

BACKGROUND POWER!

*How to Enhance Your Creativity and Increase
Profits with Background Technology*

*by
Henry J. Oles*



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WARNING!

**READING THIS BOOK CAN
DRAMATICALLY ENHANCE THE
WAY YOU DO STUDIO
PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY,
THE WAY YOU MARKET YOUR
SERVICES, AND CAN
SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE THE
AMOUNT OF MONEY YOU
WILL HAVE TO DEPOSIT IN
YOUR STUDIO ACCOUNT.**

PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK!

DEDICATION

No one does it entirely on their own. I am truly indebted to countless people who helped guide my education, my career and my thoughts, starting with my father who gave me my first camera and taught me basic darkroom methods. My parents and family were instrumental in teaching me the importance of being different from the crowd and the short and long term value of going the extra mile in anything one does. It's worked for me and, therefore, that philosophy has been a fundamental component in both my teaching and writing as you will see in this book.

My wife, Marian, has been fundamental to my success, especially through her continuous use of the virtual backgrounds process in her studio and her many ideas to improve the technology and the methods. Trevon Baker has been extremely helpful in creating many of the supporting images in this book as well as in countless other ways. Jennifer LaGrange was instrumental in composition and proofreading. I am also deeply indebted to our many worldwide customers, especially those who have reached out to provide help and encouragement to me and shared with me their own new ideas, many of which I present in this publication.

Finally, I dedicate this book to you, the reader and professional photographer. I wrote it for you in the hope that it will benefit your career.

Thank you, one and all.

Henry J. Oles

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Henry Oles has enjoyed an extensive and varied career in professional photography, starting as a wedding and studio photographer in Ohio and then, after discovering the amazing power of virtual backgrounds, he became an inventor, a manufacturer, and a distributor of innovative products for professional photographers as well as being a speaker and writer. He also earned an MA and PhD degree from the University of Pittsburgh and became a Professor of Psychology, teaching for five years at Youngstown State University and then for fifteen years at Texas State University in San Marcos. He also holds the degree of Photographic Craftsman from the Professional Photographers of America.

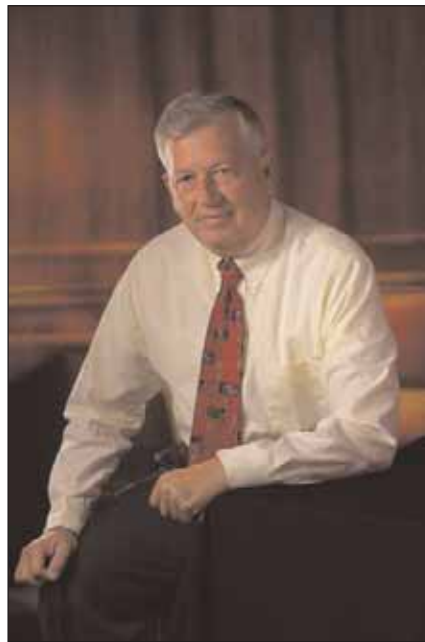


Photo by Don Blair

ed Pixel Magic Imaging, a company that specializes in the development of digital imaging systems for the retail market.

He has written several books on the use of virtual backgrounds and studio management as well as innumerable articles, a number of which were published internationally. He has lectured to photographers in most states and many other countries and has taught for the Winona School of Photography, Triangle School and the Texas School. For ten years, he authored a monthly column for the *Professional Photographer* magazine titled "Your Bottom Line." The often controversial and very pointed column was devoted to various issues that confront the professional studio photographer and provided solutions to the problems.

In addition to his development of the Scene Machine virtual background system, Oles also developed the first video proofing system and has received patents on several inventions including a patent on utilizing optical background projection in combination with digital Chromakey (green screen). In 1993 with his son, David Oles, he found-

Background Power! combines Dr. Oles' many years of experience as a photographer, marketing specialist, researcher and social scientist with the concept of background technology as a means for the photographer to significantly enhance both performance and profitability.

FOREWORD

Imagine the possibilities. **Imagine** the opportunities. **Imagine** how much more creative you could be if you had an infinite variety of backgrounds available for use in just seconds, 24/7. **Imagine** being able to easily and quickly provide your clients with a wide variety of different "looks" as part of a single session. **Imagine** seldom having to pack up and travel to a remote location. **Imagine** being able to capture your own backgrounds from around your area or from anywhere in the world you may travel and being able to make them even better than they really look. **Imagine** having total control over your backgrounds...where you could easily control the proportional size, position, color balance, brightness and focus. **Imagine** being able to use backgrounds to serve as a primary reason for customers to choose to have their portrait made by you. **Imagine** that your use of backgrounds encouraged customers to buy more prints and larger prints. **Imagine** backgrounds that could be used to bring customers to you who would not have gone to any photographer, anywhere. **Imagine** backgrounds being one of your most important promotional and marketing tools. **Imagine** not having to spend thousands and tens of thousands of dollars on new canvas backgrounds or background sets. It's all possible as you will find as you read this very unique and exciting book.

Every photographer is looking for ways to enhance their portrait business. Every photographer seeks to be more creative and be more profitable while working less to allow more time for family and personal ventures. Every photographer is looking for value minded solutions. This book explores a fundamental component of portrait photography that has, for the most part, been overlooked or grossly misunderstood by most portrait photographers. Sometimes, in our furious search for success, the obvious is missed or undervalued. *Background Power!* not only presents a broad overview of the photographer's background options, with special emphasis on virtual backgrounds, but it also presents dozens of specific "how to" examples to generate significant new profits, primarily through the use of background technology in the everyday operation of a portrait studio.

If you are a portrait photographer, this book is for you.

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INTRODUCTION

Every Business Owner's Big Challenge

"What can I do to grow my sales and profits? What can I do to stand out from the crowd? How can I run my business more efficiently? How can I work less so I have more time for my family and fun?"

These are some of the most fundamental challenges for any business. Portrait studios are certainly no exception. Every professional photographer anywhere in the world has exactly the same general issues and many more specific issues that relate directly to the success or failure of a portrait operation.

How can I get more people to want to buy professional portraiture? How can I clearly separate myself from the mass merchandiser type photographer? How can I get contracts without lowering my prices so much that I can't make any money? How can I get customers to buy larger prints? How can I get the information I need to be more successful?

Because of the nature of professional photography, the studio owner has still more issues with which to deal. Portraiture is an art. Photographers are constantly seeking to achieve an ever increasing level of creativity and uniqueness. Every subject is different and every subject wants something different. But, is artistic sophistication enough to make the business successful?

The photographer is not just a retailer selling cans of soup off the shelf. The photographer is in many respects a marketer, a manufacturer, an artist, and a retailer. The photographer has to create the need for the product he sells, he then has to create the product he sells, then he has to sell the product he created. A portrait operation is a good example of a nearly total vertically integrated business enterprise.

When Business as Usual Doesn't Work

But now, it gets even more complicated. The rules of the game have changed. Because the public no longer absolutely needs the services of a professional photographer to get portraits that are satisfactory, the photographer must come up with methods, techniques and marketing to bring the public back to the studio, offering products that are dramatically different than what the average amateur or basic studio photographer can achieve. It must be products that the customer sees as being both special and highly desirable. And, the products must sell at a price that the masses can afford while still enabling the photographer to make a good profit.

Are Photographers Masochistic?

Remember the old expression, "Build it and they will come." That may have once been true with professional portrait studios, but it isn't true any more as a great many studios are sadly discovering. New technology, especially digital, is allowing nearly everyone to think of themselves as a photographer. Why does the public need to go to a professional photographer? At many weddings today, each guest is given a disposable camera and is asked to "take pictures...as many as you can." Every guest becomes a photographer producing photo-journalism type photos. What does the typical pro-wedding photographer offer? Instead of enticing the bride with a wide variety of images that can't be done by the amateur, they emphasize a photo-journalism style of candids and albums of little 4 x 6 prints and then they wonder why so many brides today don't hire a professional photographer for their wedding. Why should they?

In the same way, many portrait photographers have turned to abandoning their studios and now work outdoors. The outdoors offers an environment any amateur can use. Again, it is my fundamental philosophy that the professional portrait photographer should be offering services that the amateur cannot offer. "But," you say, "I am a professional and that is why they will come to me." Maybe you haven't heard this, but what do you think is the major difference between an amateur and a professional photographer? It's the number of shots you have to take in order to get a really good one. Today's amateurs can shoot up a storm with their new 5 megapixel digital cameras and, sooner or later, they will get images they love and they won't have to worry about copyright! Plus, they can brag about being the photographer! Even in the world of art paintings, monkeys can eventually come up with a "masterpiece" if they are given the tools and enough time.

More than ever, the key to success in studio photography is to offer products and services that the customer cannot get elsewhere and, most certainly, products they cannot create themselves, and offer these products at an affordable price.

What Happens When Everyone Is Above Average?

No professional photographer tells the public that they are an "average" or "below average" photographer. Instead, every photographer promotes themselves as an "award winner" of sorts. Every photographer pretty much describes their work as "the best in town." As a result, the public is confused, often considering all studios, including the "big box" mass merchandiser photographer, to be about the same in quality. Some may even think the mass merchandiser portraits are superior, and sometimes they are! Very few studio owners step forward and do the things that really bring in the business and elevate sales.

Think about it. How much attention will an ad get that promotes perfect "Rembrandt lighting" or the precise way the photographer poses a hand? These things may be important when a photographer enters a print for competition with judging by other photographers, but it doesn't usually mean much of anything to the public, the real customer. What photographers need are specific "concrete" things that clearly and distinctively separate them from the competition and make their products more exciting. They cannot, and probably should not, just promote being the lowest priced photographer. The chain store photographer will always win the pricing wars. Don't go there!

To be maximally successful, photographers must develop products and methods that are so powerful, so desirable, so motivating, that they actually pull the customers in. They need to be clearly, distinctively and desirably different. Just promoting that "I'm the better photographer" doesn't do it. In wedding photography, the prospective bride has to be convinced that a professional photographer can provide her with photographs and services she just cannot possibly get if she just allows her guests to create all of her photographs.

People Can Live Without Portraits

Never forget, portraits are a luxury. Other than a mug shot for a driver's license or passport, no one needs a portrait in order to survive. Portraits are purchased with discretionary dollars. Today, we must recognize the fact that people choose to spend their discretionary dollars on an infinite number of things other than professional photography. Therefore, the photographer's primary competitor is not the other photographer down the street but rather all the countless other ways the public can spend their discretionary money and time. This fact, therefore, makes it even more important that the portrait

photographer produce the most enticing product possible. The professional photographer has to find the most effective ways to get people in front of the camera. No photographer, no matter how good, can sell what he hasn't shot! And then he has to find ways to get the customer to buy more. There is a huge proportion of the population that never even thinks about going to a professional photographer. How to successfully tap this elusive market is an important consideration for the portrait industry.

Finding the Way to a Better Life

There is an answer! Very often really good solutions to difficult problems are elusive. Every business owner must search for unique, attractive products and powerful, but not necessarily expensive, promotional methods that will set them apart from the competition and cause the public to seek out their products or services. That's the key...unique and highly attractive products that are not over-priced so they can be within the reach of the majority of the population. Ideally, these products, once developed, should become a cornerstone for business development and business success.

Fortunately, portrait photographers have some unique opportunities to develop their business, but sadly most photographers are completely unaware of all that is possible. One of the most powerful marketing methods of all is staring photographers right in the face! While a comparatively few have discovered the method, for most photographers, it remains a "secret." In fact, many of those photographers who have learned the secret actually try to keep "their" secret, secret.

The Secret Revealed

What is there about portrait photography that a photographer can use to help drive the business...to pull in new customers and

make significant sales that haven't already been extensively cultivated? Fortunately there is a component, a very powerful component of studio photography, that has been nearly entirely overlooked. **The best kept secret in studio portrait photography is the background.** Every portrait has a background. It's just that the background is seldom looked at by photographers as a critically important component of studio portraiture that can play a major role in enhancing the resulting portrait, nor do they see the background as a powerful promotional tool.

What If?

- *What if you could use unique background technology to be far more creative in the camera room?*
- *What if your use of this technology could significantly reduce your costs and dramatically increase your profits?*
- *What if your use of background variety brought you more customers, a lot more customers and larger orders?*
- *What if these methods made you more efficient in the camera room?*
- *What if this technology enabled you to have more time with your family?*
- *What if there were ways the background could be used as a very powerful but also inexpensive marketing tool to generate new business and new profits?*
- *What if these methods helped you win contracts without giving your product away?*
- *What if these methods blended beautifully with digital technology?*

STOP! Before you snicker and set this book down as a probable waste of your time because this seems either too good to be true or even preposterous, take a few minutes to read on and follow the logic. It's very straightforward. Read this book with an open mind all the way to the end. It could be some of the most important time you ever devoted to the success of your business. You owe it to yourself and your business to at least give this concept some serious attention. As my old friend Orren Lucht, creator of Lucht portrait package printers, would say, **"Some people already have their minds made up and don't want to be confused by the facts."**

Don't be one of them!

The Fourth Dimension of Studio Photography

The first and usually the most important step any marketing expert is going to take when surveying what they can do for a client is to identify specific factors that can be promoted to generate public attention leading to desirable responses. Ideally, these factors should be something different than what is already used. In looking at the portrait process, it soon becomes obvious that photographers have a very limited number of things they can manipulate in order to attract clients by turning out a more desirable product. **Basically, there are just four things the photographer can do when photographing a subject.**

1. The photographer can manipulate the lighting.
2. The photographer can vary the posing, clothing and props.
3. The photographer can change the expression.
4. Then there is the fourth and very powerful tool that a photographer has at his disposal. **THE PHOTOGRAPHER CAN VARY THE BACKGROUND!**

The fact is, all photographers work with the lighting, but the typical customer seldom knows the difference between a portrait made with a single light or one made with a whole array of perfectly positioned lights. All photographers work with the posing, but the typical studio situation places major limitations on the posing. All photographers work with the subject's expression, but in the typical studio situation, expression is limited. When considering the four variables the photographer has to work with, it is the background that many photographers currently don't do much with. For the most part, it is nearly totally ignored in everyday work with the belief that the more simple the background, the better.

Photographers are missing a huge opportunity. Not only is the background important in its own right, but it is the background that can also enable the photographer to do so much more with the lighting, the posing, the clothing, the props, and the expression.

The background is like a catalyst in chemistry. It makes other things happen and, therefore, has far more power than expected. It's the "wow" factor.

With this in mind, the marketing expert soon begins to realize that there are some mighty powerful advantages to capitalizing on background variety and using that variety to enhance the total portrait experience and, therefore, grow sales.

The modern portrait photographer should look at each portrait as a unique combination of each of the elements...the lighting, the pose, the expression, the clothing, the props, and the background. They must all fit together to produce a unique composite result that complements the subjects to such an extent that they can't resist buying the end result. This should be true whether that portrait is done in the studio or on location.

The Total is Much More Than the Sum of the Parts

Although all photographers work in varying degrees with the four dimensions of portraiture, very few ever get to experience what can happen when all the dimensions, including the background, are indeed well connected and fundamental to everyday studio operation. And, most of those photographers who do get the pieces together seldom recognize and utilize the marketing advantages that they now have to really grow their business and profits. That's what this book is all about. When you come to the end, you will have the basic formulas to energize your business beyond all expectation.

Much More Artistic Than a Technical Challenge

It's safe to say that most every professional photographer who is making the transition from film to digital imaging is overwhelmed by the technical considerations and the high cost of equipment that is often outdated within a very short time. In contrast, the implementation of backgrounds, all kinds of backgrounds, is much more an artistic challenge than technical and this is where the typical professional photographer shines, and where he wants to be. The cost of enhancing your backgrounds is not particularly high, especially when compared with the cost of going digital. The investment in backgrounds isn't quickly reduced by what seems like almost daily digital technology advancements. It is an investment that will pay for itself many times over for years to come.

Location vs. Studio Portraiture

When the typical photographer works on location with a client, the photographer generally becomes more concerned about the background. After all, is not the background the primary reason to go on location? Ideally, photographers look for a background

site that will complement the subject. They might even move to several different backgrounds to add more variety. But, when those same photographers do a portrait sitting in their studio, usually the background becomes insignificant as they resort to using traditional simplistic backgrounds including colored paper, a classic canvas that may have been used for generations, or solid white or black. For the most part, they seem to stick with what is easy and has worked for them since the beginning.

"Keep it simple" has been the rule most photographers follow even though market researchers consistently find that today's portrait subjects don't generally like standard studio backgrounds and that they are seeking more meaningful background variety. In fact, today, many clients call the studio and specifically ask, "How many different backgrounds do you have available and what are they?" I'm sure that you've gotten many of these calls yourself. These calls didn't happen just a few years ago.

Nobody Speaks or Writes About Backgrounds

The background, especially in studio portraiture, is so overlooked that professional photographers rarely have an opportunity to learn anything about backgrounds and how to use them. Think of all the books you have read about photography. The background is seldom even mentioned. Think of all the magazine articles you have read and all the professional presentations you have attended. Backgrounds are rarely mentioned. Almost no one ever talks about backgrounds even though the background is such an important part of every photograph. Even our formal photography education programs devote no time to backgrounds. Is it, therefore, any wonder that the typical photographer pays little attention to the background, at least in the studio, and doesn't realize the important role it can

play in a portrait by enhancing the photographer's creativity and complementing the subject? This lack of interest in studio backgrounds by so many leaders in the industry is a prime reason that existing technology has been so overlooked by so many photographers.

However, if you objectively look at the images of celebrities and other important people that we see in the press and the media, they very seldom have a formal studio look with the traditional canvas background. The images are nearly always shot on location. Consequently, there is a dichotomy between the kind of photography most professional photographers offer the public and what the public typically sees as portrait photography in the media. This dichotomy can be a source of many problems for today's professional portrait studio. We may wonder why we don't have the business we want when, in fact, we may not be providing the product today's public is looking for.

Developing a New Paradigm for Success

President Kennedy once said, "Change is the law of life. Those who look only to the past and present are certain to miss the future." Most people spend their entire lives living within certain paradigms...certain ways of doing things. They find it very difficult to change to new methods. They resist change even when new methods are obviously better than the ones they have been using. Psychologists call this "paradigm paralysis"; the inability or unwillingness to try new methods. You may think you are not affected by paradigm paralysis but you are. Everyone is! The most important thing is to work hard to break out of the old paradigms and explore new ways of operating. Discovering the true power that is found in backgrounds and putting that power to work to drive the

studio is the critical turning point. Once the studio portrait photographer begins to accept that more background variety can be something worth serious consideration, they have taken the very important first step.

A New Way of Looking at "In The Studio Portraiture"

When most photographers talk about adding backgrounds in studio portraiture, they often think about it on a very superficial level. They think in terms of solid white, black or colored backgrounds. Or, they think in terms of a few different classic canvas backgrounds, or perhaps a muslin background, or perhaps a painted scenic. Or, maybe if they get extravagant, they will bring a garden trellis into the studio. When they think within these paradigm limits, they are really stuck within a box that they have to break out of. The fact is, if one is to get the full value of incorporating backgrounds, they must first recognize that backgrounds represent an entire concept that affects every aspect of the portrait making process. It is not just an isolated photographic tool. It is the background that opens the door to more creative portraiture.

Photographers should be seeking to create more of what some people call photographic "wall art." With the aid of digital techniques such as Photoshop and Painter, you can even create impressionistic portraits or a family "painting." People spend a lot of money for things to put on their walls in their homes and offices. Why shouldn't professional portraits make up a substantial part of that "wall art"?

Backgrounds are also, as you will see, a major promotional tool that can dramatically increase sales performance by drawing in more subjects and encouraging those subjects to buy more and larger prints. But, real success occurs only when the photographer becomes fully immersed in this new level of studio portraiture and begins to think about a

portrait as a composite image, which is, as stated earlier, a unique combination of subject, lighting, posing, expression, AND the background, amalgamated together to produce a result that really excites and satisfies the client to the point where they want to buy more, buy bigger, and recommend the photographer's services to others.

What else does the photographer have to promote their work that the customer can easily understand and appreciate? Many just claim to be a better photographer. That isn't enough. You can advertise cheap prices for your work, but that means less profit until it isn't worth working. With digital, photographers can offer digital manipulation from retouching to various special effects. With backgrounds, you have an unlimited opportunity to create more variety and it gets even better when the photographer further enhances their work with digital methods.

Who Moved My Cheese?

There is a wonderful little parable that has become very popular, both in book form as well as in audio tape form. It's titled, *Who Moved My Cheese* by Spencer Johnson and Kenneth Blanchard. It is basically a story about some little mice and little people who have been eating very regularly for a long time...until one day, their supply of cheese disappeared. Actually, there were many signs indicating that there were going to be cheese problems, but no one really noticed until the cheese was gone. The parable relates how different mice, and people too, reacted to the change. Some kept coming back to the exact same spot, again and again, thinking that all they had to do was to continue to do what they always had been doing because, sooner or later, their cheese was going to come back again. Other more venturesome mice, those without paradigm paralysis, moved on quickly, looking for new sources of cheese...and they eventually found not only a new source,

but a better source than before.

This situation relates very well to business. Things change. We can't control that. We can, however, control our response to the change. If we keep doing the same things thinking that what once was successful will soon be successful again, we'll experience failure. Life goes on and we have to deal with it. That which worked last year may never work again. We must find new cheese. **The worst thing we can do is to do nothing.**

The Cheese Has Indeed Moved

Like it or not, your cheese has been moved. The public no longer accepts the old styles. They show their rejection by not patronizing the portrait photographer or by spending less. This is a pervasive problem that many photographers refuse to accept. **Nevertheless, the cheese is NOT going to come back.**

Fortunately, digital processes such as Adobe Photoshop and Corel Painter are enabling the enlightened photographer to produce a whole new style of image that excites the customer. In the same way, the increased use of backgrounds by a rapidly growing number of photographers is also changing the playing field. Staying as you were is not a valid option. The cheese has gone somewhere else... bigger pieces of tastier cheese. **It's there for those who go looking for it.**

Invest For The Future

Because some photographers can't see the value of adding backgrounds in studio portraiture, they typically want to spend as little as possible on backgrounds. This is the reason they may continue to use a 10 year old painted canvas background that isn't really any different from what photographers used 50 years ago. If they really knew what an important role the background can play in enhancing their financial success, they

wouldn't hesitate to invest in backgrounds.

Investing in backgrounds is the key. It is an **expense** when you buy something and it doesn't quickly pay for itself. It is an **investment** when the dollars spent today generate new business and profits that quickly pay off the investment and then the investment continues to generate new profits for the owner. Any entrepreneur should jump at a chance to invest a few thousand dollars if they can quickly get their original investment back and then continue using the tool to generate tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars that they would not have had if they had not made the original investment. Every successful business person is continually on the lookout for such investment opportunities.

The Good News...

"There is Still Lots of Gold in Them There Hills"

There is really good news for professional portrait photographers in that most people don't have their portraits made very often. Many people go 20, 30, 40 even 50 years without visiting a professional photographer. Most people don't have many professionally made portraits on display in their homes and only a very few have large wall enlargements of their family on display. There is still a lot of potential out there that isn't being developed. That means there is still good reason to explore methods to go after it and bring it in. Most photographers fight each other over the same market segments that they have always fought over. The creative-thinking, business minded photographer is not only looking for ways to prosper with current market segments, but he is also developing entirely new ones...ones that his colleagues haven't even thought of yet.

The Bad News...

"Photographers are Typically Lousy Business People"

Running a photography business today, just about any business, is more difficult than ever before. There is more competition, more technology, more complexity, and more expense than anyone ever could have imagined. In order for a photographer to succeed, it has to be business first. Being a portrait artist is a distant second. If you wish to be successful, you have to look at everything you do from a business standpoint. Most super artistic photographers who don't pay attention to the business side are known as "starving artists." You have to be both a promoter and marketer. ***A terrible thing happens if you don't market your product...it's called nothing!***

More Bad News Millions and Millions of Competitors

The most dangerous competitor for the professional portrait photographer is the rapidly advancing amateur photographer. They are going digital. They are buying better and better cameras, often using exactly the same camera as the professional, and sometimes even better cameras. Today, cell phone cameras are selling by the millions. In a year or two, 5 megapixel cell phone cameras will be available with zoom and flash. There are thousands of kiosks where the amateur can have prints made in seconds, up to 8 x 10 and eventually larger. Amateurs have access to 30 x 40 canvas mount prints. Amateurs have access to advanced digital retouching services.

Amateurs love to shoot and today, with digital, it costs them nothing to shoot and

shoot and shoot. As stated earlier, the major difference between the amateur and the professional is the number of shots they have to take to get a good one.

In general, we as professional photographers are literally turning the business over to the amateurs. As long as professionals insist on emphasizing the candid look, such as photo-journalistic wedding photography and contemporary outdoor "candid" for portraits, professional photography as we have known it, will continue to decline. The salvation is for professional photographers to offer a level of service and products that cannot be easily duplicated by the rising tide of amateur competition.

A Dire Prediction Coming True

Some readers will remember the "Your Bottom Line" column I wrote nearly 15 years ago for the *Professional Photographer* magazine. I predicted big problems for the traditional mom and pop photographer with the potential for eventual extinction. I was ridiculed by many for writing that column. Much of that prediction is, however, coming true as evidenced by more and more photographers working part time out of their homes. There is a rapidly diminishing number of fixed commercial location full time studios. Many studios just disappear. At one time, in order to even be a member of Professional Photographers of America, you had to show that the majority of your income came from photography! Not any more!

The key word here is traditional. There will always be room for a few traditionalists just as there is interest today in some black and white work. But, there isn't a lot of room. To fight the encroachment of the ever more sophisticated amateur on one side and the big box studios on the other, independent

professional photographers absolutely must operate at new levels in order to avoid the "doom and gloom."

The New Golden Age

But, all things considered, it is a really great time to be a professional portrait photographer...and also a very challenging time. There are powerful new opportunities to demonstrate your creativity and produce new products to excite the public. While people expect more from their photographer, technology also enables the photographer to deliver more. The most exciting and powerful new technologies are digital imaging and virtual backgrounds. Digital imaging and background technology enable the professional portrait photographer to create and deliver products that not only catch the customer's eye but also bring in the cash.

Neither digital imaging nor background technology is automatic. Both require investment and both require learning and practice. ***If it were so simple that anybody could do it, including the amateur, then why would there be a need for a professional?***

Learn the Secrets

Many speakers and writers talk very loosely about revealing so called "secrets." When it comes to backgrounds, and virtual backgrounds in particular, there really have been secrets. When you finish this book, you will know the ten major secrets about backgrounds. You will soon not only know the secrets, but also the logic behind them, and specific ways to turn them into success. The tools are available to you today to take your portrait photography to the next level and collect the rewards without breaking your bank. ***Whether you actually do it or not is up to you.***

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S BACKGROUND OPTIONS

Initially, all portrait photography was done outdoors because the early technology required a lot of light. With the discovery of artificially generated light and faster film, photographers began to move indoors. The earliest studio photographers did a fairly good job of creating "sets" to make their studio pictures look like they were taken on location, but later they simplified their studio photography, especially in terms of the background. For many years, plain gray with a lighter gray spot behind the subject was standard. Today, the photographer has many different options from which to select their methods of operation, including the inclusion of various kinds of backgrounds in their portraits.



