
your bottom line

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Your public image

What do members of your community think of when they hear your or your studio's name? Is the impression quality and reasonably-priced photography, or is it high prices and mediocre pictures?

Are you perceived as an important member of your community, or a person who sticks to himself and doesn't get involved in civic affairs? Are you considered a professional photographer or just someone a step above an amateur?

Your answers to these questions define your public image—the most influential tool you possess to attract and hold customers. Award-winning photography alone does not guarantee your business success. It is your public image that brings customers through your door, and it's your responsibility to consciously build your professional image over the years. When a portrait studio is only part of a large corporate operation—such as Sears photo studio chains found in its retail stores—the studio's image originates from the corporation's whole public perception. Customers go to a Sears portrait studio because of Sears' image, not due to the reputations of individual photographers who work there.

But, the image of a local, independent photographer and his studio merge together in the collective minds of most communities, and you must project a good impression yourself. Remember that you are building your public image whenever you advertise or display your work. You can improve or hurt your image in your community—especially in smaller ones—just by where you go and with whom you associate. Even the way you speak and relate to people can affect your public image.

When you first establish yourself in a community, you start with a clean slate. Therefore, you have a distinct advantage over many an old-timer with a mediocre or negative image. It is much easier to build a positive image from scratch, than to turn around an existing negative one.

If you purchase a business with a desirable reputation in your community,

you can be years ahead in business development and profits. But you must work to keep a good reputation, since an image can decline much faster than it rises. For example, today some studios are experimenting with services in glamour or boudoir photography. If you plan to go into this type of photography, you must guard against quickly ruining your studio's reputation in some locales. The style of glamour photography must be in good taste and your advertising must be carefully planned.

If members of your community think of your competitors when they consider professional photography, you have an image problem. It's a problem that won't change unless you do something about it.

Image building takes an enormous amount of work and money. Advertising is one approach, but it can be expensive. However, more effective results can often be obtained from other promotion methods. For example, local newspaper stories—published free and produced from your own publicity releases—have far more reader impact and can yield a more positive impression than expensive full-page ads.

Every time you attend a professional meeting or have special photographic training, present a program to other photographers, or receive any honor, you should send a press release to your local paper. If you include a publicity photo of yourself at an event, you can gain even greater recognition. Community members will recognize you and associate you and your studio with your accomplishments and professional work.

Involvement in your community activities or local service groups—such as Kiwanis, Lions, or Rotary—is also worthwhile when building a public image, and you should also consider presenting photography programs or slide presentations to local groups. These programs will help you gain recognition and build a positive image in the eyes of your community members, but keep any sales pitch for business at these events very low-key.

Appearances have a lot to do with your business image. Improving your studio's upkeep and staff impression can often be done with little or no money. The next time you drive up to your studio, try to envision how it looks to a new customer.

Could you spend a few hundred dollars to resurface the parking area or refurbish the building? Is the photo display in the studio windows and on the walls effective? What are potential customers' first impressions when they enter your studio reception area? How does your staff dress? Are you all friendly, do you welcome the customers, and make them feel relaxed? Is your work guaranteed to meet with the customer's satisfaction? Do they have an opportunity to give their opinions about the products and service?

All of these elements contribute to your studio's image. Ask your employees for assistance and participation in such an improvement program. Your professional image is more important to your bottom line profit than most other things you do—including your talent as a photographer. Work at bettering your image and cultivating it.

Sit down today and make a plan for the next month and year on how you can improve your personal and studio image and implement it. Image building is one of the least expensive things you can do for your studio but it will bring about a large dollar reward.

There'll be a positive effect on your bottom line immediately. After all, wouldn't you go to a friendly local photographer who did good work at reasonable prices and who you knew personally rather than to some stranger working in a large department store studio? 