer who requests information.

How does your studio look? Are your wall display prints fresh and attractively exhibited? How does your overall facility appear? What kind of first impression do your employees reflect? Are they dressed professionally, or shabbily? Do they sit behind the counter eating sandwiches and ignoring prospective clients? What do they say and how do they sound? Do your employees sell your studio?

Next, attempt to view yourself as the customer views you during the actual photography session. What is the appearance of your camera room—is it cluttered and messy? How professional is the photographer demeanor? Does the photographer make subjects nervous and uncomfortable during the session?

Take note of the service customers expect and receive. How soon are the previews ready? How are they presented? Are they just dropped on a counter? What kind of assistance do your em-

ployees offer customers when they make selections and place orders?

Document the amount of time it takes to make the finished prints and how they are presented to the client. How is the client handled when collecting payment? Do clients leave the studio with a favorable feeling about everything that has happened? Will they feel they received good value for their money?

Evaluating your total operation isn't easy. It can be a painful experience if you objectively assess each and every aspect of the business. But growth can result from pain if you make the necessary effort. I predict that photographers who perform this exercise will find more than a few rough edges. Identify those problems and prepare a plan to eliminate them. Photographers may not be able to wipe out problems overnight, but an effective plan could minimize them.

This formal exercise should be performed at least once a year. But, it is beneficial to look over your entire operation from your customer's point of view every day. It may be helpful to talk to some of your customers after the sale and ask them how they feel about the experience. Or, provide your customers with a postage-paid questionnaire to fill out and return to you. You can never get enough information from customers.

Being successful in business is a constant battle. Too many little slips can eventually spell disaster. A successful bottom line can only be achieved by a continuing effort to stay on top in the customer's eye. In the end, that's the only eye that counts. 