Early studio photographers made extensive use of environmental backgrounds to create a degree of naturalness in their products.



When early photographers were able to do portraits inside, they used a variety of backgrounds and props to simulate the natural environment.

1. THE REAL THING

If we are going to talk about the importance of the background, we should start with real backgrounds...taking the subject on location. A photographer typically goes on location in order to photograph subjects with specific backgrounds because they feel the background is an important component of the resultant photographs. Otherwise, why bother going on location?

For some situations, there simply is no substitute for the real thing. However, the real environment does pose a number of challenges.

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are some distinct advantages of location photography, the most important of which is that there are many things that can only be done on location. The real thing indeed has the advantage of being the real thing. Don Blair, world famous photographer and instructor from Salt Lake City, has been a master at creating spectacular scenic location portraiture. But, he also clearly recognizes the many limitations, not the least of which is physically getting to and from the location for both the photographer and the client. Transport is expensive in time and, therefore, dollars. It forces the resulting product to reflect those expenses, although most photographers don't charge nearly enough for their location work. Because location photography is expensive, it significantly limits the range of clientele who are able to pay for the service or who are willing to invest the time and effort. The photographer is limited on the number of locations that can be visited in a reasonable and prac-



Don Blair has spent much of his career creating thousands of dramatic location portraits that could only be done on location at just the right moment.



A typical family portrait taken by Don Blair. The environment is almost as important as the subjects.

tical period of time. Then there are the obvious limitations of the weather, the wind, sun, rain, cold, heat, as well as lighting, not to mention the problem of other people getting in the way and even heckling your subjects.

In many parts of the country, outdoor photography is just impossible during the majority of the year. Even in my home state of Texas, outdoor location photography is highly limited, by the extreme heat in the summer and periodic general nastiness in the winter. In the North, outdoor location photography can be restricted to just a few months and, even then, the reliability is poor. At an increasing number of parks and other settings you may have to wait in line for your turn to use the facilities, which also means many people have exactly the same backgrounds in their pictures.

Both indoor and outdoor, on-location portraiture, is often limited by a wide variety of other restrictions. Many highly desirable locations simply will not allow professional

photography under any circumstances. Others charge hefty fees to use their areas and impose strict rules. Another problem is general public traffic. It can be difficult or impossible to clear an area so the photographer can set up and shoot. Popular locations for bridal photography can be jammed with dozens of wedding parties fighting for the best sites. Both indoor and outdoor locations can be marred by undesirable elements such as a telephone pole or an ugly EXIT sign. Indoor locations often need additional lighting to light the background as well as the subject.

A critical business matter that the photographer must remember is to charge enough to cover the much higher costs of location work. Among the things that must be taken into consideration is the longer consultation time in planning a location shoot, the time spent packing the equipment and transporting it to the site and returning the equipment, extra wear and tear on the equipment, increased risk of accidents, including liability, as well as the fact that a location shoot usually lasts much longer than a studio shoot. Time is money. If the photographer does not adequately figure his true costs of location work, what may look like a high profit shoot may actually be a loss.

The Mini-Park

Some photographers build "mini-parks" behind or near their studio to try to capture at least some minimal form of location look. Most studios can build some type of mini-park. It may be on the roof or in a converted alley way. It may be necessary to build a high privacy fence and bring in large plants and trees. Most mini-parks include small bridges, park benches, old fence rails and barn siding. The creative photographer can come up with a variety of ideas, even when space is extremely limited. Seasonal flowers can be used to complement the environment.

Mini-parks can be expensive to build and maintain. They are actually quite limited in the

variety that is possible, plus they are obviously limited by the elements, including darkness. Some studios simply don't have space for a mini-park, no matter what the cost. However, establishing a mini-park should be a consideration for most studios.

Don Feltner of Colorado was an early developer of the mini-park concept and even wrote a book on how to do it. Mini-parks expand the photographer's variety of backgrounds and represent a major advantage over plain studio photography. Even if the mini-park is seldom used, compared with other types of backgrounds, its existence can be promoted in studio advertising, which attracts clients whether or not the outdoor park is actually used.

Now mostly retired, Don Feltner is an amazing ball of energy and has many ideas for marketing a portrait studio. In addition to his Mini-Park book, Don also still has available samples of his marketing material. He does some speaking as well. He may be reached at 3223 Lamar, Wheatridge, Colorado 80033.



Jerry Costanzo of McKeesport, Pennsylvania has made extensive use of his mini-park located just behind his studio. He very effectively blocks out the busy commercial traffic that surrounds his building, providing him with a very natural setting. Jerry's mini-park helps to separate him from other area photographers.



Portions of Jerry Costanzo's mini-park may even be used in winter. Clients move from one set to another.



The real environment also includes a wide variety of unpredictable and unpleasant elements!



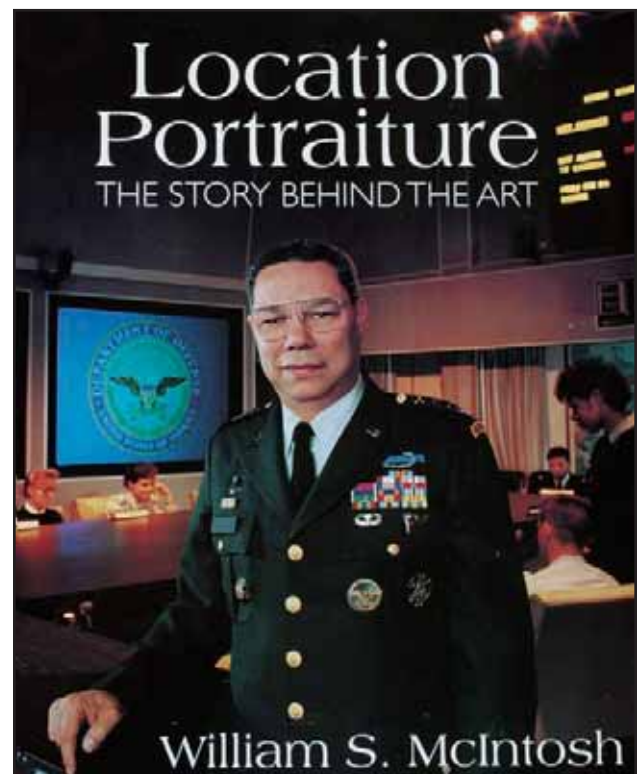
The Work of William McIntosh

One of today's most outstanding location portrait photographers is William McIntosh of Virginia. McIntosh has created commissioned location images of a wide variety of notable people, such as General Colin Powell, and many other high profile individuals. Each of his portraits is a photographic masterpiece. Most of his images undoubtedly hang as treasured large wall portraits. What I find most notable about McIntosh's style is his method of combining the subject with a meaningful background that not only complements the subject, but also helps to tell something about the subject.

McIntosh goes to great length to capture the portrait with just the right background. Sometimes he invests a day or more just in the set up. In one case, he rented a "cherry picker" to lift him high enough to take a picture of General Grant's statue when the sun was just right. Then he photographed the subject at ground level and had the lab combine the images. Another portrait of a military commander required lining up hundreds of uniformed men and women to form the background. The final portrait was extremely impressive, but obviously only the

highest ranking officials could orchestrate such a situation.

Most of his images required a great deal of work, but for the sophisticated market he serves, his methods are highly successful and profitable. The backgrounds in just



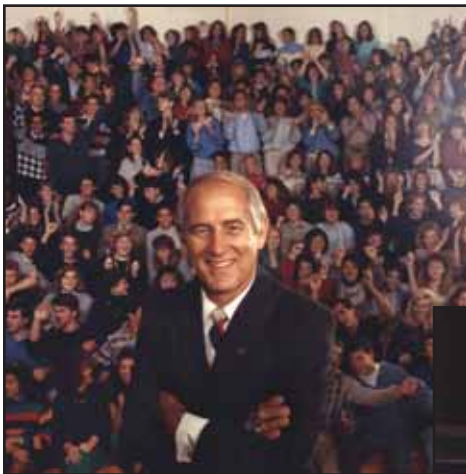
McIntosh's striking cover portrait of General Colin Powell tells a lot about both the subject and his life.

about every case play an important complementary role in the portrait. They tell part of the story about the subject.

McIntosh's book, *Location Portraiture – The Story Behind The Art* would serve as an excellent investment for any portrait photographer who would like to get ideas for ways to produce very distinctive portraiture with virtual backgrounds. The majority of his portraits could have been created with a virtual background system and some good imagination, along with good portrait technique. While all of McIntosh's work is done on location, the use of the virtual background process would be a highly cost effective way to bring classic location

portraiture to the general population. Bill McIntosh has just published a new book titled *Classic Portrait Photography*. Both books are available from Bill McIntosh.

In summary, location portraiture can yield spectacular results, but it can also be severely limiting in many different respects. The high cost of actual on location portraiture limits it to those few who are both willing and able to spend considerably more dollars and time on portraits than the average person. However, Bill McIntosh's style clearly demonstrates the power of combining subject, pose and background into a portrait that truly reflects the subject.

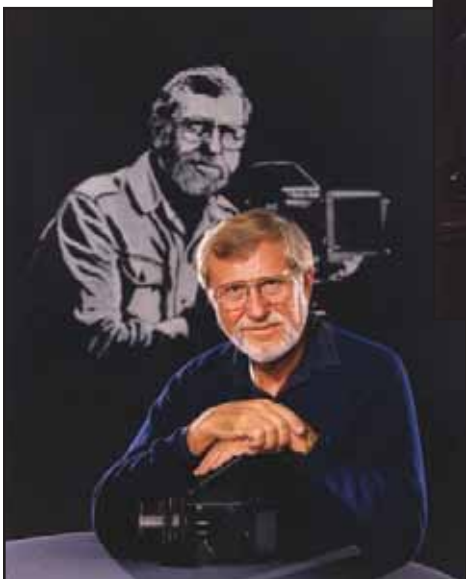


This popular high school principal has his students as a background for his portrait.

For information on
obtaining William McIntosh's
books, go to
www.portraitsbymcintosh.com or
e-mail to wsmfoto@aol.com.



A young surgeon is shown in his surgical suite environment.



A prominent wedding photographer in an environment that represents what he does in life.

This self portrait of William McIntosh clearly tells his story.

Bill McIntosh specializes in location portraiture where the background not only complements the subject but also helps to define the subject in terms of what is important in their life.

2. PAINTED BACKGROUNDS

Ever since the earliest portraits were taken indoors, photographers have been using various forms of roll down backdrops. At first, many of the roll down backdrops were quite elaborate and even somewhat realistic, as they tried to capture the environmental look even though the photography was done in a studio. As the years passed, photographers gradually moved to using a style of backdrop that was used by some of the most famous artists of the past. These artists, dating back hundreds of years and more, are often referred to as “the Old Masters” and, therefore, the smudgy painted canvas backdrops are also referred to as “Old Masters.” Another name is classic traditional canvas backdrops.

Painted Old Masters

Nearly every portrait photography studio in the world has a selection of hand-painted Old Masters backdrops. These backdrops come in a variety of colors with the most common colors being brown, blue and gray. Most have a “hot spot” painted in the center or the hot spot is created by placing a background light directly behind the subject. While creating the hot spot, the background light also cancels the subject’s shadows.

In the late 50 and 60s, many portrait photographers set aside their classic canvas and moved to a gray background with a hot spot behind the subject. This approach worked well in black and white days, but with the development of color, photographers switched back to the classic canvas look to add some color to the background to better harmonize with the subject.

Denny Manufacturing of Alabama became the predominant supplier of classic canvas backdrops, although there are dozens of other companies that produce similar backdrops. In addition, many photographers have learned to paint their own canvas back-



Typical studio graduation portrait from the 1960s using a plain gray background. The darker edge vignetting was created in the darkroom by the simple “burn in” process.



Typical studio graduation portrait taken in 2002. The basics remain unchanged except for the addition of color. While a growing number of studios offer greater variety, many still offer only the traditional look.

grounds. While classic canvas backgrounds today come in an infinite variety of colors and different designs, they fundamentally retain a common look.

Many portrait photographers, even today, use classic canvas for nearly every portrait they take in the studio. Often they work with just one background and simply vary the poses, which results in a great deal of monotony when viewing proofs, causing the subject to select one pose from the bunch that they think is the best one. This approach can clearly limit sales.

The public has come to expect to have a classic canvas background in their portrait simply because this is the way it has always been done. What is also interesting is that if one asks clients what they want in a background, many of them, especially the younger ones, will specifically say they don't want one of those old fashioned backgrounds like what was used for their parents' and even their grandparents' portraits. This, therefore, leads to an interesting dichotomy. The typical customer expects a classic background, but they don't necessarily want it. The new trend is to use classic canvas for some poses before switching to other more contemporary backgrounds. Very few studios today can be successful with only traditional backgrounds. The advent of digital cameras now makes it possible for the photographer to take more exposures with more variety which should lead to more satisfied customers and larger orders. People want more variety, from which to choose whether they are buying portraits or just about anything else.

Inkjet Printed Poster Backgrounds

A recent innovation that improved scenic backdrops was the invention of the large format inkjet printer. It is now possible to create very good quality scenic backdrops even 10 x 10 feet and larger. These are essentially photo murals. However, these

backdrops are not exactly cheap, they still require a method of storage, and they must be properly lit with back lights. The photographer must figure not only the cost of each painted backdrop, but also the cost of the roller system to raise and lower it, and the physical space the entire assembly consumes. Most studios have six or less painted or inkjet printed backdrops. The typical full size painted backdrop, including a roller, costs as much as a thousand dollars. Some can be considerably more expensive. Denny also now has inkjet printed Old Masters type backgrounds.



Image Courtesy of
Denny Manufacturing



These two full length images were created using Denny Manufacturing's large format inkjet printed backgrounds.

Muslins

Muslin backdrops became popular with professional photographers in the 80s and 90s soon after they saw the "Got Milk" television commercials which made extensive use of muslins. Muslins are comparatively cheap and can be easily draped in a wide variety of ways and then put away. The use of muslins saw a very rapid rise in popularity because it was different and then a gradual waning took place as the portrait photographer and their customers got tired of the "look" and yearned for more realism. The public sees a great deal of similarity between the muslin background and the Old Masters.

Muslin backgrounds can also be draped over and in front of the subject. Recently, muslin manufacturers have been putting more punch in their product through the process of tie dyeing. Some of the latest products are brilliantly multicolored.



MARIAN OLES

Muslin backgrounds come in an infinite variety of colors and can be used by the photographer in many different ways for both close up and full length portraits.

High Key White

Assuming the subject is dressed and posed appropriately, total white makes a spectacular background for some portraits. Photographers achieve a totally white background either by using large rolls of white seamless paper or a white canvas. It is important to cover the line between the wall and the floor so that it becomes essentially invisible and the white flows continuously.



High key white seems to come and go in popularity. It does produce a striking image, but if overused, it becomes monotonous.

The biggest problem with high key white for most photographers is properly lighting the white background so that it photographs pure white without interfering with the subject's exposure. The lighting for the background must be even and cannot be over or under exposed. Over exposure causes flare across the subject. Under exposure results in a background that is less than pure white and the subject's shadows begin to show on the background.

While high key white does indeed create a strong eye-catching background, it can quick-

ly be overused. Some photographers specialize in only high key and often find that their initial success quickly drops off unless they offer other options as well.



The Simones of Montreal have recently added a new dimension to high key by using white netting over the white background.

Projection Spot Backgrounds

A variation of high key white is the projection spot background which started to become popular about 20 years ago. Typically, this background method involves a white backdrop and a spot flash projector which is much like an ordinary but very powerful slide projector. Thin metal disks called "gobos" with various designs cut into them are dropped into the projector and the resulting light pattern is projected on the near white or colored background behind the subject. The pattern can be given a color simply by placing color gels over the projected beam. The projector is positioned along



Alton Brookshire of Odessa, Texas has made extensive use of projected spot backgrounds.

the side wall of the studio and the projection beam comes in at about a 45 degree angle so that it shows on the backdrop but not on the subject. The subject usually needs to be a considerable distance in front of the backdrop so shadows don't show in the image area and to allow room for the projected image to get behind the subject.

Many interesting abstract effects can be created with this method. However, it is very limited compared with other methods for creating similar effects such as the Designer Disks accessory for virtual backgrounds. In addition, the backgrounds created usually do not have normal brilliance or saturation because the same lighting used to light the subject also washes out the background image. However, projection spot backgrounds are a relatively inexpensive method to add a great deal of variety to otherwise traditional studio portrait photography.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Pull Down Backgrounds

The biggest advantage of using any kind of painted or pull down background is simplicity. Generally speaking, there is relatively little for the photographer to do besides placing one or more backlights to illuminate the background. High key white requires somewhat greater effort to get the proper exposure on the background. In most cases, with the exception of inkjet printed backdrops, there is nothing in the background that has to integrate with the subject except color harmony. Old Masters backgrounds have been for a long time the standard for most resumé and other basic business photographs.

The major disadvantage to these backgrounds is that they are what they are and no more. There is nothing for the photographer to modify, except in the case of muslin backgrounds, where the photographer can make some changes in the positioning of the muslin and also in projection spot backgrounds.

Painted canvas backdrops and muslins should not be totally eliminated from portrait sittings. Because the public has been trained to expect a traditional background when they visit a professional photographer, in most cases, at least a few exposures should be made in the traditional sense. This serves as what I call an “anchor,” from which the photographer can then venture. If the photographer only provides the client with more contemporary style images from which to choose, the subject or their family may well

feel that something is missing, even though they may not have chosen the traditional look if it had been presented. However, if the photographer uses a variety of contemporary backgrounds along with a few traditional “looks” and if the subject chooses only the traditional images, all is not lost. The subject got maximum variety and was able to choose the style that best fit their needs. Money is money, regardless of which background or “looks” the subject selects. It is also important that the subject leave the studio with the feeling that they had the opportunity to select from a wide range of images. This is readily achievable when the photographer uses a wide variety of backgrounds.

One key reason to continue to offer traditional backgrounds such as Old Masters and high key white is related to a concept I will mention several times in this book. With the public becoming ever more sophisticated in using their own cameras and in taking their own portraits, today’s professional photographer must offer services that the average amateur can’t do. Most amateurs don’t have Old Masters canvas backgrounds. Amateurs don’t have muslins. They don’t have the ability to do high key white backgrounds. This is, therefore, a strong reason for the professional portrait photographer to at least offer these options along with other background options discussed in this book. **The more the professional portrait photographer can clearly distinguish themselves from the amateur, the better. Otherwise, why should the public go to a professional?**

3. POLYSTYRENE BACKGROUND SETS AND PROPS

While photographers have always brought bits and pieces of the environment into the portrait studio, a Canadian company, Off The Wall Inc., perfected the polystyrene method of making sophisticated realistic looking props and even entire artificial sets specifically designed to be used in studio photography. Another major supplier of polystyrene props and sets is Scenic Design of Utah. Over the years, both companies have continually broadened their lines to include products that can also be used outdoors in a garden type setting or in "mini-parks." When used outdoors, the products are waterproof and can be tied down so they remain standing on windy days.

"Mix & Match" Nature of Polystyrene Background Components

Most of these products are designed as modular components to be mixed and matched in various ways. Off The Wall and Scenic Design offer miniatures of many of their components so the photographer can experiment with various arrangements before actually duplicating the arrangement in full size. Because of the modular construction, the same set can take on many different configurations.

The greatest advantage of polystyrene props and entire polystyrene sets is that they are full size and usually quite realistic looking. The greatest disadvantage of polystyrene props and sets is that they are full size, which means they can be heavy, bulky and difficult to store. If the photographer buys full sets, they can also be expensive. It is not unusual for a single full polystyrene set to cost as much as \$10,000 and sometimes even more. With this amount of investment, the studio owner most certainly wants to use the set as much as possible and for as long as possible. However, if the photographer continually

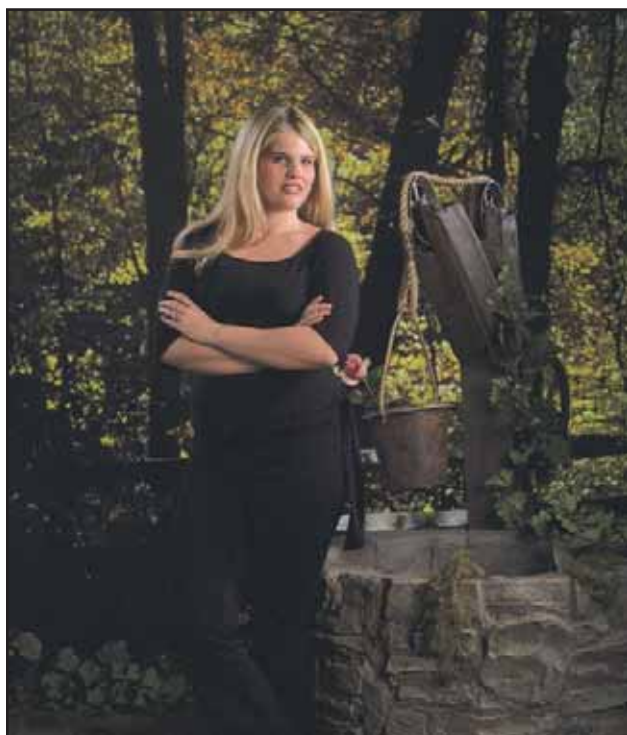


Polystyrene backgrounds require considerable time and talent to complete. A Scenic Design technician is shown putting the finishing touches on a prop.

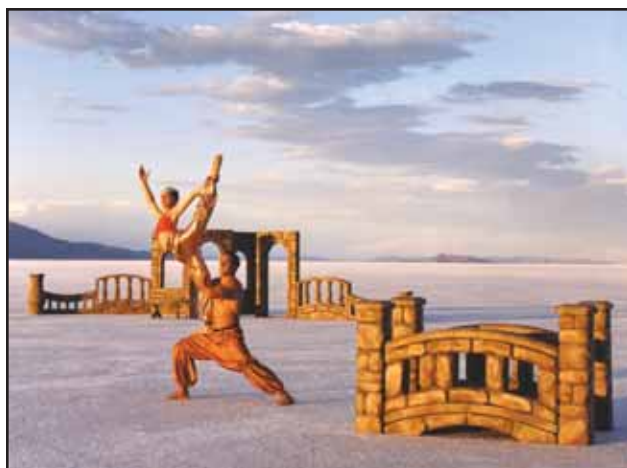


With many of the new mix and match "sets", the photographer can arrange miniatures to come up with unique set configurations before the subject comes into the studio.

uses the exact same set, that set soon becomes “old” and customers will begin to ask the photographer if they have anything new and different from what they used as a background last year. One way around this is for photographers to trade sets with other photographers, or just keep buying new sets every year, which of course can become quite expensive. Another answer is for the



The polystyrene water well forms a key part of this portrait created by Don Blair. Artificial foliage and a projected background complete the scene.



Polystyrene props from Off The Wall add a unique dimension to this image created by Don Blair in the desert just outside of Salt Lake City.

photographer to photograph their sets, sell the sets, and then use the slide of the set in a virtual background system.

Polystyrene Makes Great Props

The most ideal use for polystyrene products is for them to be used as props in conjunction with many different background methods, to provide both accent and dimension. Props can be used in front of, under, over and behind the subject. In addition, the subject can sit, stand, or lean on props. Props can be selected and positioned so that they are seamless with the remainder of the background. They need to “work” with the background. They should not just be “stuck” in the scene.

Polystyrene props are also highly useful to enhance outdoor settings. They can add infinite variety to a scene, real or virtual. Natural weathering often makes the props appear even more realistic.

When polystyrene products are used as props along with projected virtual backgrounds, they really never wear out in popularity because the polystyrene portion of an image is only a part of the total background, often just a small part. If the projected portion of the background is infinitely variable, the props take on many different looks. For example, a polystyrene archway or window takes on an infinite number of looks depending on the background that is projected through the archway or window.

I predict that photographers will replace full polystyrene sets with projected backgrounds which cost almost nothing and can look more realistic and be infinite in variety with no storage problems. Polystyrene products will shift in their application. They will become accessories to the projected background. Polystyrene manufacturers will begin to create props specifically for use with virtual backgrounds, such as the homemade set April Helsel uses as shown in Chapter 9.

It's All About Achieving Realism

Photographers often wonder why a studio portrait which was supposed to look like an actual location portrait, can look strange if not outright fake? The answer is usually fairly simple. If the subject is just placed in front of a flat background, whether that background is polystyrene, digital, projected, or painted, you are dealing with just two planes...the subject and the background. In reality there are usually many different planes in a photograph. Having just two planes contributes to making the resulting photograph look artificial. In actual location photographs, typically there can be components of the image that are in the foreground, around the subject, immediately behind the subject and in the distance behind the subject. The closer the photographer can come to duplicating this fact of life, the more realistic the results will look. Generally, as more of the body shows in the photograph, the more it is important to incorporate props in the foreground and near background.

When selecting polystyrene props, pay particular attention to the painted finish. What may look very realistic from a distance may not look very realistic close up, as the cam-

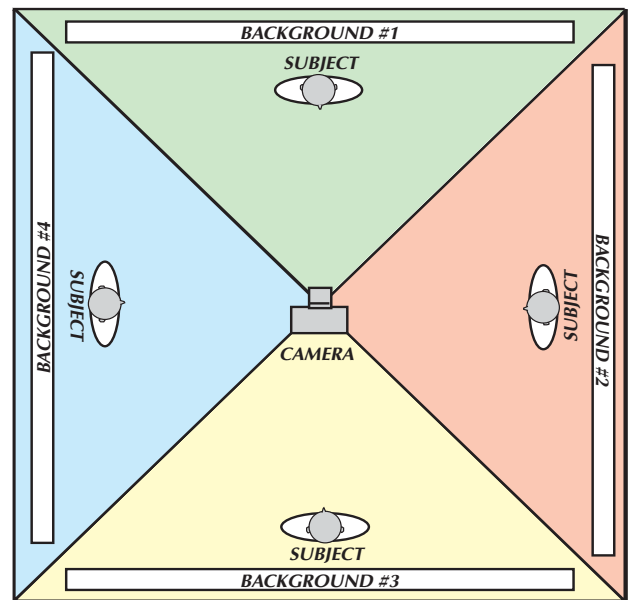


Props do not have to be elaborate. The short section of rail adds dimension and something for the subject to hold onto in this Simone portrait.

era may see it. It is always best to see a polystyrene prop in actual photographs before you choose to purchase it. Some photographers take their polystyrene props and place them outdoors for several weeks or even a few months to allow some natural weathering to take place. It is extremely difficult for the prop creators to precisely match nature, so let nature help out.

