

## The Studio Photography Industry

Our industry is broken. I took some time to really look at the state of the professional photography industry today. I looked at it objectively as both a photographer and as a client to really try to figure out the next direction for the industry. We know as photographers the industry is under a great deal of pressure from different sources and different reasons.

One of the most radical changes in the photographic industry is the emergence of high-quality affordable equipment. Anybody with a few grand can go pick up a high end Nikon or Canon and hang out a shingle. Yesterday they were working at the Waffle House today they are a photographer. In the past these new photographers were relegated to the sidelines because they could not produce the quality of image that the buying public required. They were snap shooters. Nothing more and nothing less. Today those snap shooters are using the same gear the full-time professional photographer is and delivering the same basic quality. Because the amateur-pro has none of the overhead requirements (insurance, licensing, advertising and other such business expenses) they can comfortably undercut the full-time pro from a pricing standpoint. Sometimes considerably. And their customer is happy because in their mind they saved a boatload of money. This brings up the next issue that I see. We and a industry do not get the point that the pricing paradigm has changed. Because of the abundance of competent amateur-pros out there, full-time professional photographers, no matter of how much we scream about it are at a distinct cost disadvantage. Let me give an example.

I do a lot of event photography. I go to the event take the pictures process them and post them for sale. My 5X7 print is 15.50 (which I have been told is way too inexpensive by my peers). At an event recently there was an amateur-pro there who shot the same show and posted images for sale. You could tell the distinct difference in quality of capture, exposure and use of available lighting. His prints 5X7 prints were \$5.00. He outsold me by more than \$500 on that show. Customers look for the big "value"; word when deciding where to spend their money. VALUE is the name of the game. And value is perceived by the customer not defined by the photographer. Even in a studio setting I have seen this value paradigm play out. I was in a mall over the weekend. And we all have shown our professional contempt for the mall studios but have we really looked at them from a purely economic point of view? The studio that I watched was an independent operation. Not one of the mall studios that we all know. Their packages that ranged from \$12 to \$36. The "portraits" were shot on green screen (that was clearly not lit properly). They offered "hundreds of backgrounds" and their output was done on an inkjet printer. Not fine art photography by any stretch of the imagination. They had the store full and there was a 2.5 hour wait for a sitting. I was able to talk to an employee of this operation and she gave me some insights on their volume. On a weekend they will do 300 settings and about 150 through the rest of the week 450 settings a week is an astounding number. Each setting takes about 5 to 7 minutes. They have 2 camera positions to maintain that volume. They use a commercially available software package to do the chroma key. Their target sale is 20.00 some more some less. If we stop down and play with the numbers we can come up with a rough estimate on the profitability of this operation. 450X20 gives you \$9000 gross a week and 36K a month. What "conventional" studio would not love to have that amount of gross sales. And remember they are in a MALL location with all of the overhead attached to that. The normal comeback for most studio owners is that these are low end customers that don't spend money. Right answer they DON'T spend 300 bucks for a 8x10 but they DO spend money. The problem is that they want "pictures" and not "heirloom artistry that will be part of your family heritage for all time"; They are a different customer that we as an industry have ignored. Moreover, we marginalize anyone that goes after that market because they are hurting OUR business. Nothing could be future from the truth. We don't want that customer. As professional photographers and ARTISTS that customer is beneath us. "We simply need to educate them on what quality is and they will come around" is a statement that I hear a lot &hellip; well that is poppycock they are never going to come around to our pricing mix. So we forget about that customer. 36K a month&hellip; I'd take that. As an industry we also are guilty of positioning our product in a way that doesn't attract customers that have a higher value threshold. I looked at the senior portrait market as an example. Most studios advertise this just as they advertise their other services. Go to most web sites that focus on senior portraits and they are the same boring pretty piano music with the same "family heirloom" catch lines. It seems that the attitude is that we are going to overwhelm with our class to get 17 year olds that shop at Abercrombie and Fitch and would rather be online than in the real world to come in for beautiful senior portraits. The most successful senior portrait studios have geared their marketing to that segment of the population. They get it. Many of us don't and we wonder why we are not getting senior business. We are positioning our advertising to a traditional market that frankly hates pretty piano music. We need to look at our customer and be much more responsive to their wants. Having a few acid treated images on your website does not make you a senior portrait studio. It is about attitude and for most of us the attitude that we project is "naptime". I think that for the photography industry to awaken, we have some major issues to address. We must change our pricing paradigm as it simply is not getting customers in the studio. Change our attitude. Most customers want great pictures not family heirlooms. They want to be excited and have an experience not bored to tears in studio. I think if we start there we will be well on our way to recovering a once great industry.