Multiple Camera Rooms

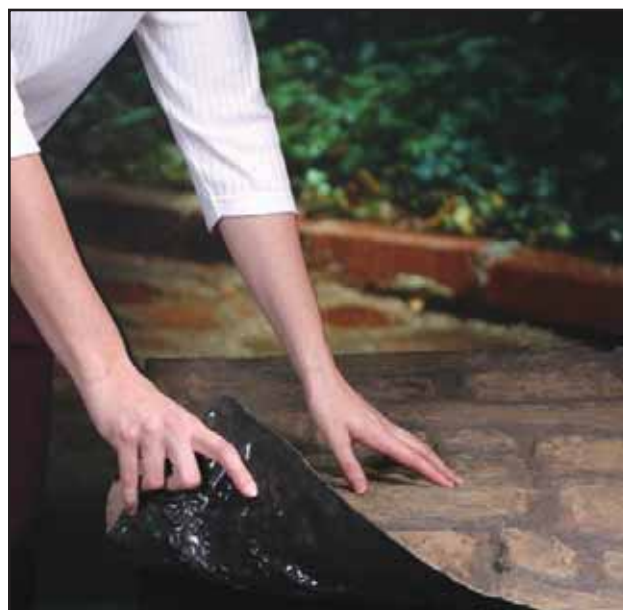
A few studios are experimenting with multiple camera rooms, each with its own individual backgrounds and props. One company developed the concept of a group of camera rooms arranged in a circle around a centrally located camera. The subjects move from room to room while the photographer simply turns the camera. The primary purpose of multiple camera rooms is to be able to quickly move a subject from one background set to the next in order to create more variety. Multiple camera rooms can be an effective way to generate more variety, but it is terribly cumbersome, limited to a few set ups, and requires more space than what is available for most photographers. Studios located in high traffic locations will have a difficult time justifying the expense involved with the additional lease space.



Some photographers make a huge investment in their effort to bring background variety to their studio photography as shown by this sketch of a quad setting camera room. The subject moves from one setting to the next.

New Artificial Floor Materials

A new product that has a great many applications is a variety of artificial floors that look amazingly real. The photographer can choose from fairly large sections of rock, flagstone, brick, and wood planks. These floors are generally large sheets of flexible rubberized material that can simply be placed on the floor in front of the background. The subjects stand on this material. The floor can be visible in front of, around, and behind the subject. The main concern for the photographer is where the artificial floor meets the wall. You would want to avoid a straight line instant transition. The transition can be made to look perfectly natural by placing some plants, rocks, a small fence or something similar at the transition point to break up the dividing line. Some of these “floors” can also be hung vertically to create a wall behind the subject.



Scenic Design was first to develop a rubberized highly realistic floor material which is now available in a variety of styles.



Scenic Design's "FLEXTEC" flooring blends beautifully with the floor in the virtual background for this full length image captured by Don Blair at the Triangle Institute.

New-Reflective Enhanced Props

New products being developed are props specifically designed to be used with the same reflective material that is used to make the virtual background screen. This incredibly reflective material can be used to create an unlimited variety of special effects depending on what it is applied to. For example, photographers frequently use the year of graduation as a prop in graduation portraits. That prop is usually painted white and, therefore, has only one color unless the photographer should want to go to the trouble of repainting it for different subjects. But, if those numbers are covered with reflective material, then the projector can be used to illuminate the numbers. Not only can they take on any color desired, but they also look as though they are internally illuminated. They glow. Imagine the response if the numbers could match the school colors!

Entire props can be covered with reflective material. For example, the Larry Peters circle was once a very popular prop, but it got "old" quickly because it was the same, year after year. However, if the face of the circle were covered with reflective material, the circle could take on an infinite variety of colors and designs.

Just about anything can be covered with reflective material to take on colors and designs and then glow. The possibilities are limited only by the imagination. If the photographer already owns a virtual background projector, there is nothing to buy other than to get the reflective material to cover your props. If you don't already have a projector, Virtual Backgrounds has just invented a very simple system which they call The Colorizer. The Colorizer simply attaches to the front of your camera. Insert a colored gel and anything covered with reflective material takes on that color. It is the absolute ultimate in simplicity and very economical to purchase. This system can also be used to produce the green or blue colors for use with Chromakey.

The possibilities created by this method are both exciting and unlimited.



Many props can be covered with retroreflective material! When light is projected on the prop, it takes on the color of whatever gel is in the projector.



The Colorizer

This very simple and inexpensive projector for illuminating props can be attached to just about any camera in seconds. It is for projecting colors only and is appropriately named "The Colorizer."



The color in the word "SENIOR" was created with "The Colorizer."

Infinite Windows

The “Infinite Window” is still another variation that combines a “real” prop with the virtual background process or with a painted scene. Imagine for a minute a home that has a beautiful arched multi-pane window in the center of one wall. Consider for a moment the components that make up this wall. There is a window, the wall around the window, some drapes on either side of the window, and a floor leading up to the wall. Then there is the view outside the window.

Now, imagine this. There is a plain wall in your studio which you can paint or wallpaper. You position the infinite window prop in the center of the wall and you hang elegant drapes on either side just as if you were decorating the real window. Instead of glass window panes, the infinite window has the same reflective material used with one of the virtual background processes or the window panes are filled with a printed scene. A carpet runs across the floor and butts up to the infinite window. Now you truly have a window with an infinite variety of scenes outside.



A window can be an infinite window when a scene is projected on it. This window was specifically created for full length work. The reflective material is just behind the panes. Some studios hang elegant drapes on either side of the window to complete the effect.



This antique leaded glass window is set in an artificial frame with a window seat. Daylight comes through the window from behind, lighting the far side of the face. The subject is warmly lit to simulate room lighting.

The photographer can pose a subject or subjects in front of the infinite window. If the window panes consist of reflective material, the scene outside the infinite window is projected with the virtual background process and can be changed in seconds. Or, you can place different painted scenes behind the window. What is outside the window can be anything the photographer can imagine that is appropriate. It can be a city skyline, day or night. It can be snow covered mountains, the national Capitol building, a lake or just trees. It's called the infinite window because the view outside the window is infinite. Even the drapes can be changed to add more variation.

Infinite windows come in many forms, ranging from large hotel lobby or mansion type windows to more simple windows and window seats. A typical studio could have several different infinite windows and window seats. Infinite windows serve as an excellent example of the results that can be obtained when combining two different background technologies.

Make Your Own Props

It is not necessary to buy all of your props. You can make many props on your own or you can find bits and pieces at places like Home Depot, Lowe's or Hobby Lobby, and assemble them into something that works. We have made a variety of extremely realistic brick walls and columns using a 1/4" inch thick product called Z-Brick. We've made fences with various components from the mega-hardware stores. The new plastic parts are very lightweight. However, they also look too perfect unless you leave them outdoors for a period to weather. We've cut down large tree stumps and mounted them on plywood with wheels so we could push them around the studio as needed. For realism, you can't beat a real tree trunk. For transportability, you can't beat one of the artificial plastic ones. A real tree can weigh a few hundred pounds, but if properly mounted on wheels, it can be wheeled around the camera room very easily.

We get many ideas for our homemade props simply by looking at photographs in magazines and other places. We always study photographs we like to determine whether or not we could reproduce the style in our studio with virtual backgrounds. To do that, we take the photograph apart in our mind, breaking it into foreground, subject, props and distant background. If it is indeed something that we could do in our studio with virtual backgrounds, we file the image for future reference when we are looking for more new ideas.

It is usually more fun to make your own props because you made them yourself and because no other studio has what you have. In addition, you usually can save some money, sometimes a lot of money.

Many pieces of furniture in your studio area can be dragged into the camera room when appropriate. For example, a leather fireside chair can sit in your reception room until you need it for a particular photograph. Many excellent props can be found at flea markets



Many excellent props can be created from the products found at your local building supply center.

or garage sales and often right in your reception area and office. Half the fun is in finding new props. The other half of the fun comes with the profits they can help you earn. Perhaps the most frequently used prop is the ficus tree. You can find these trees in many stores including Walmart and Sam's Club.

Props can play a very important role in helping to make your photographs realistic. With a little effort, you can find many ingenious ways to use them, however storage when not in use can be an issue.



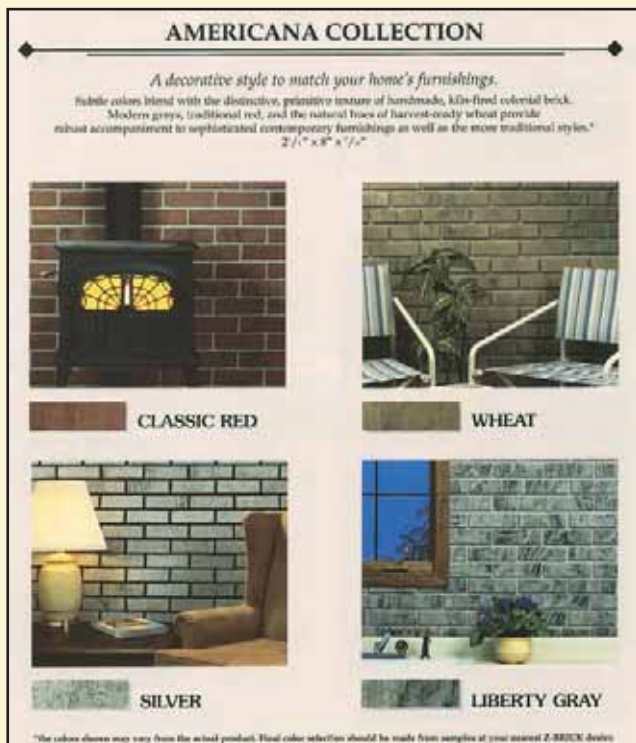
Some props can be very difficult to move around, but the biggest problem for most studios is storage.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The possibilities that come with using polystyrene props and other accessories are enormous. When used alone, polystyrene sets provide the photographer with relatively realistic indoor and outdoor settings. When used in conjunction with other background methods, such as virtual backgrounds, they often make the difference between a portrait that looks contrived and one that looks perfectly realistic. Props are not a necessary component with every virtual background portrait. In fact, props can ruin an image if inappropriately used. Some situations require props and others do not. Good sense is always required.

The major limitations include cost, physical size and weight, room for storage when not in use, and realism. Polystyrene props and sets are what they are. They cannot be easily altered in size perspective, color, focus, or brightness as can virtual backgrounds. Select your props carefully. You don't need a "ton" of props. You can get extremely good results with a very limited selection of multifunctional props. When used in conjunction with virtual backgrounds, the same props can be mixed and matched in so many different ways that they take on totally different "looks".

Create Your Own Props With Z-Brick



The "handyman" photographer can create a wide variety of inexpensive studio props using Z-Brick.



Z-Brick is less than 1/2 inch thick and very lightweight. Accessories include adhesive and grouting in different colors. Z-Brick is available through Ace Hardware stores.

4. THE GREEN SCREEN APPROACH

The digital method of inserting backgrounds is formally known as Chromakey, but more commonly known as the green screen or blue screen method. This method only works with digital files. The very complex digital technology that is involved is actually relatively simple to use. The subject is placed in

front of a bright green or blue backdrop. The subject is photographed and then, at a later time, the photographer electronically drops in a background by digitally removing all of the green or blue area in the photograph and digitally inserting in a background of choice wherever the green or blue once was. This is the same process that is used for the TV weatherman, except with the weather, the background is pasted in in real time. This

means the combining process happens instantly. The weather man can look at the monitor to see where he is pointing. Green or blue can be used so long as the subjects are not wearing a similar shade of color. If, for example, the weatherman is wearing a blue shirt and the blue screen method is being used, the blue shirt will be removed and replaced with the weather background.



Weatherman Troy Kimmel, working with a green screen background for television. The composite image can be seen on the monitor so he can "see" what he is pointing to.

CARL DEAL PHOTOGRAPHY

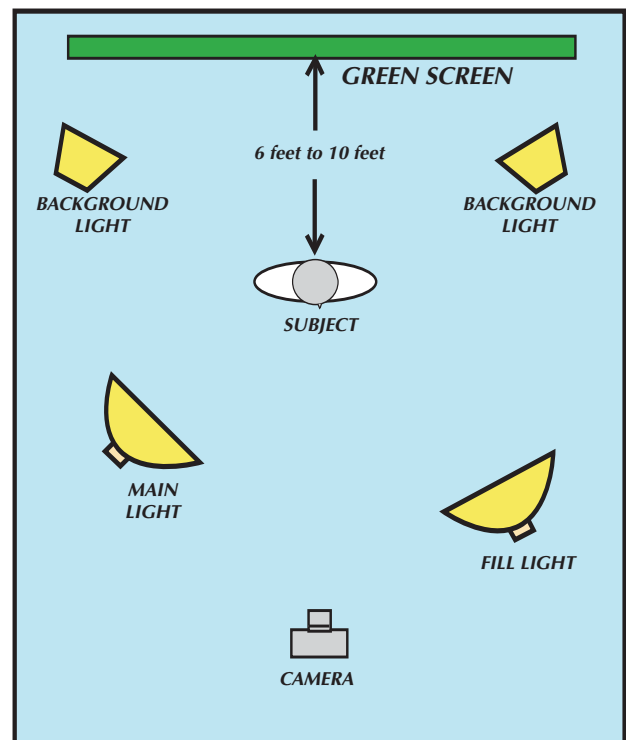
Advantages And Disadvantages

There are a number of key advantages with green screen. With this approach, the proportional size of the subject with respect to the background can be varied. That is, the computer operator has direct control over the relative size of the subject with respect to the background. The green screen method is the best approach for creating images of a real person standing with a group of virtual people or shaking hands with a virtual person. With green screen, the photographer can take

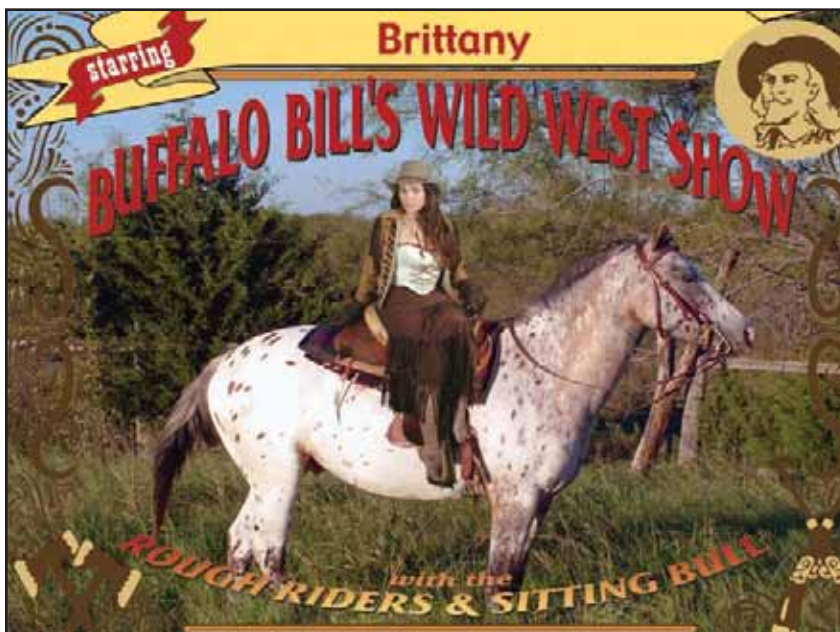
time to select a background and paste it in. In fact, the photographer can experiment with a variety of different backgrounds for any one subject pose. It is also good for certain full length applications, especially when there is extensive foreground or when the subject is especially proportionately small compared with the background. However, the pasted in look can become even more of an issue with full length work, especially if a great deal of care is not taken in using the process.

BACKGROUND POWER!

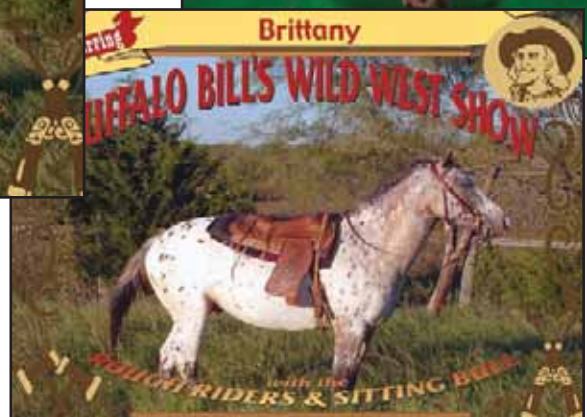
A major advantage of the Chromakey method of creating backgrounds is that it is possible to place the subject in an infinite variety of complex scenes. For example, if there was a reason to photograph a subject riding in a golf cart that is in the process of crashing into a 10 foot deep sand trap, this is a relatively simple process with Chromakey. The golfer simply is posed as if they were driving a golf cart that doesn't really exist. The golfer was simply surrounded by green. The green was then digitally replaced by the entire digitally saved scene, including even the golf cart. This feature makes the Chroma-key method very desirable for certain aspects of the event and entertainment photography specialty. Because there are usually no proofs in event photography, the background is simply pasted into every picture taken. And, because it is an event photograph, no one is all that critical about the results. If it looks pretty good, it's good enough, even if it might not look all that realistic. Green screen certainly has many applications for generating profits for a fully equipped studio.



Typical setup for green screen photography. The subject is usually at least six feet in front of the background to avoid shadows.

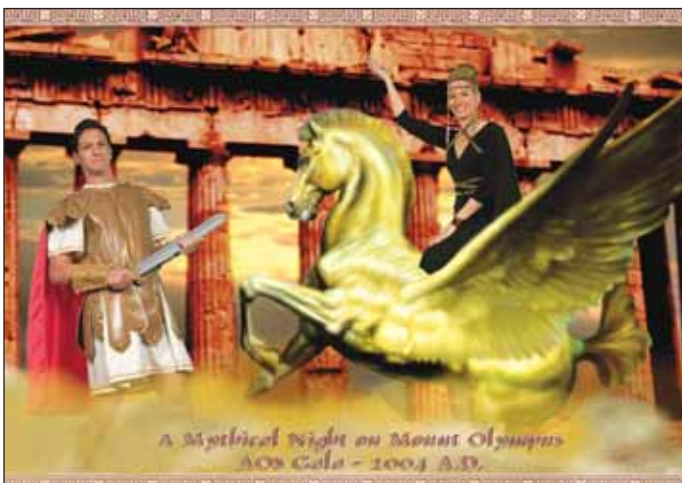
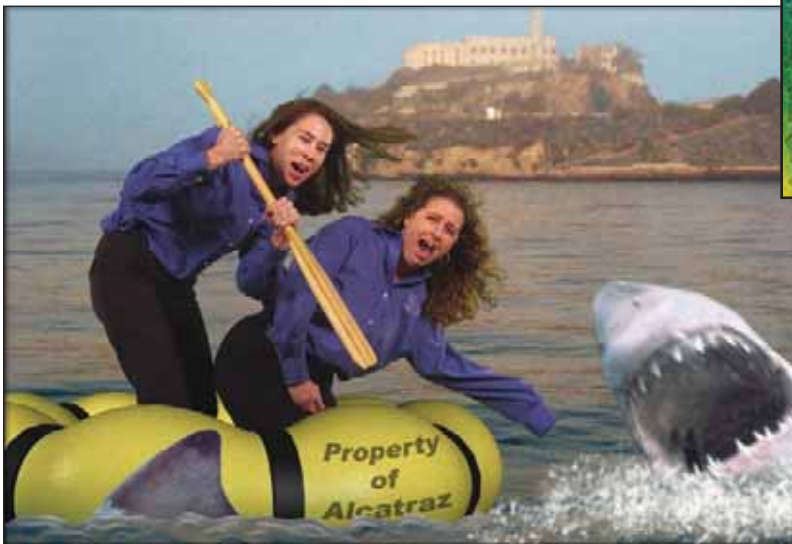
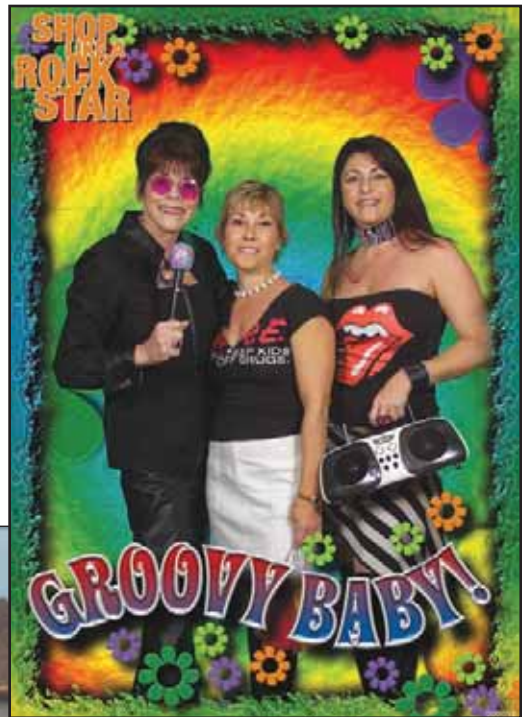


An exceptional example of the benefits of green screen for event and fun photography. This image was created by John Ashley. Ashley operates in many theme parks including the Six Flags network. (Green screen software by Tri Prism.)



Big Money in Event Photography

Many portrait photographers may frown on event photography, considering it to be such a low level of photography that it isn't worthy of their attention. Actually, there is a whole lot of money to be made in event photography. It isn't unusual for a single event to generate \$5,000 to \$10,000 of profit! High status photographers who have trouble paying their bills might be well advised to look into doing some event photography to generate some quick cash. Event photographers even have their own organization - IAPEP - International Association of Professional Event Photographers.



Each of these event function images were created using green screen technology. Images were provided by Dick Dedow at www.catchthemoment.com.



SPECIAL ISSUES WITH CHROMAKEY PHOTOGRAPHY

There are a number of reasons why the green screen method is not well suited for general portrait photography.

1. The photographer is not able to see the background as he photographs the subject, which makes it difficult to pose the subject to the background and the background to the subject. Therefore, the photographer is forced to use generic poses that can be plugged into certain backgrounds.
2. The backgrounds must be pasted in later for each and every exposure. If the photographer makes 20 exposures, he must then paste in twenty backgrounds, which can be time consuming. It would be a very poor sales method to show the client proofs with only a green background, asking them to make their selection with the expectation that a suitable background will be added later. Therefore, with Chromakey, the subject cannot immediately view their previews.
3. The green screen process very often results in a "pasted in" or "cut out" look because of the edging effect, which is especially a problem in the hair and unrealistically sharp backgrounds. Edging effect makes the subject look as if they were cut out and stuck in. The edge effect can be fixed, but it is very laborious.
4. The background color (blue or green) needs to have separate illumination, which can also bounce colored light around the studio which, therefore, affects the entire image.
5. The subject cannot wear the same color as the color used for Chromakey replacement. Subjects will often come in dressed in something that conflicts with Chromakey.
6. Chromakey screen can present problems when working with intricate props such as plants.

Digitally Cutting Out Your Subject

It is also possible to manually "cut" your subject out of any background. You don't have to even use a colored Chromakey background. When Chromakey is used, for better or worse, the cutting out process is mostly automatic. When the subject is manually cut out of just any background, the process is tedious, but a talented operator can do a very effective job with the tools that are available. The end result can be better than those achieved with Chromakey and beyond anything that can be done with optically projected backgrounds. Imagine, however, the difficulty of cutting out a tree that is in the image area as a prop along with a subject or several subjects. The work load, even for a relatively simple job can become overwhelming which, therefore, transfers into a much higher cost and more limited market for the end product. Therefore, most digitally produced background images don't have many props and certainly not trees in the foreground.

The best work I have ever seen with digitally cut out images combined with digitally

enhanced backgrounds is done by Michael Campbell. His work clearly demonstrates a whole new level for professional photography, often going beyond realism and into the surrealistic realm.

Magic and mystery, fantasy and reality intertwine on the canvases created by Michael Campbell. The background plays a very key role in nearly everything he produces. His award-winning work has appeared on the covers of many magazines including *Rangefinder* and *Professional Photographer*. He has photographed some of the world's most prominent people and has received testimonials from a wide variety of industry leaders. Moving from his native England, Campbell now resides and works in San Diego, California.

Each portrait sitting is handled much like an artist would produce a painting. It begins with an initial consultation covering every aspect of the work that is to be done, including even where the portrait will hang. This is followed by the actual photographic session and then the process of bringing in the background and overall digital enhancement. Finished wall

portraits range from \$550 to \$7,900.

In addition to his portraiture, Michael has been an active speaker and teacher. Unfortunately, the San Diego fires of 2003 nearly wiped him out, destroying his home and much of his work. Michael has understandably been down, but he definitely is not out and is currently reorganizing his studio. His work clearly demonstrates what is possible when backgrounds and subjects are uniquely combined with creative imagination. Information about Michael Campbell is available at **www.michaelcampbell.com**.

Chromakey and Adobe Photoshop are ideal methods for commercial photography, especially product photography, where the photographer or his technicians can take all the time that is necessary to make the selected print as perfect as possible. They

are also ideal for creating the exotic. For example, if you want a final image of a beautiful ballerina posed on an extremely small island in the center of a tranquil lake, there is no better way to achieve this result other than with digital tools. The results can be spectacular if you can find a client to pay for it. Another problem with cutting out your image and pasting in a background, such as what is done by Michael Campbell, is that it requires the photographer/technician to also be very much an artist. Therefore, the number of people who can do this well is very limited. On the other hand, the optical virtual background process does not require nearly the level of skill or artistic talent. However, portrait photographers should learn to create this type of product for certain special clients.



Images courtesy of Michael Campbell



Michael Campbell works his background magic by digitally cutting out the subject and then merging the subject with an appropriate background.

BACKGROUND POWER!



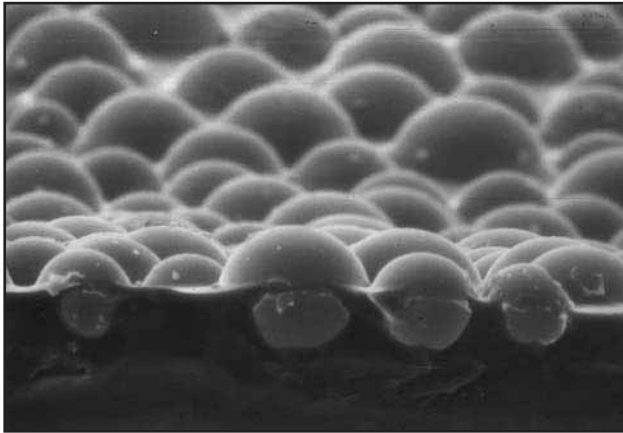
There is no limit to what the photographic artist can produce with the technical tools that are available today.



All images courtesy of
Michael Campbell.
www.michaelcampbell.com

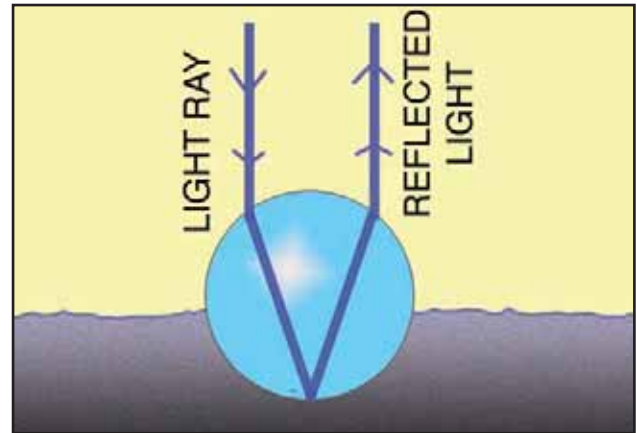
5. OPTICALLY CREATED VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS

The virtual background process was originally invented by Hollywood filmmakers to enable them to photograph outdoor scenes on the studio stage, thus eliminating the costs and uncertainties of working in the real environment. The process was eventually adapted for use in portrait photography. The early



Electron microscope photograph of special retroreflective screen showing glass beads embedded in a mastic substance. Each bead has a special reflective coating on the back side only.

systems were somewhat difficult to use, forcing the photographer to use styles of lighting that were not complementary to the subject. Recent technical advancements have improved the process to the point where the process is fully compatible with just about any normal style of subject lighting, thus removing the portrait photographer's major objection.



A diagrammatic view of how a ray of light enters a single glass bead and is reflected directly back to the source, making the screen well over 1,500 times more reflective than white. There are over 250,000 beads per square inch.



Without studio lights to illuminate it, a white sheet of paper photographs totally black while the retroreflective projection screen brilliantly reflects the projected image.

How Optical Virtual Backgrounds Work

An optically based virtual background system consists of two major components, a special projector that attaches to the camera and a special projection screen that replaces most all other backgrounds. This special back-

ground screen is 1,500 times more reflective than a plain white background. Technically, it is known as a retroreflective background because it reflects nearly all of the light that strikes it directly back to the source of the light. An ordinary white surface scatters light in every direction. A modeling lamp in the

BACKGROUND POWER!

projector enables the photographer to see the background in the camera viewfinder while he is composing. An electronic flash in the projector fires at the exact moment the camera shutter opens and the studio lights fire. The background is simultaneously recorded on film or on the digital CCD along with the subject exposure. When the shutter closes, the image is done, background and all.

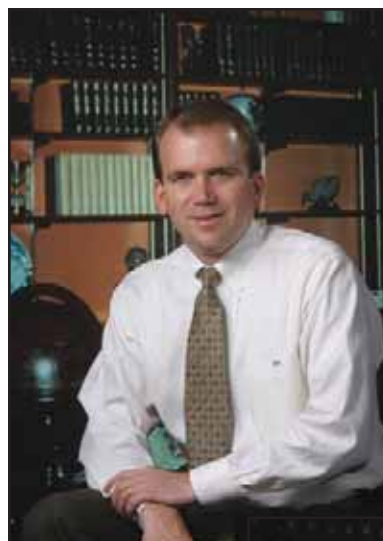
Why does the background not show on the subject since it is projected from in front of the subject? The answer is simple but tricky. Remember, the background is 1,500 times more reflective than white. This means it is 1,500 times more reflective than even the white shirt the subject might be wearing. As a result, even though the background is projected on both the subject and the background screen, it doesn't show on the subject because the subject does not reflect light as does the background screen. So, the secret is in the differential reflectivity of the subject versus the background screen. The background is brilliant on the background screen but doesn't show on the subject.



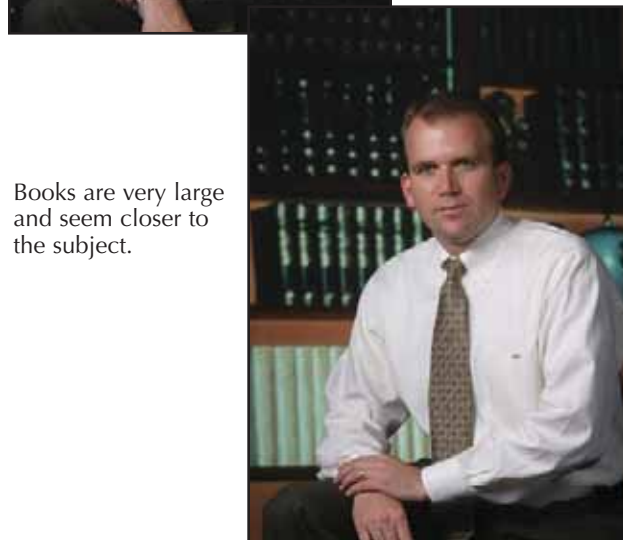
When no light is placed on the subject and the background is flashed, the person, even if they are wearing white, photographs as a perfect black silhouette.



With virtual backgrounds, the photographer simply places the slide background in the special magnetic slide carrier. The background may then be simply moved in all directions so it is properly positioned behind the subject.

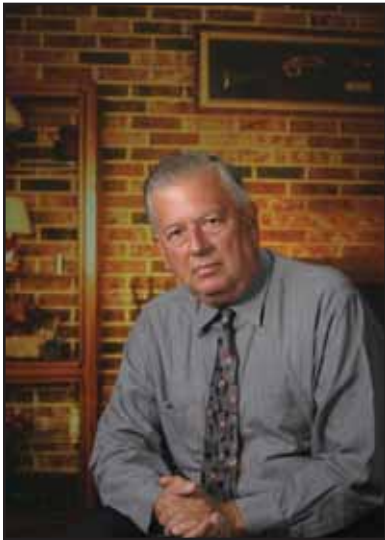


Books are relatively small and look more distant.



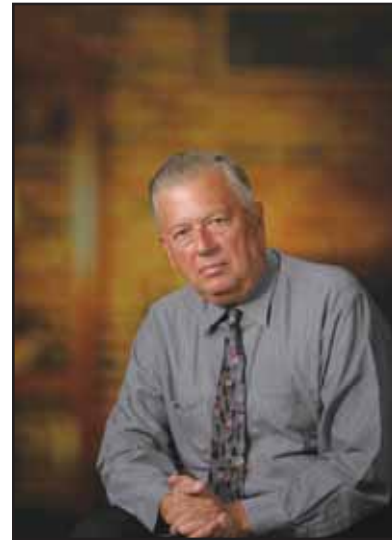
Books are very large and seem closer to the subject.

The proportional size of the background can be varied by the photographer. However it can also be made too large or too small. If a realistic background is used, the size must be reasonable.



In focus background.

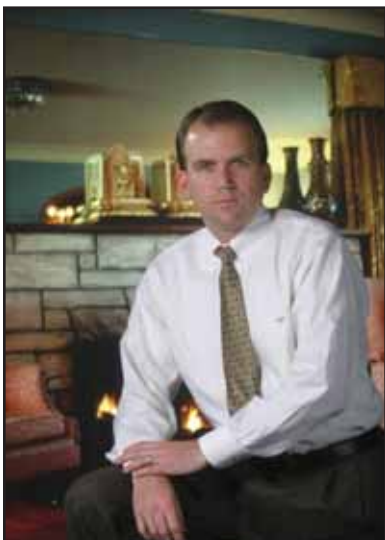
The background can be placed in focus or out of focus merely by adjusting the focus of the projector lens.



Out of focus background.

To use the process, the photographer chooses a slide transparency and inserts it in the projector. That slide then appears on the background behind the subject. The photographer can see the background and the subject in the viewfinder of the camera. The slide can be of anything...indoor or outdoor scenes, computer generated or computer enhanced images, even just colors. If the photographer completely covers up the projection lens, the background is perfectly black. If the projection lens is uncovered and if no background slide is in place, the background will be perfectly white. If a colored gel is inserted in the projector, that is then the color of the background. If an actu-

al photographic slide is placed in the projector, it will project on the background screen. Stock slides can be used or the photographer can create his own background slides using his 35 mm camera or medium format camera and transparency film like Ektachrome. It is even possible to photograph one's own canvas backgrounds and then from that point forward, simply project the canvas rather than having to use the real thing. The projected canvas can even be better than the real thing because the photographer can easily change the brightness or color hue. The photographer may also capture backgrounds on a digital camera, then optimize them and output the results to a film recorder.



Properly positioned background

With the magnetic slide carrier, the background can be easily moved. If a tree is behind the subject's head, in a second, the tree can be moved. Of course, the background should be straight.



Improperly positioned background

INSTANT COLORS



Switch from black to white or to any color in seconds simply by turning your projector off, on without a slide, or on with a color gel in place.

The process is almost unlimited and works equally well with both film and digital cameras. Any time the photographer sees what he considers a good background, he simply photographs it with his camera and brings it home to the studio where it can be reproduced any time, with the photographer in total control. Without leaving the comfort and convenience of the air conditioned studio, the photographer can project the various slide images. The photographer has total control over the background. He can vary the proportional size of the background, the focus of the background, the position of the background in relation to the subject, and even the color of the background, all without affecting the subject. The system can be used for close up photography or for full length work. It can even be used for groups.

Common Questions About the Process

A common question is “why doesn’t the subject throw a shadow on the background screen?” Actually the subject does have a shadow on the background, but because of the design of the projector, the subject “fits” their shadow perfectly, so perfectly that the shadow doesn’t show. Therefore, as far as the camera is concerned, there is no shadow. The subject actually appears “in” the scene,

not pasted in. This of course assumes the system is being properly used.

Another question that often comes up is why doesn’t the studio lighting wash out the background image? There are several factors that make this happen. The most important is the fact that the special screen used is extremely retroreflective. That is, the subject lighting that happens to hit the screen is reflected by the screen back to the studio light from which it came just as the projected background image is reflected directly back to the camera. Unless the studio lights are positioned very close to the camera, or some other unusual situation occurs, they generally will not affect the background. There are also two other factors that help reject studio light washout of the background. The first is a specially woven black net that is placed in front of the projection screen. It is called Blackscreen. The second factor that helps the background resist stray light is a special technical improvement in the screen invented by Virtual Backgrounds.

As stated earlier, the photographer sees the total image in the camera’s viewfinder, background and subject. This is a critically important feature because the photographer can, therefore, adjust the background to the subject and the subject to the background “on the fly.” For example, the photographer

can zoom the background to change the relative proportional size of the subject to the background and continuously see the results in the viewfinder. After the exposure is made, the results can be seen on the monitor. If the camera has live video feed, the photographer can see the changes on the monitor as they occur.

The photographer can also quickly reposition the slide to move the background behind the subject. If, for example, a tree branch

appears to be coming out of the subject's head, the photographer can move the tree. The focus of the background can also be changed as can the color of the background, all before the shutter is clicked. When the shutter is clicked, both the background and subject are simultaneously captured. At that moment, it's over. It's done. There is nothing for the photographer to do after the exposure. Every proof has a background in place.

Full Length Options

The photographer has several choices when it comes to doing full length photography. The options are commonly called...

- **Project a Floor**
- **Create a Floor**
- **Reflect a Floor**

"Project a Floor" involves special reflective floor panels that are covered with the same reflecting material as the background screen. The image is then projected not only behind the subject but also under and around and even in front of the subject.

"Create a Floor" involves actually creating a floor that is appropriate for the background. The floor can be a wide variety of things ranging from dark carpet that photographs black or near black to the rubberized floor mentioned earlier. With "Reflect a Floor,"

the subject stands or sits on a Plexiglas mirror. This method is ideally suited for glamour photography. It is something every virtual background photographer should try. You'll be very surprised at how it actually works. Full length is a powerful concept of studio photography. When a photographer has only standard studio backgrounds, there is little



The special ribbed floor panel, covered with projection screen, enables the photographer to do full length projected backgrounds. The background is actually projected around and in front of the subject as shown on page 2-30.

reason to do full length work. However, when the photographer has the ability to create virtual backgrounds, full length work becomes a very viable and profitable option. It is also not very difficult to accomplish as you will see throughout this book. For prom and bridal formals, full length is mandatory. It is also fun to do.



Too green

Color Balance Your Backgrounds To The Subject

With virtual backgrounds, the photographer can vary the color of the background independent of the subject simply by adding filters. It is important for the background color to harmonize with the subject.



Much better

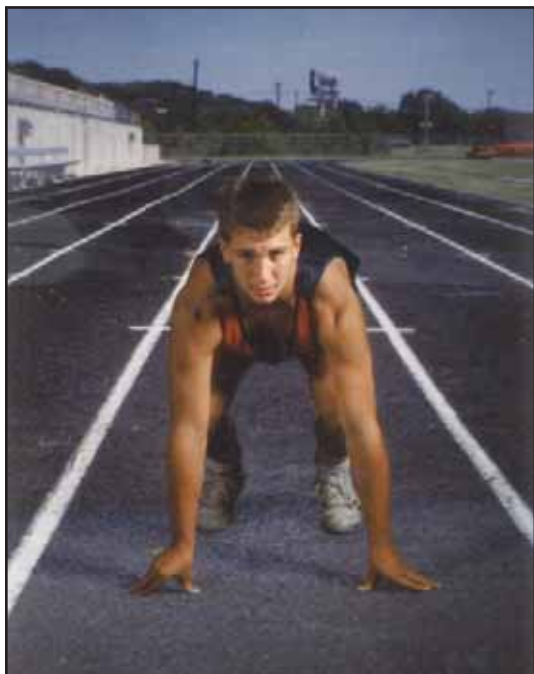


The base floor of Dean McDonald's UK studio is real stone squares. Dean covers the stone with carpets for other kinds of work. This is an excellent example of **"Create a Floor."**



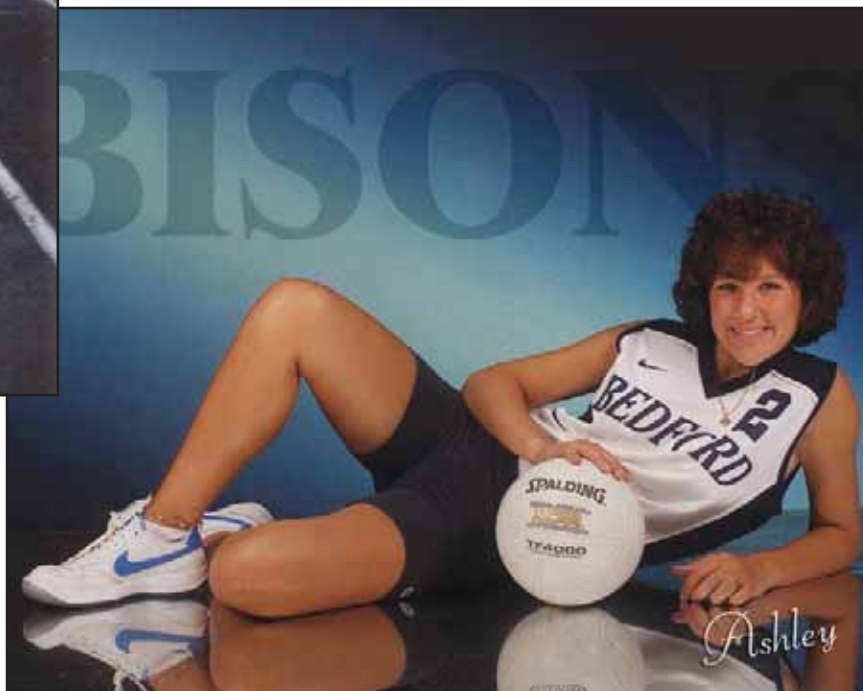
MARIAN OLES

Dark carpet forms a perfect floor for this **"Create a Floor"** full length bridal portrait. This is a simple way to do full length portraits with virtual backgrounds.



JIM WILSON

This full length image was created using the special reflective floor panels which seamlessly merge with the vertical screen. It is a great example of what can be accomplished with **"Project a Floor."**



April Helsel uses a plexiglas mirror to create this interesting **"Reflect a Floor"** image. This method is ideal for many glamour type poses.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The key advantages of using the optical virtual background method are as follows:

1. The photographer sees the background live as he composes the picture enabling him to pose the subject to the background and the background to the subject.
2. The background is done the moment the shutter is depressed. The background is on every proof which can be shown to the subject immediately.
3. The background is controlled completely separate from the subject. The same background can be sharp or soft, whichever is better for the portrait, without affecting the subject.
4. The process works especially well with props, even complex props such as trees and other plants.

An important issue is that the photographer has to be able to think dimensionally to form the composite image. That is, the photographer has to be able to perceive the total overall effect before he creates it and then he has to be able to "see it" in the viewfinder and tweak it as necessary. Then, if he is digital, he has to be able to quickly perceive any final tweaking that needs to take place when the first image is displayed on the monitor. Digital cameras are without a doubt one of the major factors that have made virtual backgrounds much more popular. When using a digital camera, the photographer learns the process much faster and is constantly monitoring every shot with instant feedback.

Before digital, the only way the photographer could actually see the subject and background in a preview was to take a Polaroid test print. Because this was a nuisance, cost over \$1.00 and consumed a few minutes of time, most photographers didn't bother and instead shot blindly which meant that they often made mistakes which frustrated them when they finally saw their proofs. Had they used the Polaroid method while they were learning the basics, there would have been a

lot less disappointment.

On the negative side, the virtual background process is so flexible that there is much for the operator to learn and control. However, the whole virtual background process can be greatly simplified by preselecting specific set ups and then it is just a matter of the photographer following a clear set of directions in order to get perfectly repeatable results. If this is done, even department store photographers can successfully use virtual backgrounds to enhance their photography.

Hybrids - Optical + Digital

Sometimes a combination of methods can yield results that would be difficult or impossible with any one method. For example, virtual backgrounds are enhanced by combining them with props such as the extensive selection of polystyrene props discussed earlier. The two methods complement each other.

If the optical virtual background system is used to project solid green or solid blue, to form a Chromakey background, this eliminates some of the problems that come with using a real colored green or blue background which has to be separately illuminated. For example, when using a standard colored green or blue background, the subject throws shadows on the background. Lighting the background to illuminate those shadows casts colored light on the subject, especially around the edge lines. With this hybrid method, it is also possible to change from one color Chromakey to another in seconds. The photographer simply has to change the color of the slide in the projector. Projecting Chromakey colors can be done with any virtual background projector including the new Colorizer system which projects colors only.

There is also the option of using this combination method for full length photography. The background can be optically projected with the special highly reflective screen while the floor is painted green. This method preserves the advantages of using projected backgrounds but adds the advantage of the green screen on the

floor where it is easiest to control. Whereas the background behind the subject is created with the standard optical virtual background process, the green screen process enables a variety of floors to be inserted digitally.

Hollywood filmmakers have made extensive use of this combination process in a variety of major films.

What About Projecting a Digital Image?

Transparencies or slides are obviously old technology. Digital video projection is new technology. Some photographers ask, "why project an old fashioned slide... why don't you project a digital image with one of the new digital projectors?" The answer is fairly simple. We have developed various background projectors that replace the normal flash module with a digital video projector... and it does work...but it isn't generally practical and the image quality is reduced. Attaching a digital video projector to a virtual background projector is a major

added expense and it considerably increases the size and weight of the unit. It also creates a number of other serious limitations including less zoom and basically more effort to achieve the same results.

In my opinion, there is generally no practical reason to go into technology that increases cost, increases equipment size and makes the entire process more complicated. The benefits are minimal compared with the limitations.

The use of slides is elegantly simple.

Some day there will be what I call a "liquid slide." Basically a liquid slide will be a transparent LCD type panel about the size of a regular traditional slide. The slide can be inserted into a virtual background projector of today's design and provide the simplicity of using today's ordinary slide coupled with the advantage of having the liquid slide coupled to a computer. Then, it will be an available option for all virtual background projectors. We look forward to that day if and when it comes.

A Virtual Background for PPA Degree Recipients



TERRY DEGLAU & ROY MADEARIS

Traditionally, PPA degree recipients were always photographed against a standard photographer's canvas background. In 2004, Terry Deglau came up with the idea of doing something different. Terry photographed the appropriate degree plaques and turned the images into slides which were projected with a Scene Machine Digital virtual background system onto an 8 x 8 screen. A Kodak DCS camera captured both the subject and the background simultaneously. All 65 recipients were photographed within an hour and finished 8x10 prints were given out at the Kodak reception a few hours later. The idea proved to be extremely successful.

Minimal Camera Room Size Needed

Some studio owners think they cannot use the virtual background process in their studio because they feel they have too little space. In reality, the less space they have, the more they need a virtual background system in order to make maximum use of the space they do have available. Although a larger size camera room is certainly desirable, it is possible to work in an area as small as 7 x 8 feet. The basic rule is, if you can operate without a virtual background system, you can certainly operate more effectively in the same space with one.

Portability

Today's virtual background systems are extremely portable. The background screen can be quickly mounted on two light stands and unrolled in minutes. The projector can be set up and operational in just a few minutes. The Spectravue systems are somewhat more portable than the Scene Machine. But even the full Scene Machine can be set up just about as quickly as a standard studio. Special carrying cases are available for both the background screen and the projectors.

The optically based virtual background process works equally as well with both digital cameras and film based cameras. It works with nearly any size camera.

Summarizing

When it comes to working with creative backgrounds, today's portrait photographer has a number of different options. Because each method offers certain advantages and disadvantages, depending on the assignment, portrait photographers should have available many different methods, to be used when best suited. This is not unlike the photographer who has a whole array of different lenses for his camera, selecting the best lens for each particular assignment. More



Even when working in a 7x9 foot area, the photographer can still generate an enormous variety of images by using virtual backgrounds. This photo shows our working studio at the 2004 PPA Convention.



A virtual background system is extremely portable. It can be set up and taken down in minutes. Custom carrying cases are available.

importantly, today's portrait photographer must give more consideration to the background options that are available to bring portrait photography to a new level.

However, as important as the background is, it should not dominate the photographer's effort. The vast majority of the photographer's time still must go to the planning and the orchestrating of the posing, the lighting and the expression. Then the background is made a part of the overall composition.

What Do We Do In Our Own Studio?

Some photographers like to view the various methods of creating backgrounds as highly competitive. This just really isn't the case. One cannot say that any one method is indeed the single best method, in part because the methods are often used together. All of the methods are designed to complement portraiture and, therefore, to sell more photography.

Obviously, one would think that any studio I was involved with would be 100% optical virtual backgrounds. Wrong! If you were to visit my wife's studio, Marian Oles Photography, in San Marcos, Texas, you would find that she offers traditional studio photography, a great deal of optically created virtual backgrounds, and some digital manipulation. She has a wide variety of polystyrene props plus many props we created or found ourselves. However, it doesn't stop there. She has a "ranch studio" where subjects can pose with a horse, or lying in the Bluebonnets in the spring or the tall grass in the fall and winter, or in a shady grove of Live Oak trees. We also offer a "beach stu-



We make good use of our real train cars and surrounding accessories as "ultimate props" for portraits.

dio" on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico where we do photography in the sand dunes and along the water's edge. We have a "train studio," actual train cars which can be used for photography as giant props and backgrounds. Subjects can be photographed in, on and around the rail cars. In addition, we'll go on location to just about anywhere if this is what the subject wants and is willing to pay for the time and effort.

Backgrounds are an important part of every one of these opportunities. Even a traditional Old Masters canvas background can be useful for certain situations. The key is to provide the customer with a wide range of options to make their portraiture opportunities more exciting than ever. Variety is an important key. Fundamental to all this, however, is good photographic techniques and good people techniques. These can never be replaced by backgrounds, no matter how elaborate.



Marian Oles Photography is located in a rustic cedar house on 27 acres which also includes a tank (pond) and horse pastures.

In the final analysis, however, if I were asked which one single background method would be considered most important or the one I would give up last, the answer is overwhelmingly in favor of projected virtual back-

grounds. This would be because it is the universal method that can incorporate so many of the primary features of the other methods. (Yes, it is nice to have the options, but projected virtual backgrounds covers so many bases.)



MARIAN OLES

Bluebonnets are the state flower of Texas. There is no better way to get great images with Bluebonnets than to immerse your subject in a Bluebonnet patch. But Bluebonnets are available for only a short time in the spring.



MARIAN OLES

A quiet moment with a horse can only be done in the pasture.



Portraits in the sand dunes are better done at the beach in the dunes, but they need to be shot early in the morning for the best results.



The majority of Marian's work is done in the studio with virtual backgrounds.



Traditional canvas backgrounds are always an option. The canvas background might be real or it might have been projected.

Return on Investment for Backgrounds

Backgrounds can be shown to be something that have a very high "Return On Investment" (ROI). Virtual type backgrounds have an exceptional ROI because once the initial investment is made, additional backgrounds cost next to nothing. The photographer can have hundreds of backgrounds that take up absolutely minimal space, like a couple of square inches. The investment in a top of the line virtual background system with a relatively large background screen is generally about equal to 6 to 10 painted canvas backgrounds with rollers. A more economical system with a smaller background screen costs about as much as 3 to 5 painted canvas backgrounds. Once this initial investment is made, the cost of adding backgrounds drops to almost nothing. As customer tastes change, the photographer simply changes the background slides. We will look at ROI for backgrounds in more detail later. Always remember that there is a price-to-value relationship. When you add variety, when you create more than just a portrait, value explodes.

Work Smarter ... Not Harder

Most photographers are looking for ways to lighten their load, and as such, they quickly reject anything that looks like it may make their life more difficult. Certainly, having to become more involved in backgrounds seems like it would be more trouble. However, that which first meets the eye may not be reality. There are many aspects of using virtual backgrounds in the studio that not only greatly expand the photographer's creativity but which also significantly lessens the work load.

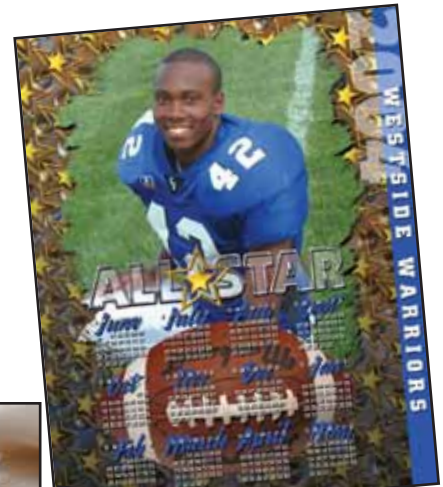
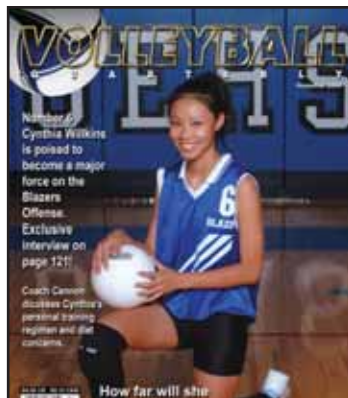
Even if using backgrounds required a little extra effort, if that extra effort brought in a lot more dollars, then the photographer may in the end work with fewer clients and still make more bottom line dollars....and have more fun along the way.

6. USING DIGITALLY CREATED OVERLAYS & COMPOSITES

Overlays and composites are not exactly backgrounds and they are not exactly foregrounds. But they do represent a creative addition to a portrait that can help to distinguish your studio as having even more creative artistry and help you sell more prints. Overlays are obviously not for every subject. They are relatively limited, but when properly used, they do excite the subject, and they do bring additional sales. Some photographers would think that overlays are beneath them. In some cases they may be. But in many other cases, overlays provide just one more opportunity to offer more variety and to get into new business opportunities. Would you go to a car dealer who had just one type of car in just a few colors available, or would you be more likely to visit a car dealer who had hundreds of new cars on the lot in all

colors and all configurations? Although this book concentrates on the benefits of background variety, more options translate into more customers and more profit.

Synchroplex Imaging was formed to enable the professional photographer to take full advantage of these new opportunities without having to become a graphic designer. Synchroplex offers design systems utilizing templates (or borders) with paste into layers, text fields and graphics assembled in multiple layer Photoshop format along with detailed tutorials. This enables the photographer to fully exploit the many special effects available in Photoshop to customize photo composites for maximum value added effect. Synchroplex provides the basic artwork and graphics. Synchroplex is continually expanding the categories and formats available. For further information, contact artdirector@synchroplex.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SYNCHROPLEX IMAGING

A COMPARISON OF THREE METHODS FOR CREATING VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS

There are three basic methods to create virtual backgrounds for portraits...the optical Scene Machine and Spectravue method, the Chromakey method which is also known as green screen or blue screen, and the more or less manual digital cut out method. Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages.

	OPTICAL PROJECTED	DIGITAL CHROMAKEY	DIGITAL CUT OUT
Photographer can see the background in the camera's viewfinder as the picture is taken	YES	NO	NO
Background is captured simultaneously with subject exposure	YES	NO	NO
Background can be instantly manipulated in terms of focus, size perspective, color, sharpness, and color	YES	NO	NO
Background is automatically on every proof and does not have to be added later	YES	NO	NO
Subject can wear any color clothing they wish	YES	NO	YES
Props can be easily used in the foreground and background to accentuate the photograph	YES	NO	NO
Customer always sees proofs with background in place	YES	NO	NO
Equally useful with both digital and film cameras	YES	NO	NO
Needs additional lighting to properly illuminate the background	NO	YES	NO
Bounce from background can affect subject color	NO	YES	NO
Best for exotic images with small subjects positioned in huge background areas	NO	YES	YES

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

So, where's the money? Where's the beef? How does the typical portrait studio owner reap all the benefits and profits from incorporating background technology in their portrait photography?

Independent business entrepreneurs, including photographers, are frequently approached with phenomenal money making schemes which too often end up making money only for the promoter and not the buyer.

Of course, there is a negative way of looking at it as well. Where's the money if you don't do something new and different? Where's the money if you don't find new ways to market your business? Where's the money if you don't change with the times? How profitable are you? Could you live comfortably on your photography income or do you have to supplement your income? Many photographers are in financial trouble. Does it really have to be that way? Is the business just going away no matter what we do or are there ways to recover the business and bring in new dollars?

Some speakers appearing at conventions and various photography schools tell the photographer to simply raise their prices and things will get better. Maybe they will, but probably they won't get better. Let's do a reality check. Imagine any business person who is having financial trouble because they are not getting enough customers who decides that the answer to their problem is to raise their prices. Business doesn't generally work that way. That business person is going to have to actually do something to make their products more desirable, more interesting and creating more demand and then maybe they can raise their prices. Most people do not just go out and look for the highest priced vendor! They are not that dumb. When you buy a new camera, do you go



When all is said and done, portrait photography is a business that must produce profits.

down to Pete's Camera Store or do you call New York? Pete is going to have to be pretty special to get your business. Why should it be any different for you?

The dream of many photographers is to make a maximum profit on the fewest number of people and with the least amount of time and effort. This means going after the very top end of the community. Sometimes that can be done, but it is extremely dangerous to base your entire business on a very, very limited population. The real money usually comes from serving the masses in a way that is profitable.

This chapter is in a way an introduction to the rest of the book. We'll be talking about a lot more ways to get to the money.

We'll show you!

Are Backgrounds the Magic Bullet?

In order to be successful with the line of thinking presented here, one must first accept the fact that just maybe backgrounds are indeed the forgotten component of studio portrait photography. Could they possibly be a “magic bullet” that leads to significant new profits? That is exactly what nearly all the rest of this book is about. That is, there are specific methods, ways of thinking and actual action plans that lead to greater financial success by way of the background. There is no magic button that you can press that pours forth money. But, there is an approach, a plan, a method, that does work and one that will bring significant results. If properly implemented, the concepts presented here work far better than you might imagine. It’s a concept that is so basic that many readers will say, “gee wiz...why didn’t I think of that a long time ago.” Money that could have been made last week or last year is gone. There is no reason to fret about it. But there is reason to discover methods to set things up for the future.

Developing New Paradigms

The first step is to plan a program to change some of your basic paradigms. This begins with accepting the fact that we are all constrained by our existing paradigms and that it will take special effort to break loose and explore new opportunities. The power of backgrounds is very clear to those who have already made the discovery and profited from the results. It is sometimes almost difficult to observe those who refuse to see the potential value of backgrounds to the point where they can’t accept clear evidence when it is right in front of them. Remember the old expression, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink?”

“Espionage” Can Yield Valuable Information

I always felt that as a businessman, if the competition was getting the action and I

wasn’t, I would go over to snoop around to find out why this was happening and if possible, I would want to copy what the competition was doing and try to even upstage them by doing it better. Most of the largest companies engage in corporate espionage. Professional photographers should do it as well. It’s just part of business.

When I was a kid, my grandfather owned a small local tavern in Ohio. Every couple of weeks, we got in the car and drove around town checking out every other tavern. We checked the number of cars in the parking lot and considered what might be going on inside to attract patrons. He not only wanted to get his share of the business, but he also wanted to develop the means for attracting more business. One method was to periodically hold dances that literally cleaned out the other taverns. Those who attended the dances were also more likely to come back on other days. The dances were one of many things he tried to do to drive business to his “Towne Tavern.”

Photographers should do similar research on their competitors. What are they selling? How fast are they delivering? How are they advertising? What are they doing that I might not be doing? What are they doing that I can improve on? Just ignoring the competition can be DISASTROUS!

Surprisingly, many photographers show no interest in checking up on the competition. They would never take one of their kids to the Walmart, KMart or Sears studio to see exactly how they operate. Perhaps what they don’t know is that what you don’t know CAN hurt you. How do you plan your operation if you don’t know what the others are doing?

Can the Big Guys be Knocked Off?

Photographers sometimes feel that they can’t compete against some of the really big photographers. Lifetouch now does a billion dollars a year in business. (That’s \$1,000,000,000

per year!) Sometimes numbers this big have no meaning. Look at it this way. Assume that the Professional Photographers of America has approximately 10,000 members. If you divide 10,000 into one billion, the result is \$100,000 per studio! **That's a big number!**

How could one possibly compete against such a giant? It's not just local photographers who think that way. It's every small business person. Walmart may be the biggest retail chain in the world, but that doesn't mean that every other retail store has to close up and let Walmart totally take over.

Giants Have Vulnerabilities... Find the Holes in their Armor

In my town, the long time owner of a restaurant with an exceptionally beautiful courtyard has been agonizing for some time now over the arrival of one franchise competitor after another. At one time, he had the most popular high end restaurant in the area, but he has watched his business dwindle. His food is still good, but he hasn't changed his methods in years. He has no specials that would really draw people in. He isn't doing much of anything different from what he did 20 years ago. He's not aggressively marketing his place. As a result, business is slow...much slower than it should be. His cheese has been moved, but he hasn't seriously sought a solution.

His business is fading away even though no other restaurant has the setting he has. The franchise places are so terribly "plastic like" by comparison. I've tried to offer him a wide variety of ideas that would bring in the business, but he hasn't followed up on any of them and he continues along day by day with more and more empty tables. As there are fewer patrons, those who do come will feel funny that so few others are there and eventually they won't come any more either.

At one time, he was able to survive simply on his reputation and his beautiful environment. But as the glitzy franchise restaurants



Walmart uses background variety but keeps it simple with inkjet printed mat boards behind the subject. This limits the use of these backgrounds to small children. Walmart will probably look at virtual systems when they get some competition.

arrived, he needed to move to a new level in order to successfully compete, but he just hasn't done it. He still maintains the basics needed to succeed, but unless he significantly cranks up his marketing, he will soon be just one more restaurant casualty... but one that absolutely did not have to happen. When I talked to him about his business, he complained about how hard it is to be an independent operator and successfully compete against the chains. However, if he would just open his eyes and look around, he would find many highly successful independents.

They simply started to work smarter!

Being the smaller operator can offer a great many advantages over the giant, but in order to succeed, they have to be flexible and capitalize on their advantages. Elephants move slowly. Rabbits can run circles around the elephant...and even drive the elephant crazy, but the rabbit can never allow itself to forget that the elephant can squash him if he isn't both careful and quick.

Find A Buddy

A sizable chunk of Lifetouch's and Olan Mill's business comes from producing church directories for church groups across the country. Many local photographers think that the family portrait business has gone away because they get so few people asking for family portraits. It has gone away from them, but it has not necessarily gone away, gone away. The national church directory companies come into town, photograph all the church families, and then move on, taking the dollars with them. Once photographed, even if the family photograph isn't all that good, the family doesn't bother to seek another family sitting from the local photographer. They are done for the year or for longer than that. The typical church directory company returns about every four to five years.

The local photographer probably feels that he cannot get into the church directory business because of the need to produce the actual printed directory. That is the main stumbling block coupled with a lack of "know how" to get into the business and make it profitable. Local printers can be ridiculously expensive because they are not set up to handle directory printing at a price that will allow the local photographer to be competitive with the national directory companies.

Alas, there is an answer. Marathon Press, a company that caters to professional photographers, has now introduced a church directory printing program for local photographers. It is a win-win situation. Marathon gets the printing business, the local photographer gets to photograph the church families, and the church families get to work with a local professional photographer. In addition, if the church families have a good experience with the local photographer, they are more inclined to go back to the same photographer for other photographic needs.

The local photographer can do a better job than the national companies who have to send in a traveling photographer to get the job done as quickly as possible. The local photographer can take more time with each family. The local photographer can be price

competitive. And most important of all, the local photographer is local. Most churches would prefer to keep the business local if they can expect at least matching or better service and product.

Marathon also provides photographers with a workshop to teach them how to run a church directory business. While the national church directory companies make a good profit, the local photographer can do decidedly better. Whereas the regular church directory photographer may be happy with an average per family sale of \$60.00 to \$80.00, the local photographer, taking more time and producing a better product, could potentially double or triple that average along with developing a continuing relationship with the families. Can the local photographer continue to ignore this huge opportunity? I don't think so.

Church directory work is but one type of directory photography. You can also get into photographing a wide variety of other groups including the doctors, the lawyers, the police, the firemen, etc., on a local, regional or state wide basis. Any semi-cohesive group is a possibility. Modern technology may enable you to build the smaller directories in your own facility or you may simply create a directory on CD. Each directory is not only a profit maker in its own right but it is an opening to further photographic assignments with each and every subject and their families. The directory portrait can be just a ticket to other photographic opportunities.

Having a buddy like Marathon to help open the door to directory photography is not the ultimate answer. It simply removes some of the critical obstructions. In the same way, having the right camera, the right lighting and the right background is not enough. It all has to be amalgamated together into a package that has to be marketed. But, the more exciting the package, the easier it is to market and the better the results.

Other Win-Win Relationships

It is difficult to find your way to the money if you insist on going at it alone. You can usu-



One of the best ways to find out what people want in photography is to hold focus groups. Ask them and they will tell you...you should not tell them what they want.

ally get there faster if you choose to work with partners and if you make a continuing effort to take advantage of the many educational opportunities that are out there for photographers. In many ways, photographers form a "community." You can see it at conventions and association meetings. You see photographers helping photographers, even their competitors. You see genuine friendship. You see vendors working with photographers in more than a typical business-to-business relationship.

Marathon Press is a company that has discovered that if they reach out to their constituents, they will be able to help their constituents be more successful and, in turn, they will be more successful.

Besides Marathon's church directory services, they also offer other educational programs, especially in the area of school photography and in marketing. Photographers often have a difficult time with marketing because they just don't get around to creating printed materials and/or they are uncomfortable with their ability to do it or they just don't have the time. Local printers may be able to help, but they don't have any expertise specific to the idiosyncrasies of professional photography. Marathon has developed literally hundreds of advertising templates. The photographer can buy preprinted color materials and simply add their name to it, or Marathon will help the individual photographer plug in their own images and marketing message into a standard template. Or,

Marathon will help a photographer develop a completely individualized marketing program. If you don't have a Marathon Press catalog, it's time to get one. It includes a wealth of information and marketing ideas and even has a marketing education section.

Digital Photography Innovations (DPI), like Marathon Press, has reached out to its constituents by developing a total solution for photographers working in the digital environment. DPI works with labs and photographers to help them compete against the giants. DPI's Oze Digital Imaging System (ozeware.com) enables a photographer to use a single software solution.

DPI is partnering with Marathon Press to provide lab support and on-site software for



Marathon Press has many preprinted marketing materials or they will custom design to meet the photographer's need.

digital photographers interested in its new church directory services program. Moments after the sitting, the customer can select a custom-cropped pose for the directory, matched with their family name. The photographer can also offer special effects such as vignettes, soft focus, sepia tone, etc., for

additional portraits that are ordered, providing the customer with even more reasons to purchase more portraits. The images are then sent by FTP or CD to Marathon for production of the directory and to an Oze lab such as DPI for print production. DPI offers the only tether-free solution for matching images to a database. The DPI system also works well for school and senior photography or any large project requiring a catalogue of images and data.

The cheese certainly has moved for everyone. We all have a choice of watching our business go down or we can get more aggressive and at the same time, start working more cooperatively with each other including services providers like DPI and Marathon Press. By working together, the possibilities are become unlimited.

Professional photography is special because of its constant striving to further the education and abilities of individual photographers. There are many local, state and regional organizations along with the Professional Photographers of America that invest heavily in educational programs. In addition to typical convention programs, various associations hold a 5 day intensive "school" each year. There is a lot of new technology for photographers to learn about. Technology seems to be advancing almost daily. For those who want to learn, there are unlimited opportunities to learn from the best.

What photographers don't think enough about is "partnering" with other local photographers to promote the success of all professional photographers in their community. While many photographers still think their competition is the other studios in their area, their real competition is really all the countless ways the public spends their leisure dollars. If the associations of local photographers promote professional photography in general, it will help generate new business for everyone. Yes, some will get a "free ride", but one can't worry about that too much. Photographers need to worry about establishing trends such as getting the public to see professional portraiture in new ways,

promoting large wall portraits, developing ways to get more people to visit the professional portrait studio more often, and just upping the general perception of photographers and their products.

Trends don't usually just happen entirely on their own. Someone starts them. People buy what they see others having and what they think they are supposed to buy. If they go to home shows and model homes and see large family portraits on display, they'll be more likely to think about having a family portrait on display in their own home. If a group of local photographers got together and pushed wall portraits really hard, more wall portraits would start to sell. It may take a while but it will happen.

At my company, Virtual Backgrounds, we've learned that our responsibility is not nearly done when a sale is completed. It is obviously in our best interest that our customers are maximally successful. If our customers are successful, they will be more likely to tell other photographers and their machines won't show up on E-bay. This is the reason we implemented our workshop training program that is offered at no cost to system owners and we work hard to make it a fun experience. This is the reason we offer unlimited customer service by phone or via the internet. It's the reason we occasionally offer a free workshop to anyone who owns a virtual background system of any make or any age. We want to help every photographer with a virtual background system to be successful with their system, even if it is old. We are in partnership with our customers. If they fail, we fail. **Take good care of your customers.**

No one really makes it alone in anything they do in life, even if they might think that they've done it entirely on their own. One way or another, everyone has gotten an enormous amount of help in getting to where they are today. There is absolutely nothing wrong in looking for help. Look out for opportunities to work with "buddies." Look out for "win-win" situations. That's how you get to the money.

Objectivity is a Painful but Required Process

One of the hardest things to do is to take a very objective look at your business and your products. Photographers tend to get very emotionally wrapped up in their physical surroundings and their products. Too often photographers want to tell their customers what they want rather than listening carefully to their customers. I've heard it a thousand times from photographers... "I want to educate my customers." That's all well and good, but who is to say that you have the right idea? The customer is the boss. They know what they want.

Photographers are often too proud of their work to the point that they don't see their deficiencies, even when the deficiencies are blatantly obvious. This is a major reason professional photographers have print competitions so the creator of an image can get a more or less objective view of others. Of course, the viewer who really counts is the subject in the image and their family. If they are happy, the photographer was truly successful. It's the money paid that really tells the story.

It actually would be best if you brought in an outside consultant who doesn't have the emotional ties and is willing to tell you their true opinions, even if the comments are potentially upsetting. But, if you must do your own evaluation, try to separate yourself and be objective. Look at your business location. Look at your furnishings. Most important, look at the prints you have on display as well as typical every day orders that you are preparing to send out. Be critical. Always ask yourself, how can I do even better. Portrait photography involves lifelong learning.

Have you ever held a focus group to determine what it is that your various customer groups are looking for? Politicians do it. Big business does it. Why couldn't you have several focus groups to help you recognize what excites customers today about portrait photography and what they will pay? You don't have to hire expensive focus group leaders.

Ask yourself...

- *Why do customers come to me?*
- *What really makes my work special?*
- *Are my customers really satisfied?*
- *Would I know if they were unhappy?*
- *Why do people not come to me?*
- *Have I ever held one on one and group meetings with my customers to learn more about what they really would like in their photography?*
- *What significant changes have I made in the last year...the last five years?*
- *Am I keeping up with the latest trends?*
- *Is my pricing in line with what I have to offer and with what the community will pay?*
- *Are the portraits I display on my walls very similar to the ones I regularly deliver to my customers?*
- *Are the portraits I submit for competition really any different from those that I normally sell?*

You can even conduct a focus group yourself, especially if you have had experience with focus groups.

Focus groups can help you answer these questions and others. They can even come up with things you haven't even thought of. If you had a focus group and asked them about the importance of backgrounds, you would immediately learn just how important backgrounds are to your customers. But then, your next question would be, what backgrounds and poses are popular with today's clients, especially young clients? You can also ask their opinion about other studios and what you would have to do to become more successful.

Don't think for a minute that just because you were once 17 that you know what 17 year olds think like and want. If you are now 37, 47, or 57, you are far removed from today's 17 year old. You can try to pretend you are 17, but you are not and the real 17 year old will laugh at your attempts. But, you can do focus groups with 17 year olds to find out a great deal of detail about what they like and want in their photography and at the same time you can develop a good relationship. People like to be heard.

If I were specializing in senior photography, I would bring in a sampling of pre-seniors and photograph them with many different backgrounds and poses. I would let them help direct me, coming up with ideas of their own. I would then turn this into a digital slide show. The next step would be to form advisory committees from each school with which I wanted to work. The advisory committees would actually be little focus groups. You wouldn't have to pay the kids. Just do a pizza and soft drink party. Most of them would be very thrilled to come and have an opportunity to give their opinion. Keep the meeting short, but in an hour or so you could show them a variety of sample portraits and ask them to not only vote on each one but also give their opinions verbally.

Once they get into the idea of poses and backgrounds, you could also show them dozens of backgrounds for them to vote on. You could also ask them to express their ideas on senior photography, what they want for themselves and their friends, what they want for their parents, etc. You would then be getting the thoughts of today's youth on what **THEY** like and not what some adult thinks they would like. They will appreciate being asked and you will appreciate the business that can result.

While they are at your studio, give them a tour, show them your equipment, answer questions, send them home with some brochures and perhaps even some sample photographs. They will be especially fasci-



Our senior backgrounds change every year as expectations change. The backgrounds are designed by young people who know the culture and trends.

nated by your digital techniques and virtual backgrounds and props. Do it right, and you will be creating emissaries who will talk with their friends about how you listen, how you respond to their needs, about your studio, about your photography. That's how you build a business. **Listen, learn, and respond.**

Each year my company creates a new set of special backgrounds for seniors featuring the year of their graduation. We always get a young graphic artist to create the backgrounds, because they are closer to the actual age of the seniors. Generally, the further away you are in age, the more out of touch you are. Some of our older photographer customers may complain about the slides, but they are not who we are trying to please. We must please those whose images we are capturing. **After all, it's their portrait.**

Several years ago I was very much involved with a company that decided to change its logo into something management thought would be more modern. The company already had an excellent logo that was very well known in their industry, but a "hot shot" consulting group recommended an entirely new logo that I felt was a very poor choice, but my voice was drowned out. Some time later, and after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on developing and promoting the new logo, I organized a couple of focus groups to help the company chart its direction. I inserted the question, "How do you feel about the new company logo? Much to just about everyone's surprise but me, no one in the focus groups even recognized the new logo. Nearly everyone thought the company was still using the original logo which hadn't actually been used at all for more than a year. Half the group spoke up and said, "Why would you ever want to change your logo? Your original logo was perfect." The results were instantaneous. Those in the company who were bent on promoting the new logo immediately retreated and the new logo quickly disappeared in favor of the original logo. Such is the power

of well run focus groups. But, had the focus groups been held early on, hundreds of thousands of dollars could have been saved!

Ask and people will tell you their opinions. But you usually have to ask and, hopefully, you'll be smart enough to listen!

Success and Failure are Both Optional

It always disappoints me when I hear of a portrait studio that doesn't pay its bills or, in fact, closes the doors and auctions off the equipment. The standard comment is, "I just couldn't make a go in this town." Is it really true? Is it just impossible for anyone to be successful in certain communities, or are success and failure both optional?

In nearly every case, I believe success and failure are options. The portrait photographer can choose to be successful, or they can choose a path to failure. Even with all the new competition, even with all the new equipment, portrait photography can still be an important commodity for most people. Look at it this way. If a person's house is on fire and they have a chance to dash inside to save just a couple of things, what will they try to save? In almost every case, it's the photographs, including professional photographs hanging on the walls of beloved family members. That's a pretty strong indication of the importance of photographs.

You may have also noticed how many young people are dying when you look at the photographs on the obituary page of your local newspaper. But when you read the text, you find out that the person who looks 30 or so died at the age of 85. This usually means that they haven't had a photograph taken in 50 years! This represents a huge missed opportunity.

When my wife, Marian, and I first started our studio in San Marcos, Texas, we were sometimes called upon to photograph deceased people at the local funeral home. Once again, the family was desperate to have

an image because there weren't any. There is a major disconnect between how important portraits are to people and how many people don't have portraits taken.

There is a huge market sitting out there waiting to be tapped by someone. Walmart type studios basically get only the kids. Church directory photographers pick up part of the slack, but most of it goes unfilled. It's a situation a whole lot like that which is faced by the oil drilling companies. They go after the oil that is easiest and cheapest to reach, but if the oil is a little tough to get to, they leave it alone. They may even decide that there isn't any oil down there. Then an enterprising oilman comes along and tries horizontal drilling, or fracturing, or goes deeper, and suddenly they are highly successful.

Of course, it is always easier to pick the low hanging fruit, but the really aggressive business person is willing to either climb the tree to get the fruit or to shake the tree until the fruit comes down. It's easy to complain

that there isn't any way to make money in your town when in fact the opportunity is there for those who are smart enough and creative enough and energetic enough to go after it. ***Both success and failure are options. It's your choice!***

However, there is no simple path to success. I will never tell you that if you buy a virtual background system and plug it in that success is assured. Some of our customers actually think that if they plug in their new virtual background system, customers will sniff it out and start coming in, offering to pay big dollars. It doesn't work that way. Success is a compound event. There are many factors that must come together to result in success. One way or the other, success is there. It might be harder to achieve in some situations compared to others and the level of success can be higher in some locations compared with others, but success is out there. ***You can choose to be successful or you can choose to fail. It's all in you hands.***

It's All Intertwined

By now you have undoubtedly noticed that this book is about a lot more than just backgrounds. It has to be that way because I see it as all intertwined together. **Backgrounds by themselves will do nothing for you.** It is only when appropriate backgrounds are successfully integrated with lighting, posing and expression and are coupled with good business management, excellent customer care, and effective marketing that true success becomes likely.

Many years ago I thought if I just had a Hasselblad camera instead of the cheap camera I was using that everything would get suddenly better. I got the Hasselblad, but everything didn't

get suddenly better. The camera was just a tool that my customers didn't even notice. If I had put up a sign that read, "I Now Use A Hasselblad," it would have made zero difference to 99% of my customers. The really important thing was how I used the Hasselblad as part of my entire business venture. I learned that it was just one component in a total package. It is the total package that really counts.

Therefore, although this book is primarily about the implementation of various kinds of backgrounds in your portrait photography, I have chosen to present backgrounds as a key part of an integrated package of concepts which lead to success.

Return on Investment Analysis

Whenever I am trying to decide whether or not it is a good idea to purchase a particular product, I always try to determine whether or not the product will make me new money. New money is money I would not have earned without the new product. I also think about how long will it take for the new money to actually pay for the product. Once paid for, I consider the product "free" and then go on using it to generate more new profit. I also consider whether or not the new product is going to save me time and effort. And I consider what capital value it has should I choose to sell it.

I did exactly this when I decided to buy my first color lab. Basically I figured how many 8 x 10 prints I would have to make before the difference between the pro lab price and my new cost would pay for the equipment. I then went on to use the equipment to generate tens of thousands of new dollars and the equipment also enabled me to promote the benefits of being the only studio in town with its own in-house lab which would enable me to offer faster and more personalized service than anyone else.

Many people will try to show you how to get to the money whether it's by using their methods and/or by using their products. In the end, it is up to you to pick and choose the approach that is most likely to lead to the real money.

Years ago when I was thinking about buying my first virtual background unit, I thought about it this way.

- A. It sounds like a really great idea that could potentially enhance our studio operation.
- B. Even if it were a total waste of money, the amount I would spend wasn't so great that it would cause severe financial problems.
- C. If it worked, it would give our studio a definite edge over the competition
- D. If it worked only half as well as

claimed, we could generate more profit than without it.

- E. Even if some photographers had reported trouble with it, I reasoned that hopefully I was smart enough to figure it out.
- F. I saw a few sample prints that were made with the system and they looked reasonable as far as the background was concerned. I didn't like the posing and lighting or even the choice of background, but that had nothing to do with the background system. Those were photographer issues.

The decision was pretty simple. I bought it. I never regretted that decision. The equipment quickly paid for itself many, many times over. Virtual backgrounds became a cornerstone of our studio, both in terms of the photography and in our marketing. Our display portraits in our main street window were decidedly different from the traditional competition. Within a very short time, we moved our studio into the prime studio location in town. The studio that was competitive and using that space just locked the door walked away. So we moved in.

What's the R.O.I. for an Investment in Backgrounds?

You can figure your return on investment (ROI) for implementing virtual backgrounds, or for that matter, any other product if you follow this simple plan. Much that has been written throughout this book makes it intuitively obvious that the inclusion of the virtual background process can be very profitable and, therefore, a good investment. How profitable, of course, depends entirely on the photographer, how good they are as a photographer and how good they are as a promoter. Any ROI analysis is nothing more than an estimate, an informed guess. My personal rule is if anyone ever promises me absolute success I turn the other way, because I figure they are not being honest.

Many photographers spend huge numbers of dollars without seriously considering the

ROI. For example, they purchase a super new expensive digital camera back that may not help them generate any more revenue than the digital back they already have. Or they purchase an expensive digital system but then they never use it any differently than film. That purchase would, therefore, be a bad investment...one that has a very low ROI or even a negative ROI.

Here are some of the factors I would suggest that you seriously consider before you make an investment in virtual backgrounds.

1. What is my total investment if I should decide to implement a virtual background system in my studio? That number will be somewhere between \$3,000 and \$9,000 in terms of today's US dollars, higher if you buy floor panels or a very large screen. You have to determine not only how you are going to earn this total investment back in new dollars, but also how you are going to use this investment to make even more dollars.
2. If I promote the concept of more background variety with more poses and looks with more proofs, will this approach help to differentiate my studio from the others and will it bring me new customers and a better chance of securing new contracts? What's the estimated value of these benefits per week or per year?
3. If a virtual background system enables me to take more shots of a subject, with more scene changes, more outfit changes, and more pose changes, often in less time, will the results be more satisfied customers who are more likely to buy more? What's the value of these benefits per week or per year?
4. Will my customers be more likely to buy larger prints compared with my normal studio photography? What's the value of this benefit per week or per year?
5. Will my customers be more likely to recommend my services to others? What's the value of this benefit per week or year?
6. Will my investment in virtual backgrounds be likely to maintain its value and enable me to stay current by adding new backgrounds as customer trends change? What's the value of this benefit per week or per year?
7. Once I own a virtual background system, my cost of acquiring new background images drops to near zero. Therefore, I will be saving by spending much less money on backgrounds per year.
8. Will this investment make my life easier and enable me to be more fulfilled in my everyday work?

There are, of course, many other factors such as, will this investment enable me to work faster, will it encourage subjects to come to the studio more often to take advantage of seasonal specials? Will they tend to purchase more prints or larger prints?

It should be pretty obvious with only a minimal amount of consideration that the ROI for virtual backgrounds can be very, very high. The down side is almost nonexistent. The aggressive marketing minded photographer should be able to pay for the equipment very quickly using only the extra profits it made possible and then go on generating substantial additional revenue. To use a somewhat dated expression, "it's a no-brainer."

While it is possible to go to your accountant and plug in specific number estimates, this is a case where the investment is so little and the returns so high that a simple intuitive analysis clearly points to justification.

While I am obviously emphasizing the ROI factor on virtual backgrounds, determining the ROI for every type of background you may be thinking about buying is important to do. If a purchase isn't going to generate new income, you need to think seriously about why you want to make that purchase. Of course, this ROI analysis, even an informal analysis, applies to any product you may purchase for your entire studio operation. A key reason many studio operations get into financial trouble is because they make

capital purchases that don't quickly pay for themselves or they may not pay for themselves at all. The investment turns into a liability. You may be able to make a few mistakes, but each time you do make a mistake, it is like swimming with a heavier and heavier boat anchor attached to your waist. Your investments in equipment are supposed to support you like a life preserver. They are not supposed to sink you.

The bottom line for investments in your studio equipment should be...

"Do Things That Make Money."

A Simple Little Test

Here is a little test that I frequently gave to my university psychology students to demonstrate an important point. It isn't perfect, but it can tell you a little bit about yourself or about members of your staff. Take this little test right now. I'll explain what it means after you have completed it.

Take out a sheet of plain paper or use the space below and hold a pencil in your hand. The instructions are as follows: Given two parallel lines...make a design.

Give yourself a couple of minutes. There is no actual time limit. When you have decided that you are done, go to the next page for an analysis. Don't peek!

**DON'T PEEK
UNTIL YOU ARE
FINISHED!**

Evaluating Your Parallel Line Test Results:

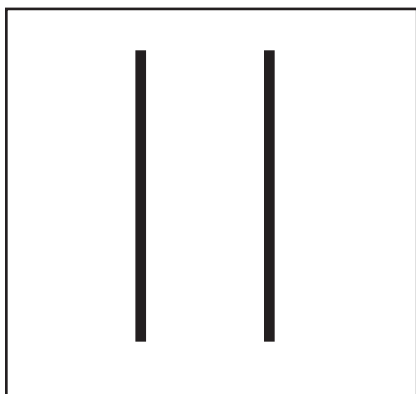
Most people who take the parallel line test will simply draw two parallel lines and do nothing more. Or, if they add anything at all, they will close in the ends and make a rectangular box or perhaps they will draw in a few additional lines and make a railroad track. The important thing is that they either add nothing at all or if they do add any lines, the new lines are all within the original lines. They do this because they were not specifically told that they could add lines and go beyond. On the other hand, they were not told that they couldn't add anything. They stayed trapped, fearful of doing something that wasn't clearly approved by the authority, in this case, me. I simply said, given two parallel lines...make a design. I didn't say anything about not adding any new lines or forbidding you to not venture beyond the lines. If you stayed inside the "box," you did it to yourself.

Why are some people more willing to venture beyond the lines than others? It is not your ability to draw freehand. The answer is never simple, but there are a few things to think about. Some people are just born more willing to venture out than others. But, even some of those venturesome people become timid when their venturesome behavior is critiqued or even punished. Remember way back when you were first learning to color? Remember being praised for staying inside

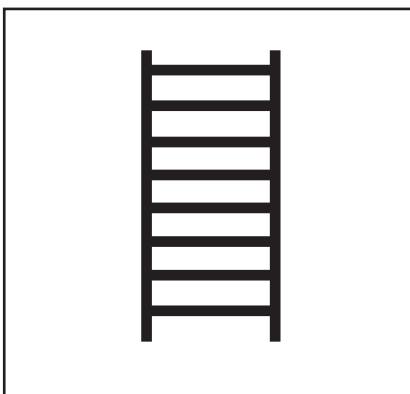
the lines? Remember being criticized for going outside the lines? Remember being criticized for using strange colors and praised for being conservative? It happens to all of us, but it affects some more than others. A fundamental law of behavioral psychology is that behavior that is punished tends to be extinguished. Behavior that is rewarded tends to be repeated.

A primary reason many photographers stayed away from using virtual backgrounds was because it wasn't an "approved method." In the beginning, very few well known leaders in the industry used the method. Today, because some of the biggest names in portraiture are now using virtual backgrounds, it's not only OK but even highly desirable. The most venturesome photographers are willing to take the biggest leaps forward in terms of creativity, such as even producing their own backgrounds and creating totally new and different looks not only for sale to customers, but also for presenting their results for print competitions for their colleagues to see.

Even if the creativity you were born with was stifled by well-meaning parents and teachers, you still have the power to regain it. The first step is to recognize your constraints. The second step is to strive to break free and be as creative and flexible as you can be. It is something you can work on every day. Dare to be different. Being creative doesn't come automatically for most of us. When there is a will, there is a way.



Afraid to do something wrong, this person does nothing. Some people call this "paralysis by analysis."



This person dares to add lines, but keeps them entirely within the parallel lines, afraid to go beyond.



This individual feels free to go way beyond the original instructions and, therefore, is the least inhibited.

Take Time To Plan Your Approach

We all typically tend to dive into things without taking time to plan. We just don't seem to have time to plan. We just don't seem to be able to find the time to develop new techniques. Or, maybe we just don't make time. We dive into the routine the moment we arrive at the business and we stay too busy until we drag ourselves home. But, most any business consultant will tell you that taking even just a few minutes every day to sit down and devote your entire attention to planning and evaluation will pay huge dividends.

Starting today, force yourself to have some planning time, once a day or at least once a week. Step aside from your normal responsibilities. Go someplace special with one purpose in mind...discovering a better way to operate your business. Let your mind creatively explore the possibilities, even the wildest possibilities. When you have a new idea, why not try it? There is always a better, smarter, and more profitable way to do things. Dare to be different. Set yourself apart from the crowd. Break free from paradigm paralysis. These few minutes that you spend exploring the possibilities will be some of your most profitable time.

You must ask yourself the critical questions and you must evaluate your honest answers. How can you get ahead if you don't know, really know, where you are or where you are going? How can you get ahead if you don't really know what your customers want? The fact is that there is a lot of money out there to be made and that you just have to stop and plan the most efficient ways to get there while you also have fun. The purpose of business is to get people to willingly take money out of their pocket and put it in your pocket. Just about anything that will help you efficiently and effectively accomplish that transfer of money will be a good investment.

In the next several chapters, I will provide you with a number of other specific ideas for enhancing your marketing, your studio promotion, and your photography in general, as well as ways to squeeze more money out of each specific job you do. The examples are only a sampling of the possibilities. You are welcome to copy them but, better yet, use the concepts presented here to come up with innumerable ideas of your own. ***The possibilities really are unlimited and so are the profits. That's where the real money is! I can show you where the money is and provide ideas about how to get it. The rest is up to you.***



YOUR KEY TO NEW PORTRAIT TECHNIQUES

Why don't more people of all ages utilize the services of a professional portrait photographer? Why don't many of those who do come into the studio buy more than they do? The answer is simple. A prime reason they don't come to a portrait studio is because they expect to not like the results they might get. They are afraid that they may not look as good as they hoped. Or, they just don't feel a need or have a reason to take the time and spend the money to have a professional portrait made.

Many of those who do come to a portrait photographer don't buy more than they do because they are not as happy with the results as they had hoped they would be. If the photographer could make them look better than they thought was possible, if they really liked the results, they would buy more and they would buy larger prints.



Most of the prints people have on display in their homes were not done by professional photographers.

A second reason is that they simply aren't pushed. People generally have to be pushed to do something. Much of that push comes through advertising and marketing.

Professional photographers simply don't do a whole lot of advertising and, very often, that which they do is poorly done.

Price is not the major issue IF there is something else of value to consider besides price. But, for many people, there is a limit as to what they will pay for photographs. People will only be willing to put so much money into portraiture, no matter how good the results, so it is important for the photographer to not let his costs get so out of hand that he has to sell the product for more than what many potential clients are willing or able to pay.

Think about it for a moment. Why do people choose a particular photographer? Value is the key word. If you knew that a particular photographer was so talented and creative that they really made your average looking friends look really good, you would be highly motivated to seek the services of that photographer for yourself. After all, if they made them look good, maybe they could make you look good. You would be disappointed if you got assigned another staff photographer. And, if indeed you were truly satisfied and proud of the results, you would place a nice order and you would continue to seek the services of that same photographer. But again, there is a limit in terms of what you would let yourself spend. If you were looking for just a standard portrait, you would probably look at Walmart or Sears.

The Emotional Component

Making a subject look really good is only part of the equation. It gets even better for the photographer and the customer if the photographer is able to introduce an emotional component to a portrait. In his teaching, my old friend, Charles Lewis, talks about the emo-

tional side of photography. If the photographer creates an image that really grabs the viewer in ways that no ordinary snapshot or portrait can, then it tugs at not only the customer's heartstrings but also their wallet. They want it. They want to display it. They want to frame it. They want it on the wall. The portrait becomes a family treasure.

Capturing the emotional component is difficult. It involves every factor over which the photographer has control, and then some. Here again, one of those factors is the background. Sometimes the background plays a minor role but, at other times, it can play a more major role. The background can be nothing more than textures or it can be as specific as a symbol of the university campus that is perfectly positioned behind the subject for a graduation portrait. Or, the background can be a special stained glass window in the church where the young bride is to be married. But one thing is certain, a standard traditional studio canvas background seldom adds to the all important emotional component. When the photographer successfully gets at the emotional component, the customer will spend more.



All these people are really your boss, **They are your customers.**

Will The Real Boss Please Stand Up?

Most photographers are independent entrepreneurs earning anything from just a few percent to 100% of their income from professional photography. Many of them went into professional photography because they wanted to be their own boss. They want to do what they want to do when they want to do it. What they probably didn't think of is that if you are in business, you may think that you are your own boss, but your real boss is the customer. It is the customer who determines whether or not they like what you do, and if they don't like it, they either won't buy your product, they will buy less, they will go to one of your competitors who does do what they want, or they won't go to a photographer at all. The only way you could be your own boss is if you are financially well set and don't have to worry about your business earning an income. Then you could do anything you want and not think one bit about what the customer wants. Or, you can do only what you think the customer wants. For me, the best solution is a merger of satisfying the customer and being creative and flexible. Customers like to choose from a wide assortment. You should provide that wide assortment for them.

The Discrepancy Between What's On the Wall and What Goes Out the Door

Most every photographer searches out their very best work to hang on the wall or place in their window display. They even include their competition prints. Many competition prints do not even involve real customers and the photographer may well have taken hundreds of exposures and then spent an enormous amount of time or money to get the chosen print made just as perfect as possible. The investment in making the convention print could very well make its retail price out of reach of 99% of the customers. The bad part about putting super fabulous prints on display

is that they set a high level of expectation for the customer, a level that is impossible to achieve with everyday customers. The customer is led to hope that the photographer may be able to perform a miracle only to be disappointed when they view the proofs. There are two solutions to this discrepancy. One answer is to reduce the quality of the prints on display. The better solution is to find a way to up the perceived quality of the everyday work that is produced.

Customers Lie

Do you think you really satisfy your clients simply because they tell you they are happy with their portraits? How many times have you been dissatisfied with the food you were served in a restaurant, but when you were asked if everything was all right, you said, 'Sure, yes, everything is just fine' and then you grumbled to yourself, "I won't be coming back to this place ever again."

Every photographer wants to be seen as being both highly creative and different from their colleagues. Because professional photographers are artists, they ideally want to be able to produce something very special for each client. They want the client to appreciate their artistic creation and, of course, unless they take pride in being a "starving artist," they want the client to pay for the effort and the resulting product. This, however, is mostly hypothetical. This is what the professional portrait photographer would like to be able to do. The realities of running an everyday studio can be quite different from the ideal. The photographer has to be extremely attentive to customer likes and dislikes. Your ear has to be on the ground, but your head can't be buried in the sand.

Modifying the Production Line Approach

Many portrait operations become production lines. This is especially true with the undergraduate school photographer. That's just the way it is. They set up a backdrop and a stool



Most school pictures haven't changed much in 50 years except for going color. 1, 2, 3... it's sit, shoot, next!



School pictures don't have to look like school pictures. This image was taken just outside the school using mostly natural light.

and a couple of lights and then the kids line up to be shot. The photographer takes maybe 15 seconds to seat the student, get him to look at the camera, and snap it's over. There is almost no creativity, no uniqueness. About the best the photographer can hope for is that the camera was set right and that the kid has his eyes open and maybe a half decent smile. In school photography, it's usually one pose, take it or leave it. It is rare for the photographer to do two or three poses and provide a choice. It would be extremely rare for the photographer to change the background as part of a sitting. Maybe the photographer will offer a different background the following year, and then again, maybe they won't. Typically, the background used is very traditional canvas.

But, what if the photographer could combine most of the elements of production line photography with production line backgrounds? For example, what if the school photographer could take three photographs instead of just one, and at the same time, use a different background for each photograph, changing from one background to the next in a second or two? Or, what if the school photographer charged one price for a standard background and charged a premium for special backgrounds? Think it can't be done? It's possible.

Unfortunately, too many of the production line methods also show up in the photography of high school seniors. Seniors want much more. They want something different. The more the photographer can please the senior and their parents, the more money they are likely to make. In fact, isn't that true for every customer that walks in your door?

Oak Veneer Can be a Good Thing

I've heard it from photographers time and again. "If I can't take my customers to the real location, I just don't want to do it. My customers don't want anything fake. They just won't stand for it. I won't stand for it. I won't

do it. I'd rather not sell it." It's an interesting but also absurd argument. Remember, the key to most business success is to provide the largest number of people with the most desirable product that they will be willing to pay for.

Let's look at the furniture industry. How much of the furniture in your home or in the furniture store is 100% solid wood, through and through? The answer is, almost none of it. Once upon a time, an oak table was 100% oak. But today, only a very, very thin veneer on all visible sides is 100% oak. Underneath the thin veneer is probably cheap particle board. Most people couldn't afford 100% oak or any other special wood. They might say they really want solid oak, but when they see the price tag, nearly all of them will settle for veneer. There also isn't enough oak wood available to produce all solid oak furniture.

Now, once you get the oak veneer furniture in your home, do you accept it or do you bemoan the fact that it isn't 100% real wood? Can you really tell the difference without looking underneath or without taking out a knife and scratching the surface? Do your guests crawl under your table to see if it is veneer or not? Of course they don't. Veneer is in for good reason. It fills the need for oak, but at a price that most everyone can afford.

In reality, veneered furniture in some respects is actually better than solid prime wood furniture. Solid wood may be more likely to warp. In the case of veneer, the manufacturer can select a very stable substrate material and apply the veneer over the top for the appearance. This results in a considerable savings, but maintains appearance. In many respects, veneered furniture vs. solid wood is somewhat analogous to virtual backgrounds vs. the real environment.

Now we even have vinyl imitation oak veneer. Very likely the desk you are sitting behind at this moment uses the vinyl imitation oak veneer. Underneath the micro-thin layer of printed vinyl is cheap particle board.

That is why you paid so little for the desk. It was a great “deal.” It isn’t until you scratch the surface that you realize just how thin the veneer really is and that it isn’t even a real wood veneer.

What about the silverware in your dining room? How many people have silverware that is 100% silver? Almost no one. Most all silverware today is silver plated. Most people could not afford, or even if they could afford it, they just would not buy 100% silver. Utensil makers still make a lot of money selling silver plated. Only a few users of the silverware would be so bold as to turn it over to see the word “Sterling” which means it is probably solid silver. And even if it were Sterling, would it really make a difference? Would the food taste any different on Sterling as compared with silver plate? I don’t think so. The makers of silver plated utensils still make a lot of profit.

So, why should a photographer be any different? If the photographer can offer nearly all the benefits of working on location without ever leaving the studio, why should the photographer not take advantage of technology and produce a better product for less, make more profit and make the client happy? In some cases, the work the photographer produces in the studio is actually better than what he could have created on location, not even considering the time and expense of going on location, just as cultured pearls are typically better than natural pearls.

A few photographers will be “purists” and insist that if they can’t do it on location, they won’t do it at all. Some of those will find a market niche and be successful, but the majority of them will not get the returns they need for the effort invested. There is a market, but a very limited market for solid oak furniture or solid silver silverware but, because of the high cost, it is a very thin market. There is an expression that goes something like this, “You can swim against the current but eventually you will be dead.”



Can you tell the difference? Is it real wood... or is it veneer? In many respects, veneered furniture vs. solid wood is somewhat analogous to virtual backgrounds vs. the real environment.



Working on location is never easy unless you are doing simple candids.

Is There Room For The Carriage Trade Photographer?

Many photographers aspire to serve only the carriage trade, shooting a very limited number of sittings for the highest possible dollars. Is this a realistic aspiration? The answer is not a simple "yes or no." There are a whole lot of "it depends." Much depends on where your business is located. Most successful carriage trade photographers are located in major metropolitan areas where there is sufficient carriage trade potential. Regardless of how much the public may like the work of a carriage trade photographer, only a small percentage can afford the prices.

A carriage trade photographer has to be really good. You can't do average work and expect to get carriage trade prices.

Of course, most photographers see their work as better than what it actually is, so this is an especially difficult issue. But as always, the public has to clearly recognize the carriage trade photographer as providing a product that is distinctively above that offered by everyone else.

A carriage trade photographer has to present an overall image of quality and elegance. It takes years and years to build up a carriage trade business. One does not become a carriage trade studio simply by raising prices by several hundred percent. That just won't work. People aren't that dumb. The carriage trade photographer has to be carriage trade throughout their entire operation. They must

also continually "circulate" with the people who could become their customers.

Joseph and Louise Simone of Montreal are two of the best known carriage trade photographers in North America. They didn't, however, get there overnight. They developed their business over 30 years. When one walks into their studio, one immediately is struck by the large incredibly creative images on display. Nothing is even near average. The walls are also lined with awards they have received in both Canada and the US as well as elsewhere. It is obvious that they are indeed true artists and those who can afford their services don't balk at their prices. In

fact, price is not an issue. To own a Simone portrait is to own a work of art. Their customers come mostly from the Montreal area, but some fly in from thousands of miles away specifically for a Simone portrait.

Simone portraits combine incredible artistry, posing and precision lighting, along with complementary



Definitely not a "run of the mill" portrait, this Simone portrait is ideally suited for the carriage trade. A free DVD showing the Simones at work in their Montreal Studio is available upon request from Virtual Backgrounds.

backgrounds, both real and virtual. The background plays an important role in just about every Simone portrait. Once a selection is made, Louise Simone then works her well known magic with Adobe Photoshop and Painter. Then the highest quality prints are produced and Joseph completes the job with exquisite canvas mounting and framing. This is how a photographer can justify selling portraits for thousands of dollars to those who can both afford and appreciate them. This is how one becomes a carriage trade photographer. There is no shortcut.



Courtesy of Marathon Press

Standard church directory photography. One background only. It makes no difference if it's a single person, young or old or a whole family. One "size" fits all. How much could sales improve if the photography were on a higher level and more individualized?

Enhancing Church Directory Photography

Church directory photographers aren't much different from school photographers. The photographer sets up a traditional canvas background and a couple of lights. The church families come at an appointed time and exposures are made of the whole family together, and then there are individual shots of the parents and the kids, and perhaps a group picture of the parents together, and one of the kids together. The process is known as "slicing"... turning what starts out as a family portrait session into individual shots as well. It's a way to expand the potential revenue. However, in most cases, everything is the same...nothing changes besides the number of faces in each photograph. The quality of the work is usually very low and it is terribly monotonous.

Time is critical. Maybe the photographer can allow 10 minutes to capture all the images of the family, the whole family group and the individuals. The background doesn't change for any of the exposures. The lighting doesn't change. It's snap, snap, snap, and next family please. It's not very exciting for the family and it certainly is boring for the photographer. Even if a single person is photographed, they are typically photographed in horizontal format with everything else the same as if a family of 6 or so were in the picture. The results can be much less than desirable.

The portrait of an individual will probably not sell. The family may purchase a few images, perhaps enough to make the directory company happy, but the question that is seldom asked is, "How much money has been left on the table?" That is, what might the results have been if a very different and more appealing style of photography had been offered? Might those families who bought nothing have made a purchase? Might those families who bought the minimum package possibly have spent many times as much if they were more satisfied? Might it be possible that if the church directory photographer had spent just a little bit more time with each family and offered a distinctively higher level of photography, would not the sales have gone up, even possibly doubling or more?

Most church directory companies don't really know the answer to these questions because they continue to do their photography exactly the same way, year after year. They are often unwilling to even test market any changes such as using virtual backgrounds to add variety or extending the length of time they spend with each family by a few minutes so they could do a better job. It's just another example of paradigm paralysis. Think about it. If just 3 more minutes per family meant \$10.00 more in sales, that's a couple of hundred dollars more profit per day. That's not bad.



If you go to the expense of getting people in front of your camera, why not go an extra step to create images they will want to buy?

What about Consistency in Church Directories?

Church directory photographers think that they have to use plain backgrounds because that is what the church leaders want. But, is that what they really want? What if the church leaders just didn't know about other possibilities until they were shown an alternative approach? If I were looking to break into the church directory business, I would analyze how it is currently being done and would immediately decide that the missing component is backgrounds and I could capitalize on exactly that, showing the decision makers that we had a better way of doing their directory photography to make it different and more modern. The big operators would all offer their traditional look. I would offer a completely new look AND the traditional look if that is what they really wanted.

If the church leaders absolutely insist on plain backgrounds for the church directory and you can't change their thinking, with the virtual background process, you would still

have another option. You can photograph the family for the directory with the chosen plain background and then immediately switch to a variety of backgrounds for the photographs that are specifically taken to stimulate sales. In this way, the customers can choose from either the plain background shots or the more location type shots. The variety provides the customer with more selection and, in the end, it doesn't matter which background selection the customer orders from...money is money. It only takes seconds to change backgrounds.

I would also stress the importance of spending just a little bit more time with each family to produce quality portraits rather than "snapshots." I would bring along some directories made by other companies that exemplify the low level of work that is being done and then show them what could be done if they used my studio. When you combine more care and attention to detail, higher quality portraits, and background variety, it's a one-two-three punch that will usually get you the contract.

Steve Meier of Ottawa, Canada has been offering background variety with virtual backgrounds for years and it has worked out quite well for him. In addition, Steve prints his own church directories using his computer printing system and then binds them. He is preparing to test the idea of providing church members with a CD or DVD instead of printing an actual book. He will offer his churches the option of a book or the digital form. Steve chooses to use a limited number of background choices because he allows just 15 minutes per family and he likes to keep it simple. He is considering expanding his background choices.

Terry Deglau, a nationally known portrait photographer from Pennsylvania, reports that his own personal church provided members with only a directory on CD. There was no printed directory. The business minded photographer will provide the church leaders with the options and let them choose. A year or two ago, the CD idea would flop. Not today.

Nearly everyone today can use the computer. Some people might prefer their church directory on a CD instead of or in addition to a printed book. This is just one more opportunity for the local photographer to offer products and services that are not now available from the national church directory companies. The more special services you can offer compared with the competition, the greater your chances for getting the contract.

A few years ago, I was debating a church directory company president, who argued strongly for plain backgrounds so he could maintain absolute consistency. I picked up one of his directories and took a look. The pictures all had a dull gray background. But,

because they were taken by different cameras on different days, there must have been a half dozen or more shades of gray backgrounds. Some were dark gray, some were lighter gray. So much for consistency! I also suggested that maybe he could use his dull gray background for the church directory photo but then go to some other backgrounds and better poses for the images he hoped to sell. He said there wasn't enough time. If I were in the church directory business, it would be a pleasure to bid against him. I could eliminate him! Paradigm paralysis can be a blessing to those photographers who don't have it because it makes their competitors so vulnerable!

Squeezing More Dollars Out of Each Customer

Many studio photographers are not really that much different from the high volume photographers. The local studio photographer may allow more time to photograph the subject, such as a high school senior. He may try to inject a little more variety including some variation in lighting, posing, and perhaps may use two or three different canvas or painted backgrounds. Here again, one must ask the question, could I have gotten the subject to have spent more if I had done some really different images? And, could I have gotten more, let's say high school seniors, to come to my studio if I were known for offering greater variety?

Professional photographers love to sell wall enlargements, 16 x 20 and larger. Wall enlargements not only bring considerable profit, but they also are very satisfying to the photographer to have one of his creations



Why is it rare for a family to have a wall portrait of their family hanging in a prominent place? **Could it be because photographers don't market it?**

hanging in a prominent location in the client's home, not to mention the continual advertising that occurs when visitors come to the home and ask about the portrait and who did it. The question is, why don't clients buy more wall enlargements? It's easy to say they don't buy them because of the price, but just maybe it isn't the price. If they just aren't happy enough with the results to justify displaying a large portrait on their wall, they won't buy it.

It is typically only when the portrait photographer offers

location photography, in the park, in the office, by the beach, that things start to change rather dramatically. The photographer becomes far more creative and expressive in the posing. The subject is posed in front of as many different backgrounds as possible. The posing is more natural. The subject is surrounded by background. If well done, sales averages zoom up. The problem is the photographer doesn't do an outdoor session every 10 minutes or even every 30 minutes. A session might easily take an hour or two, or more, especially if you add in the time it takes to get to the location, set up, shoot, tear down, and then return to the studio. With location photography, the photographer's costs zoom up, especially when he considers his time, and time is money. Therefore, the studio must charge considerably more for the location session. The cost of a location session can become so high, if the photographer is truly charging for his time, that many subjects can't afford it, and they settle for a traditional studio session or no session at all. This places the photographer in a double bind. Does he reduce the cost of a location session and hope to make it up with larger sales, or does he keep the cost of the session high and reduce the number of people he photographs?

This situation is further complicated by the development of high quality digital copy systems. How do you handle the client who takes home the proofs and makes their own enlargements at Walmart? This is a very real problem today for every photographer. If the photographer makes their prices too high, enterprising customers will find ways to copy the proofs even if it is technically illegal. If the photographer doesn't offer proofs, they will buy the minimum package and then make their own enlargements at Walmart. Even those who can afford it will use copy systems...maybe even more so than those who can't afford the photographer's prices.

What Carnival Cruise Lines Can Teach the Volume Photographer

It wasn't that long ago when cruise ship photography wasn't nearly as big of an income producer as it is today. Photographers captured passengers getting on the ship and perhaps a couple of candid shots. But, was there more money to be made? Many cruise lines' executives were satisfied with the status quo and thought they had reached the maximum income that could be produced from photography.

But, that was only the beginning. Carnival's Director of Photography and now Vice



Carnival Cruise Lines photographers pose and photograph passengers many different ways, both formal and informal. Photography is a major profit generator for Carnival.



Jerry Costanzo has had great success with creating a complete “sales book” for each senior client. The book includes not only the inkjet low resolution proofs but also a wide variety of promotional material for other products. It also helps to keep the proofs from getting copied.

President, Bob Woodry, set out to see just how far shipboard photography could go. Carnival introduced one new innovation after another including the continual upgrading of the quality of the work produced. Bob even hired world famous photographer Monte Zucker to come aboard and train the staff in the finer points of posing and lighting for group and individual portraits. On certain evenings, portable studios are set up in key locations to photograph passengers at their very best using two or three studio lights and the most elegant of backgrounds.

To make it easier for passengers to find their photographs, Bob developed a special face recognition system. When the passenger comes to the photo gallery, their face is captured and all of the photographs in which they appear are instantly displayed.

For passengers who take their own photographs, high tech one hour labs produce prints. For those passengers who bring digital cameras on board, Carnival now has Pixel Magic Imaging kiosks where the passenger can insert their media card and receive high quality prints of their choice in seconds.

Carnival leads the cruise ship industry in developing new methods for expanding on board photographic operations. Today, photography is one of Carnival’s major profit producers and a much appreciated service for the passengers. Carnival provides an important lesson for all photographers. Always make sure that you are searching to find ways to better serve the customer and produce more revenue, even when you think you have already done it all.

The Portrait Sales Book

There is usually a way around most problems, such as the problem of clients copying proofs. Jerry and Bonnie Costanzo of McKeesport, Pennsylvania have developed a very extensive customized inkjet printed sales book for each of their senior customers. The book includes all the proofs as well as information about the studio, all the options that are available including framing and special digital enhancement, special finishing, even keepsake items like a ceramic photo coffee mug. The book doesn’t replace normal selling methods in the studio, it complements them. It’s something substantial for the client to take home and review on their own and with their family.

Properly handled, the sales book method of selling can dramatically enhance sales as well as partially automate sales. Nothing replaces a top sales person who has unlimited time to spend with the client. But, having your best sales person always available and in top condition is not realistic. The sales book certainly fills in the gaps and is a continual advertisement for the studio. Many clients share their book with others. And, most importantly, the proofs can’t be copied very well.

Avoid Boring, Boring, Boring

Most photographers, especially those with digital, now take many more exposures than they did just a few years ago. A word of warning. If you are going to take more exposures, then you also have an obligation to engage in more variety in both posing and backgrounds. I’ve seen presentations of 50



Just because the photographer takes a lot of shots, without variety in lighting, posing, expressions and background, it's mostly a waste of time and opportunity. People want real variety.

or more proofs where the background was always the same and only the subject's body changed. This can be boring, boring, boring.

Think about it. We've said it before. The key element in location photography is what? Yes, the backgrounds that can be found when one goes on location. If it were not for the backgrounds, why would anyone bother to go on location? The two biggest problems of on location photography are the time involved and the lack of control. When the photographer works on location, he is subject to a myriad of problems including the weather, lighting, wind, temperature, bugs, distractions, other people, and so much more.

I've looked at this dilemma every which way and consistently come up with only one solution...use virtual background technology to bring as many of the positive features of working on location into the studio and at the same time, eliminate the negative aspects of working on location. In essence, this means bringing the backgrounds that are normally part of location photography into the studio for everyday use. It's that simple. Take the best of location work and combine it with the huge advantages that come with

working in the studio to create a unique array of products that combines the best of both worlds. It is, of course, important to also maintain the same variety in posing whether one is working on location or in the studio. But, posing variety comes naturally as you work with background variety.

Merging Location and Studio Photography

An important key to merging location photography with the studio is the virtual background system coupled with appropriate props. It is the tool that lets you grab the location environments from anywhere in the world and bring them into your studio along with anything that modifies light, such as gobos, colored gels, etc. It is the background that provides the photographer with the "license" to be more creative in their posing and lighting, just as it is the location that enables the photographer to be more creative when working on location. And, because it is so simple and quick to change from one background image to another when using a virtual background system, the photographer now has the ability to use a wide variety of



One of the best ways to sell larger portraits is to make the face small by showing more body and background. Most people don't want to see their faces too big.

different backgrounds in a single sitting. By using many different backgrounds, along with unique complementary posing and lighting coupled with appropriate props, you are able to create a variety of very different "looks." The customer will then be almost forced into buying from a number of different looks rather than just selecting the one best pose as so often happens when one background is used throughout the sitting.

How to Increase Sales for Wall Portraits

Now, let's look at another very important aspect of location photography. Why do clients very often purchase larger prints, especially wall portraits, when the photography was done on location? The answer isn't very hard to find. It has two parts. First, when a subject is photographed in the traditional studio, very often the pose is a head and shoulders pose. When the subject is on location, the photographer very often does full length and even surrounds the subject with a lot of extra background. This makes the subject's



When the face dominates, most customers buy smaller portraits. It would be highly unusual if this customer ordered anything larger than a 8x10 of this image.

face quite small as compared with a normal portrait of the same size.

When market research is done as to why more clients do not buy large wall portraits, the standard answer is , "I don't want my face that big." It usually isn't that they cost too much. So, if portraits are taken with the entire body surrounded by lots of background, the client may have to purchase a 30 x 40 to get their face as big as it would have been on an 8 x 10 standard studio close up pose. This also means that any imperfections in the face are not nearly so noticeable when the face is small in proportion to the entire portrait. Herein lies one of the major reasons photographers sell more wall portraits from location shoots. The background lets the photographer pull back and make the all important face smaller in proportion to the overall portrait. So, if this is what it often takes to better please the customer and sell more enlargements, the answer is simple...do it.

The second major reason subjects buy more wall portraits from location shoots is

because of the background. They may not be cognizant of this reason, but if you surround a not so perfect subject with a beautiful background, the background helps to complement the subject. The viewer looks at the subject's face, the subject's body and then glances around the entire portrait image and adds up all the components in a perceptual process that results in an evaluative judgment. If it all adds up, as it should, the final score the viewer gives the portrait is far higher than what might have been assigned if he were only looking at a head and shoulder pose with a plain background. Rather than distracting from the subject, the background is actually complementing the subject. The composite image is more appealing.

Therefore, if the photographer is able to utilize virtual backgrounds in the studio in order to surround the subject with a complementary background which also allows the photographer to photograph more of the subject's body, then the photographer is able to utilize the two most powerful factors of actual location photography. But, because it is now done in the studio where the photographer has full control and no travel is necessary, the process is easier for both the subject and the photographer. With virtual backgrounds the photographer can now offer more variety, more options, for less cost and in less time. This is the fundamental beauty of the virtual background processes.

Setting Up a Trend

People tend to buy what they perceive as being "in." How do they determine what's "in" at any particular time? It's what they see on television, the movies and other media or in the homes they visit. If you want to see wall portraiture flourish in your town, get your local architects and home show designers to include quality portraiture in their room displays. When the public sees it, they begin to think wall portraits must be "in" now and, therefore, develop a need for it in their home. That's how trends start. Trends don't generally happen instantly. They have

to be built, one step at a time.

How does any artist get famous? Most of the time, someone has to push their work until it is recognized. That's what an agent is for. Photographers don't usually have anyone pushing for them and, consequently, they are not nearly as successful as they could be. Photographers need "pushers."

Exploring and Developing Entirely New Markets

Let me provide one more example of how this approach can bring you a lot of new dollars. One of the most underphotographed groups is the senior citizens. The senior citizen is the most rapidly growing population in the country. Most of them haven't been to a photographer in decades. Most photographers don't bother with this market segment, thinking that they are not interested in portraiture. But, have photographers actually done the market research to find out exactly why this huge segment of the population never goes to a portrait photographer? If they did the research, they would find out that they don't go because they expect the photographer to photograph them like they photograph school kids...standard head and shoulder poses...and they know they won't like the results. So, they just don't even consider spending money on a portrait. Therefore, the photographer earns nothing and can even lose money if he does a promotion this way with senior citizens. But, what if the photographer had the ability to photograph them in a way that they would be very pleasantly surprised with the results? Is this possible?

With a virtual background system, the photographer can arrange to go to the senior citizen's center or the assisted living facility and photograph all the residents. But, by incorporating backgrounds, he doesn't do close up head and shoulder poses. Instead, he photographs every senior citizen in elegant environments, such as a richly paneled library or near a cozy wood burning fireplace. The subject is sitting on a dark leather wing back chair. They are nicely dressed and at least

half or all of their body is in the photograph. With this arrangement, their face is proportionately small in the photograph and, therefore, they are less likely to focus on their wrinkles or any other aspect of their body with which they are unhappy. A soft focus filter can do wonders.

The background is highly complementary. When they view the proofs, they and their families are very pleasantly surprised that the photographer could make them look so good and that leads to sales...sales to people who never would have thought of going to a professional portrait photographer. Show them some framed wall enlargements and you will find yourself selling 16 x 20s and larger. It's found money.

Several years ago, I photographed my very reluctant mother and dad. Dad was already 85. Mother was 80. They made the usual comments about breaking the camera lens. Besides wanting to photograph my parents, I had an ulterior motive. I wanted to show what could be done with senior citizens on a 35 mm camera in a non-traditional studio pose, with only one light, and a complementary background. They did what they had to do because their son asked them to do it. They were not very anxious to see the results. However, my mother clearly proved my point when she saw the proofs and asked for prints for the family as well as photo Christmas cards. I simply made them look better than they ever thought they would look in a photograph.

A Simple One Light Set Up With A Virtual Background



These portraits of my parents were taken a few years ago as a part of an experiment. We wanted to see the results from using a very simple set up, a 35mm film camera, and only a single light. Imagine how different the subjects would look if I photographed them close up with only a plain canvas background? They liked the images because they were pho-



tographed in natural poses, nearly full length, and with a complementary background. This type of sitting would be ideal for church directory work, especially if a second light or reflector were used. It is the background that helps set the stage for the portraits.

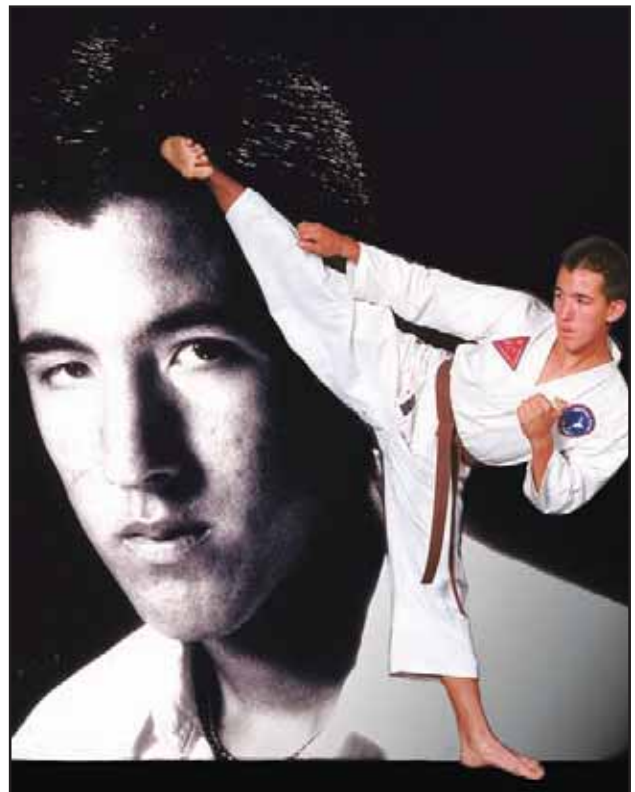
The Ultimate Personalized Portrait

Here's an idea that is almost completely unexplored. What if you could produce a portrait of a person with an image of that person or some other selected person making up the background? The results can be really exciting as can be seen in the sample image shown here. And, it isn't all that hard to do. This kind of work usually involves a double sitting, one to take the background image and then one to make the combined image. The background image can be shot on film or digital and then converted to a transparency or it can be shot on Polaroid instant transparency film which can be developed in a little dry tank in minutes. If the background image is black and white or litho, a color gel can be used to change its color. The background image can also be shot digitally and then FTP'd to a lab with a couple of days' turnaround.

This approach can be easily done with virtual backgrounds, green screen, or the photographer can combine the two images with Adobe Photoshop after the sitting.

Warning! Don't Go Overboard

Glamour Shots offers an interesting case study. Glamour Shots was hugely successful at first, opening hundreds of locations across the country and even in other countries. They were immediately successful because they offered the public a new style of portraiture that made them look really good...even too good. The heavy pasty makeup and the extreme close up created what became known as the "foo foo" look. Initially, it was wildly successful. Then, women began to realize that their "Glamour Shots" portrait didn't really look like them at all. They began to hesitate to display the portraits. They became hesitant about going back for another portrait a few years later. Glamour Shots really only offered one "look." As a result, business quickly peaked and then plummeted as subjects didn't come back for a second or third sitting.



Rick Harding has had a lot of success projecting an image of the subject as a background for the same subject's portrait.



The classic "foo-foo" look was highly successful, but for only a short time.

Glamour Shots was another victim of paradigm paralysis. They had a great idea but then refused to change as their customers began rejecting their style. Many Glamour Shots locations have closed. Had Glamour Shots offered a more realistic approach, such as less makeup, more of a natural look but placing subjects in attractive backgrounds with more of their body showing and less emphasis on the face, and surrounded the subject with an attractive complementary background, Glamour Shots may well have had a very different outcome. Glamour Shots serves as a classic example of the power of doing something different, but ultimately having serious problems because that something different was far too narrow to be a sustaining enterprise. But again, the Glamour Shots experience is clear evidence that the public will respond to a good idea.

What Happened To Olan Mills?

Olan Mills was once one of the largest studio chains in North America. Besides having fixed location studios in many cities across America, they had a school division and a church division. Today, they have sold off their school division. They have closed most of their fixed location studios and opened mostly children's studios within the faltering K-Mart chain. What happened was still another example of paradigm paralysis. Olan's primary method for bringing customers to his fixed location studios was aggressive telemarketing. He was a pioneer at telemarketing and it worked great until relatively recently when many companies got into telemarketing and the public began to reject the method.

Olan Mills didn't have an alternative method to market. In addition, their traditional style of portraiture fell out of favor, but they didn't change. Without their primary marketing method, and without major changes in their portrait style, their studios soon fell empty. A goliath of the industry tripped and fell, mostly on their own.

The cheese moved, but Olan Mills didn't!

Real Location Photography Must Always be an Option

At no time would I ever suggest that a photographer not offer actual location photography. There are times when there are things that can only be done at a real location. There are subjects who won't be satisfied unless they get actual location photography. For these clients, the photographer should provide the service the customer is demanding, as long as he has a price structure that provides adequate compensation for the time and effort expended by the photographer.

If the customer insists on going on location, charge appropriately just as your family doctor would charge significantly extra to come to your home to do an exam. For all other customers, the virtual background process

provides many of the benefits of location photography with the advantages of not having to leave the studio. An alternative would be for the photographer to do location work, but at a single location such as a senior citizens' center or an event such as a prom where they can photograph many people with all the background variety provided by the natural environment or virtual backgrounds.

IN THE BOX THINKING

One of the most common reasons given by photographers for not getting into background technology is that they already have pretty outdoor surroundings they can use with their subjects so they don't need it. This thinking totally misses the fact that most photographers who use background technology don't use it just to create outdoor backgrounds. They use it for many other types of backgrounds, indoor locations, graphics, Old Masters, colors, other abstracts, and so much more. In fact, most photographers may use background technology for generating outdoor backgrounds less than 25% of the time.

Portrait Photography Is Not Static

The biggest threat to portrait photography is not keeping up with the times. The world is changing faster than ever. People are changing faster than ever. What is popular today was probably not popular yesterday and will probably fall from favor tomorrow. Portrait photographers must continually keep abreast of changing trends or find themselves becoming a relic. A fundamental beauty of the virtual background process is that it is so infinitely flexible and easily changeable. But, it is always up to the individual photographers

to modify their methods to fit the individual customer's needs, and even exceed them. In some cases, it is the customer who guides the photographer while in others, it is the photographer who guides the customer. Each individual customer is a unique individual with different needs, likes and dislikes. Regardless, it is the background that forms an important component of portraiture that enables the photographer to move in so many different directions. Every portrait makes a statement. The background is a fundamental component of that statement.

YOUR KEY TO NEW MARKETING STRATEGIES

A terrible thing happens if you don't market a product...nothing. Marketing is critical to any product, but most marketing is poorly done. Poor marketing is exactly why many businesses die. Some things are very difficult to market because there just isn't anything interesting to promote. Other things are much easier to market because their value is more easily seen. In photography, the use of virtual backgrounds has a "wow" factor because it is new and because it is different, and it enables the photographer to create truly unique portraits that catch the customer's attention.

Better Marketing = Better Sales

Marketing makes the difference between success and failure. With good marketing, a poor product can become far more successful than a competing good product that doesn't have a strong marketing program. People don't buy without reasons. Marketing provides them with the reasons to seek out and purchase a product.

The marketing specialist, John Hartman, makes a very powerful statement. "The most expensive studio is an empty studio." Any business anywhere absolutely has to find ways to get people to buy their products.

A classic current example is the Krispy Kreme donut chain that has caused quite a stir across the country. When the first Krispy Kreme donut outlet opened in Austin, Texas, a number of people camped out on the sidewalk the night before the store opened so they could be the first in line to get their donuts. Why so much excitement about another donut chain, especially a new chain, when so many chains such as Dunkin' Donuts already had a stronghold on the market? The answer is marketing.



Krispy Kreme used first class marketing to quickly capture a first class position in the world of donuts.

Krispy Kreme donuts aren't all that different from most other donuts. After all, a donut is nothing more than dough fried in grease and coated with a flavoring. The difference is in the hype...it's in the marketing. Krispy Kreme does have the donut machine that operates behind glass in full view of the customer. That's not a new idea. One hour photo labs have done that for 30 years. The one hour eyewear people have done that for 20 years. The real reason for Krispy Kreme's success is in their marketing, their news releases, their advertising, their hype. I wouldn't be at all surprised if some of those who camped out in front of the Austin, Texas store the night before it opened were actually Krispy Kreme employees! And why not? It provided media coverage on TV, radio and in the newspaper. People are still talking about "those crazy people who camped out all night just to be the first to get Krispy Kreme donuts." They couldn't pay for all the free advertising that brought.

What Happens When You Don't Recognize New Markets

Twenty five years ago, there was a huge photographic equipment manufacturer in Minneapolis known as PAKO. They made a wide variety of processing equipment including equipment for the largest commercial labs as well as relatively economical systems for smaller labs. Some people at PAKO proposed that it was time to produce a very simplified film processor, printer and paper processor that could be used in retail stores to produce prints for amateurs in one hour. The idea was shot down as not being practical. "After all," it was said, "why would people want their pictures in just an hour...overnight is good enough and retail type personnel wouldn't know how to operate a photo lab."

So, what happened? Noritsu, a Japanese company came out with their one hour lab along with several other Japanese companies including Fuji. They flourished while PAKO went bankrupt!

A similar situation happened in portrait photography when video proofing and quick service portrait studios first came out. The



Tens of thousands of one hour photo labs were sold just after PAKO decided there was no market for such a lab. That kind of thinking put PAKO out of business.

old stodgy traditionalists turned their noses up at the new technology, stating that quick service and video proofing lowered the perceived value of the product and just wasn't necessary. At the same time, the retail store photographers like Walmart picked up on the video proofing idea and significantly increased their perceived value in their customer's mind and also increased their profits. They had a service the local independent studio photographer didn't have.

Today, many traditionalists almost vehemently reject capitalizing on backgrounds in their studio portraiture. Recently, a Pennsylvania photographer told me on the phone, "I don't need that background garbage...it's a gimmick...I don't stoop to such low levels. It's not my style!" The public will be the ultimate judge.

Innovation Comes First

The first step is choosing to be innovative and then actually doing it. PAKO was the most qualified company to build one hour photo labs. They could have owned the world market, but they were stuck with paradigm paralysis and, rather quickly, it killed them. Photographers who automatically rejected video proofing and now digital, and those who are unwilling to provide quick service are feeling the pinch. Those who reject new styles of portraiture such as using backgrounds and contemporary posing are feeling the pinch as competitors grab more and more of their territory. One has to step forward with new ideas and then market those ideas in order to reap the rewards.

It Isn't Just All About Money

Most people think that the automatic solution to all problems is money...just throw more money at it and the problem will be solved. Wrong! When it comes to developing new ideas, many of those ideas and concepts come from innovative small companies rather than the big guys with all the money. When it comes to marketing, there are smart ways to

spend money and dumb ways to spend money. There are actually infinitely more dumb ways to spend the available funds than there are smart ways.

Marketing does **NOT** have to be expensive to be effective. In fact, some of the very best marketing might be free. The smart entrepreneur looks for the most effective and the most cost efficient methods to get the job done. A must read for any business person is **Guerrilla Marketing** by Jay Conrad Levinson. It provides many ideas on how to get the most

impact for the least amount of money.

One of the most important benefits of using virtual backgrounds in the portrait studio is that the process can become much more than just a photographic tool. It

can become a highly powerful marketing tool. This is a hidden benefit that demands serious attention. It isn't the background itself that is the most important component. It is the overall product that can be created and the enthusiasm that can come as a result of using the virtual background process that is important. Therefore, the photographer should think of virtual backgrounds as a marketing tool as much as a photographic tool.

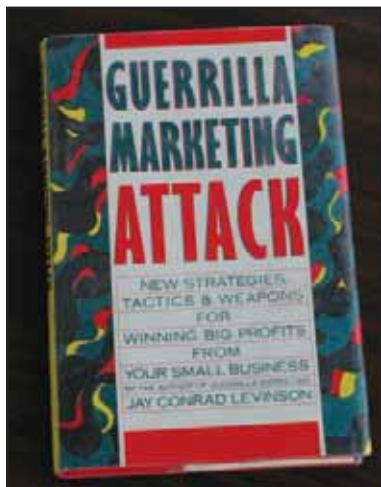
Take Time to Plan Your Promotions

Most photographers never plan their marketing promotions. If they do any promotions, they just try something when they happen to think of it. The chances of success using this method are minimal at best. Some of the best time you can take is to develop a promotional calendar for the next 12 months. Work until you can come up with something that is good for just about every

month. Develop your plans in detail and then follow them. People don't usually do something unless they are pushed, at least a little. You have to give people a reason to come to the portrait studio. A properly executed promotion can be the reason.

Merging People with Their Life

In the previous chapter, we discussed how the use of backgrounds complements the subject and ends up making the entire image more attractive. Customer satisfaction is a pretty powerful marketing force. If the customer isn't impressed with your portraits of them or their family, they won't buy. What wasn't discussed was that an appropriate subject related background can be a powerful force in its own right. To demonstrate this point, think about all the self portraits of professional photographers you have seen over the years. Most of the time, you'll see the photographer posed holding his favorite camera with perhaps some studio lights in the background. The background is helping to complete the statement that is being made by the portrait... that this is a portrait of a professional photographer who loves what he does.



PORTRAIT BY JOSEPH & LOUISE SIMONE

Portrait icon, Don Blair, with his son, Gary, doing their thing at the Triangle Institute in Pittsburgh.

Are professional photographers the only group that loves their work and wants to be photographed with symbols of their profession? Of course not. Actually, most people have a strong association with various things they do in life and would like to have that association displayed in their portrait. In fact, it is that association with what they enjoy in life that could be the very excuse they need to have a portrait made.

What's Important In My Life?

If they have the option, high school students would want something in their portraits that represents their high school, their team, their club association, the school mascot, or perhaps the year they will graduate. Firemen love their work and would like to have something from their profession in their portraits. Policemen feel the same way. So do doctors and lawyers. So do teachers, nurses, even accountants. So do mill workers, carpenters, and truck drivers. Combining a subject with symbols of their lives is the basis for what I call "Personality Portraits." Some photographers call it "Lifestyle Portraits." At least some of the portraits in a session are specifically designed to reflect the personality of the subject. Now let's use this concept of personality portraits as a marketing tool.

Most adults never visit a portrait photographer. Their wedding pictures are often their last experience with a professional photographer. Is it possible that the aggressive photographer could use specific customized backgrounds to attract these people to visit the portrait photographer? The answer is definitely yes. Let's look at just a few examples.

The Club Approach

In every community across America, there are a number of social and service clubs such as the Lions, Elks, Eagles, Kiwanis, Christian Women, Rotary and so many more. Most of their members haven't been photographed in many years. How do you get to them? How do you get them to get in front of your camera to have a portrait made?

Let's pick out the Rotary club as a classic example. The typical Rotary club has 30 to 100 or more members from about 30 to perhaps 80 years of age, most of whom are business owners/managers or professionals. No matter what you do, you will have an almost impossible time getting them to come to the studio, even with special promotions and huge discounts. You can try to make it easy



Just about every city hosts a variety of social and service clubs.

for them by setting up your location studio at their meeting site on the day of their meeting and members can be photographed before, during and after the meeting. But, even if you agree to go to their meeting to photograph them with no sitting charge, and even if you offer them special discounts on enlargements, chances are they will not respond. But, let's change things just a little bit. If you offer them a special promotion that involves photographing each member at the meeting with the symbol of the Rotary club in the background, and then offer to provide the club with a print of each member, without charge, a print that they can put on a



The Image that gets you in the door.

display board, the response can be completely different. With this plan, you will have an excellent chance of getting the opportunity to photograph the club.

Bait and Switch

There is just one big problem. If you do all of this for free, where's the profit for the studio? The family almost surely won't buy pictures of Mom or Dad with the big Rotary symbol in the background. Here is where the versatility of virtual backgrounds comes into play. If the photographer is using a virtual background system, the first two shots are done with a projected image of the Rotary symbol as the background. Then, the



The image that makes money!

photographer instantly changes to an executive office background and does two more exposures and then changes to a more traditional projected canvas background and does a couple more.

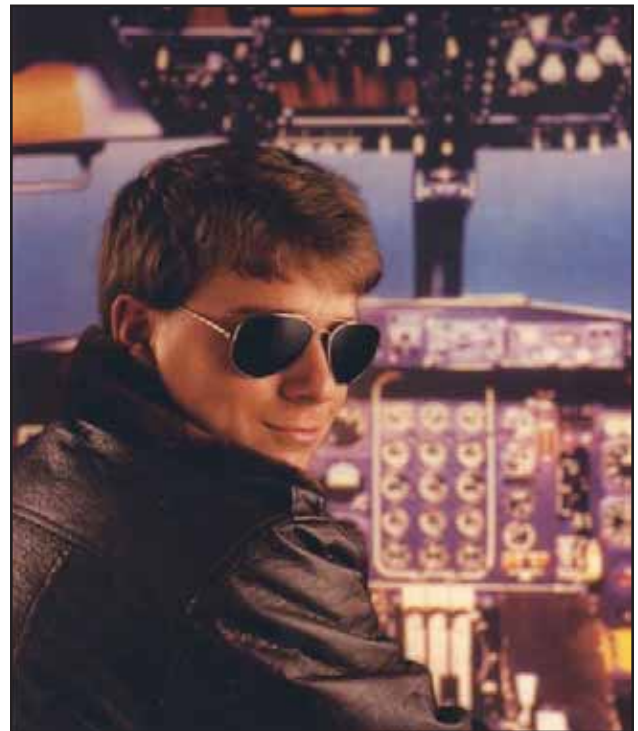
In one to two minutes, the photographer has captured perhaps 5 to 8 exposures with only two of them with the club symbol. Because the backgrounds are changing so quickly, the photographer can make only minimal posing adjustments. These people are most likely very "antsy" about having their portrait made so anything you do has to be reasonably quick.

The proofs, clearly marked proof, are sent home for selection, or if the studio is conveniently located, the members, preferably with their spouse, can be encouraged to come to the studio to view their previews and place orders. You deliberately used the club symbol as the vehicle to get the opportunity to

photograph the club's members and then you quickly switched to other backgrounds that are more likely to result in images that are purchased. Virtual backgrounds are the only way to provide so much variety in so little time. This is also the opportunity for the studio's sales agent to do a soft sell on a family portrait promotion which you do either on location or at the studio with various virtual backgrounds. Once the photographer establishes a working relationship, the possibilities for future business are unlimited.

Pilots

Pilots love their work, but have you ever tried to photograph a pilot in the cockpit of their plane? It's pretty cramped to say the least and, after 9/11, you would really have trouble getting an airline to set aside a plane for you to work in. Therefore, most pilots have to be satisfied with poor snapshots of themselves in the cockpit. The aggressive photographer with virtual backgrounds can get permission to photograph the cockpit of any plane, from a Piper Cub to a Boeing 777 with a super wide angle lens, perhaps with the seats



JIM WILSON

With virtual backgrounds it's easy to put anyone in the pilot's seat.

removed. He can make sure everything is just perfect. He can even digitally insert puffy white clouds outside the windows. Then, he can set up his aircraft backgrounds in the studio to photograph pilots better and more efficiently than they can ever be photographed in the real environment. Once you photograph a couple of pilots and they get to show around the results, you'll have a line. Imagine if you lived in Houston and offered this service to Continental or if you lived in Dallas or Chicago and offered this service to American Airlines? Perhaps you could even get permission to set up at the airport.

Military

The military and its symbols are very important to soldiers. The typical photographer who photographs military personnel sticks them in front of a flag. Think of what the response would be if you could put them in front of their tank, their plane, or do simulated action shots with their rifle? The response would be especially good if you came up with shots that would be difficult or impossible to do with an amateur camera. Once you got a few of these really special portraits in circulation, your schedule book will quickly fill. Since most military personnel have their own cameras and do a pile of snap-

shots, you'll have to offer them great portraits that they could not possibly get by any method on their own.

If you live in a military town, this is a huge opportunity. And what makes it even better is that you continually have new customers coming to town.

Tons of Opportunity

In any town, there is club after club after club that the aggressive photographer can go to in order to secure the opportunity to photograph the members. But, you don't have to stop with service clubs. Think about all the other groupings of people that could be approached the same way. For example, the firehouse, the police station, the union members. Truckers like trucks. Printers like printing presses. Welders like welding. Dentists like dentistry. Once you get your brain clicking along this line, the possibilities are endless, but the fundamentals of the portrait promotion remain exactly the same. The photographer uses a customized background to draw the group in and when you have them in the studio, you photograph them with a couple of highly complementary backgrounds as well. The method will generate instant revenue and can be used to build your business for the long term.



PORTRAIT BY MARIAN OLES

Jim, the local welder and metal worker, helped set up and plan this portrait himself.

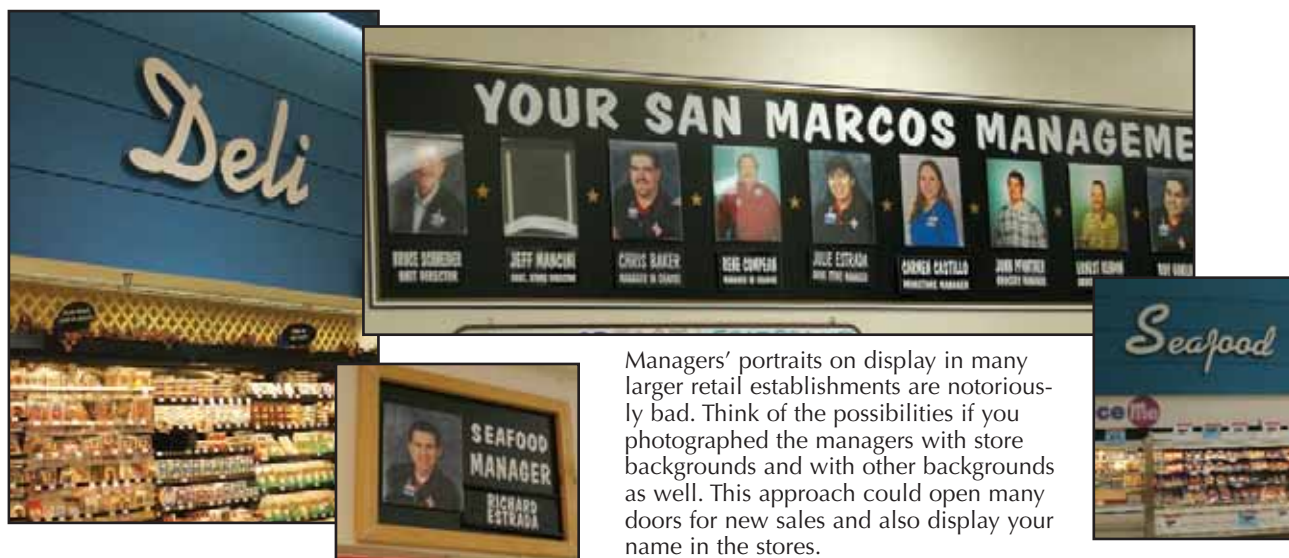
Still More Marketing Opportunities

Now, let's try this same concept with a totally different group. In your town, you probably have one or more large grocery stores and in the front of that store, somewhere on the wall, are pictures of all the department managers and the administrative team. The pictures are probably very poorly done. They typically look exceedingly amateurish. What if you did a deal with the store manager to photograph all department managers in your studio, with a background from the store that represents their individual departments? This wouldn't even have to be a freebie. The store would probably gladly pay \$20.00 or more for the sitting and an 8 x 10 for display in the store. But, here again, when you photograph the department manager with a store background, also make it a policy that you will do a half a dozen other shots with business and traditional backgrounds, with the employee dressed appropriately for each background. Every time a new manager joins the store, part of their processing can be to come to your studio to have their portrait made.

Of course, you could go to the store and photograph the manager right in their department, but then you could be replaced by an amateur photographer with prints made at the

one hour. Also, if you go on location to photograph the manager, you won't have an opportunity to photograph them with other backgrounds and other outfits. In addition, they will not have had the experience of physically coming to your studio and the opportunity to introduce them to your whole array of services. Once again, it is the virtual background that enables you to bring the customer to your studio and to sell them more.

There are an infinite variety of variations to this promotion. It can apply to any group of employees. It can apply to "employee of the month" programs. Again, if you do a good job, if you form a good relationship with the customer, you also have the opportunity to schedule them for a family portrait and perhaps much more than that. Unlike most vendors, a professional photographer has a unique opportunity to bond with the customer because capturing a portrait is such a personal event. That bonding relationship can be then used to develop still more business opportunities such as creating family portraits or photographing an upcoming wedding. If you have made a good impression, the customer would much rather go to someone they already know rather than running through the phone book and just picking a photographer at random.



Managers' portraits on display in many larger retail establishments are notoriously bad. Think of the possibilities if you photographed the managers with store backgrounds and with other backgrounds as well. This approach could open many doors for new sales and also display your name in the stores.

Put New Life In An Old Idea

In keeping with the philosophy that people need a reason to go to a professional photographer, the family album plans promoted for years by Olan Mills and others, including a company known as the Family Record Plan, were great ideas that simply didn't evolve with changing times. These plans were based on selling a package of sittings and photographs on a prepaid basis, generally one sitting every six months or year and one "free" 8 x 10 from that sitting. Sometimes a simple album was included with an opportunity to pay more for a better album. The idea was pretty basic. Get some cash up front, get the sittings done, and hopefully sell more than the free print. Because the family had prepaid for the sitting and the free print, which had to be done within a prescribed time period, the photographer had a "license" to call the family and remind them that time was running out for their free sitting. Instead of intruding, the telemarketer was being helpful by reminding them. The appointment calendar could always be full.

What went wrong with the program? Undoubtedly, many things. Probably one of the key factors was the very traditional look of the portraits being offered and the coming of the "big box store" studios. It was still a great idea but simply one that hadn't been messaged into the 21st century. I am sure that an enterprising studio owner could bring new life to this concept IF they found an effective way to market the "family portrait club" and if they produced quality contem-

porary images at an acceptable price level.

Telemarketing isn't the only way to market this plan. It was the traditional way. Let's look at a more creative method of marketing, something outside the box. Do your kids or grandkids come home from school trying to sell you and all the neighbors a \$2.00 bar of candy or something similar as a fund raiser? Why not come up with a really serious fund raiser, like membership in a portrait club for the next couple of years? The plan could include 5 sittings and one free 8 x 10 each year. The cost of the membership

"THREE PORTRAIT" FUND RAISING CERTIFICATE

\$10.00 off the Purchase Price of this Certificate will be donated to:

This Certificate Entitles

To an 8X10 or 5X7 Natural Color Portrait from each of three separate sittings when made according to the conditions listed on certificate.

Portraits Now

PROFESSIONAL PORTRAITS IN 1 HOUR

Call 749-9489 for Appointment

Studio Hours: Mon., Tue., Wed. 9:30 - 5:00pm, Fri. 9:30 - 5:00pm, Sat. 9:30 - 5:00pm

ST. LAURENT SHOPPING CENTER • OTTAWA • 749-9489

Retail Value \$50.00
Sales Price \$20.00

Date Purchased _____
Expiration Date _____
Certificate must be presented when portrait is made.

CONDITIONS

- Three separate sittings, spaced not less than 90 days apart.
- Customer selects an 8X10 or 5X7 from a selection of 5-7 previews of each sitting.
- This certificate expires one year from date of purchase. The studio is not responsible for savings missed or not taken at proper intervals.
- Portraits may be of groups or individuals. Pets may be photographed with someone in the picture.
- Portraits made and previews shown by appointment only. Parent or guardian must accompany minors at preview selection.
- This is a special offer. Special offers are limited to one per family and/or subject every 90 days. For example, a mother and grandmother can not have the same child photographed on two different special offers within a 90 day period. A special offer is any offer that is below regular studio prices, including, but not limited to, portrait certificates, news, etc.
- Other than these conditions, the studio accepts no responsibility for any exception unless in writing and signed by the studio manager.
- This certificate is not refundable but may be transferred to, or used by, friends and relatives.

FIRST PHOTOGRAPH			SECOND PHOTOGRAPH			THIRD PHOTOGRAPH		
Date	Subject	Sitting #	Date	Subject	Sitting #	Date	Subject	Sitting #

Portrait Plan Offers:

- A money saving way to get professional portraits of your family on a regular basis.
- Three separate studio sittings spaced approximately 3 months apart.
- Choose from color proofs from each sitting.
- Your choice of an 8 x 10 or 3 x 7 from each sitting.
- No additional charge for groups (with the exception that only one group is a family group).
- Normal studio price for three 8 x 10 sittings is \$50.00.

Portrait Plan Agreement

- Portraits made and previews shown in just 1 hour. Finished enlargements ready the next day.
- Only one Portrait Plan per family.
- Parent or guardian must accompany minors at preview selection.
- This plan is good for one year from date of purchase and costs \$20.00 plus tax. Sittings must be spaced at least 90 days apart. The studio is not responsible for sittings missed or not taken at proper intervals.
- Pets photographed only when with someone that can control them in the picture.
- Sittings may be groups or individuals at no additional charge, but, only one family group.
- This is a special offer. Special offers are limited to one per subject and one per family every 90 days. For example, a mother and grandmother cannot have the same child photographed on different specials within a 90 day period. A special offer is any offer to be photographed that is below regular studio prices.

A payment of \$40.00 is due if proofs are taken from the studio for others to view and order from. Proofs and negatives are kept on file for 4 weeks only.

SITTING RECORD

1st Sitting

DATE _____ SUBJECT _____
CHILDREN'S NAMES (GROUP) _____
REMEMBER, NEXT SITTING IS DUE APPROX. _____

2nd Sitting

DATE _____ SUBJECT _____
CHILDREN'S NAMES (GROUP) _____
REMEMBER, NEXT SITTING IS DUE APPROX. _____

3rd Sitting

DATE _____ SUBJECT _____
CHILDREN'S NAMES (GROUP) _____
REMEMBER, NEXT SITTING IS DUE APPROX. _____

IF THIS PORTRAIT PLAN AGREEMENT DOES NOT MEET YOUR NEEDS, PLEASE CALL THE STUDIO FOR CANCELLATION. BEFORE THIS CANCELLATION IS MADE, THE PLAN MUST BE PAID IN FULL. IF BEFORE NEXT SITTING, AND WITHIN 30 DAYS OF PURCHASE, AFTER 30 DAYS OF PURCHASE, NO REFUND ON PORTRAIT PLANS WILL BE MADE. THIS PLAN IS TRANSFERABLE TO SOMEONE ELSE.

We find it more satisfactory if sitting appointments are made according to who is being photographed.

- Opening time to 3 p.m. Babies, children under school age and adults.
- 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. School age children and adults.
- 5 p.m. to closing time Groups and adults.

could be, for example, \$50.00. The kids could "keep" half of the \$50.00. The membership can possibly be promoted as a tax deductible donation. Even if the kids sell the membership only to their own parents, think of how quickly you could set up hundreds of family plans. The kids would be thrilled because they could collect so much money so quickly without having to scour the neighborhood. You would be thrilled because you would have many members in your family photo club. You could also take this plan to the service clubs as a fundraiser.

Each member may buy the membership just for their own family or for each of their grown children.

The family portrait membership program is a great way to get your business to start to roll. Your ultimate success, of course, depends on the quality and uniqueness of the images you produce and your ability to up sell.

Cost of Customer Acquisition

Think of it this way. How much would you have to spend on advertising in order to get 50 or 100 individuals into your studio for sittings? It is the primary job of advertising to get you candidates for sales. If you use the club and group approach, you will be spending very little to get the potential to earn a lot. Of course, how you handle the people... their experience with you and your business, is crucial. Do it badly and you are really wasting your time.

Some carriage trade photographers may be thinking, "I'm not going to do any such garbage...I'm not going to give away anything...I'm not going to promote myself this way." Well, that's your right as an independent entrepreneur photographer, but I can tell you this, I've seen photographers who have used promotions like this who indeed are able to capture family sittings as well and who actually sell \$3000 hand painted oil family portraits based on a photograph. The methods work!

Keep in mind that it is easier to keep a client than to get new ones. The best way to keep a client is to please them with your total approach. Show each and every client that you care. Provide them with reasons to come back, such as offering new backgrounds for new seasons.

When we first opened our studio in Texas, we had no business. We had a terrible second floor location, but it was the only space available in town. No one knew anything about us. So, we set out on a plan to convince a few people to come to us...people

who were decision makers for an entire group. We were in a university town so we specialized in making composites for university sorority and fraternity groups. All we had to do was convince the president of the group and they brought their entire group marching in for scheduled appointments. But, the problem was that these groups had already been using other photographers to do their composites. We had to convince them that we had the better deal without being the cheapest.

We had just recently purchased our first virtual background projection system so we built our case primarily on the uniqueness of our photographs. We emphasized the fact that no two groups would have the same background and that we would custom create backgrounds for each individual group. In a very short time, we were photographing nearly all of the groups on campus.

We didn't make much money at all on selling the actual composites. The real money came from portrait sales from the students and especially from their parents. We had to get the proofs in the hands of the parents, preferably before Christmas. Because of our variety in our photography and the quality of the images we created, our sales of enlargements to each of the fraternity or sorority members or their parents were very good. It very quickly formed a solid base for our business. This was the second time I discovered the power of backgrounds. We used background options as one key factor in getting the contracts with the groups. Every other competing photographer, both local and national, offered traditional canvas backgrounds and nothing more.

When I first started my business in Ohio, I was a totally unknown teenage photographer trying to specialize in wedding photography. How was I supposed to get brides to sign up with me? Back then, no photographers in the area were doing outdoor wedding candids on the day of the wedding. I started taking every couple who was married in the daytime and

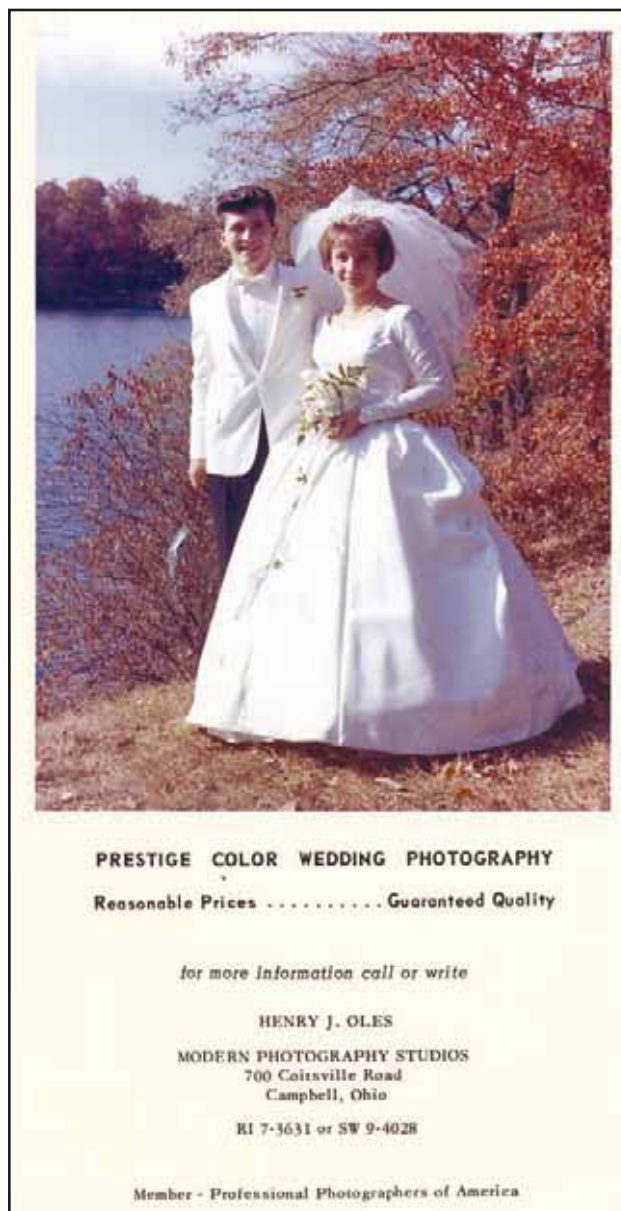


Our original main location in the historic downtown section of San Marcos, Texas. The studio helped to feed the camera store and the camera store helped to feed the studio. They grew together.

during acceptable weather, to the park to do a whole series of images. The concept was so popular that I very quickly became the number one wedding photographer in the Youngstown, Ohio area. While other photographers in the area condemned the concept of going to the park for photographs on the day of the wedding, I walked away with the business! That was when I first discovered the power of backgrounds. For a number of years, we were one of the only studios that offered outdoor candids. Some brides even changed their wedding date so they could have more desirable outdoor backgrounds. That most certainly taught me a whole lot about the power of backgrounds. I've also learned the consequence of depending on "Mother Nature." A rainy Saturday in the summer could cost me a ton of money. I could not sell what I didn't take. This is what first got me thinking about the merits of a virtual background system, only they didn't exist yet. Years later, when I did have a virtual background system, I even advertised that I could "guarantee" a sunny day for the bride's wedding photographs.

Advertise for Free and Get a Free Lunch as Well

A little more abstract way to build the busi-



This early 1960's colorful October bridal portrait turned me on to the power of backgrounds. It quickly brought me dozens of weddings from brides who wanted "something different." At that time, no other studio offered outdoor portraits. I turned it into a "slim line" card to promote the new look. The business flourished.

ness is to offer various clubs in your area a speaking program on professional photography, emphasizing the latest technological developments. We are very fortunate to be in photography because just about everyone on the planet has some interest in photography and would like to know more. You are a professional photographer and, therefore, you are seen as the storehouse of a wealth of interesting information that could be shared.



There is no more cost effective way to get known in your community and get the word out about your studio than giving presentations about photography to local groups.

Most clubs meet weekly and have a 20 minute program for every meeting. The individual club members are usually charged with finding the people to put on the programs. Most of the programs are pretty boring. So, here is the perfect opportunity for the aggressive photographer. Why not get yourself scheduled to do programs about photography for the clubs in your area? A photographer certainly has interesting material to talk about.

It's really quite easy to get scheduled. If you were the Program Chairperson for the club, you would be running out of ideas for programs. So, if the local photographer offered to present a program on new developments in photography, it is very likely that within a few weeks or months, someone would be calling you to schedule your program.

Now, needless to say, you can't stand up there and brag about your studio operation and how good you are and try to sell them portraits. That would be inappropriate. The clubs don't want a commercial program. But, there is another way to give a non-commercial program that brings in the business.

Consider tailoring your presentation to be about developments in digital photography and also talk about new studio techniques such as virtual backgrounds. Virtual backgrounds are an especially interesting topic for club presentations because they are so unique and interesting. You can also talk about digital print enhancement showing before and after examples.

You can talk about all the new technology and what it means to the client. You can run a slide presentation that shows the new equipment in operation along with sample images. You can give out your business cards and you can even pass out a brochure. That is usually appropriate as long as you avoid handing out price lists and don't overtly use your speaking opportunity to solicit business. You could pass out a sample print they can take home that nicely shows how the virtual background process enhances the overall image. Your studio name and phone number should be on the handouts.

Not only will you get a chance to speak, but the club will probably provide you with a free lunch and even give you a small gift in appreciation of your taking your valuable time to talk to the members. What a deal! A chance to advertise your business for free to hundreds or even thousands of local citizens!

Don't expect members to line up to schedule sittings the moment you finish your program, but you can expect them to go home and talk with their wives or husbands about the interesting program they heard that was put on by the local professional photographer. They now feel like they "know" you. If you made a good professional presentation, they now have confidence in your abilities. It may take a while but soon your phone will start to ring more often. When a need for photography comes up, they will typically think of you first. Or better yet, your program may help to create an interest in having a portrait done.

You can also offer to do a program for the grade school kids or for the high school pho-

tography club. You can offer to do a program on entrepreneurship for the business classes at the university. You should take every opportunity to talk about all the exciting new things going on at your studio...those things that make your operation special. I cannot think of a better or more inexpensive way to promote your business. What's the alternative... run a bigger more expensive ad in the yellow pages? It's so easy to increase your yellow pages ad, but is that your most cost effective means of advertising? I don't think so! A bigger yellow page ad should come only after you have done the more cost effective methods.

Reestablishing the Bridal Formal Portrait

Up until about twenty five years ago, just about every bride came to the professional studio several weeks before their wedding for a formal bridal portrait. It was "standard operating procedure"... an essential part of the total wedding experience. They would spend hundreds and sometimes thousands of



Long ago and up until recently, most brides came to the studio before the wedding for the all important formal bridal portrait.

dollars on prints, often including large wall portraits. Mom and Dad and other relatives also purchased formal bridal portraits. Best of all, what they spent on their pre-bridal formal portraits generally had no affect on what they later spent on candid photos for their wedding album. Some brides who couldn't afford candid photos would still schedule bridal formals. The formal portrait of the bride was really that important.

Unfortunately for the professional studio photographer, in recent years, most brides no longer schedule a bridal formal and, as a result, that segment of the business has dropped to nearly zero revenue. Many brides will say, "I just don't have time for a formal bridal sitting...I'll just have my photographer snap a few extra full length pictures of me at the wedding and maybe I'll get a big one of one of those." You can just about guarantee that this means the "big one" won't happen. Even worse is that a growing number of brides today do not hire a professional photographer to photograph their wedding and instead hand out single use cameras to all the guests, so they can have dozens or even hundreds of "photo journalists" recording their wedding event. Or, they hire a low end professional who gives them their film or media card at the end of the wedding and collects his fee for shooting. In either case, if they don't do a bridal formal session before the wedding and if they don't hire a professional photographer for their candid photos, depending more on Uncle Jake and/or all the guests to do the photography, then professional photographers get no part of what once was a major source of revenue.

I've heard countless photographers tell me that there just isn't anything they can do about the situation. "Brides just don't want formal bridal portraits anymore...the formal bridal portrait is dead meat." I don't buy that argument for one minute. A wedding is one of the most important events in a young lady's life...even if they do it more than once. The typical bride spends between \$1,000 to

\$5,000 on their wedding dress and often tens of thousands on the entire event. Do you really believe that the bride, dressed in the most expensive outfit she ever purchased, for this most important milestone in her life, would not want to be photographed in the most elegant way by a real professional photographer? Somehow the argument that bridal formals are dead meat just doesn't add up. 2 + 2 doesn't come out to 4!!

What happened here? Let's do an analysis.

How did this decline come about? My answer revolves around several different factors. First, as we said earlier in this book, if you don't promote a product, nothing happens. Professional photographers have done a very poor job of promoting bridal formals to their clients and to the public at large. Second, as more and more amateurs began moving into doing wedding candids, they didn't have an actual studio where they could do bridal formals so they downplayed the formal pre-bridal portrait...

because they couldn't do it. Third, the world seems to turn faster today than ever before and, therefore, not having time and not having the dress ready became as good an excuse as any to not have the formal portrait done. However, we all know that if the bride really wanted a formal bridal portrait, the dress would indeed be done in time and she would make time to do the session. Finally, most photographers who did bridal formals stuck with the old traditional style which a growing number of new brides rejected and instead decided to just rely on the "snapshots" taken at their wedding which they saw as more "natural."

How can the local professional photographer get the bride to again want to do the pre-bridal formal portrait? It won't be easy. Changing a downward trend is not easy, but it can be done, especially if a group of local professionals work together and in conjunction with the bridalware stores and others in their area. Professional photographers will have to push it hard to get it going again which may mean even temporarily cutting prices. It can be restarted, especially if you

produce a style of bridal formal that pleases and even excites today's brides. A bridal formal portrait, taken before the wedding has to again become a "must have."

A fundamental fact of retailing is that people buy what they think is "in." People buy what they see on display. This is especially true if they like what they see. The formal bridal portrait has essentially disappeared primarily because it was too formal and even out of date in appearance. So, what to do now?

As always, the first step

is to find out what brides really would want in a formal bridal portrait, if they were to have a sitting before their wedding. Here comes the focus group concept again. But, if you are going to have a focus group, you need to have samples, especially great samples that reflect current contemporary style. You also need to have a whole list of good compelling reasons for doing a formal bridal portrait and present them to your focus group for their reaction. Remember, you are having to promote an attitude shift.

By now, you already know exactly where I



POURTRAIT BY JOSEPH & LOUISE SIMONE
Elegant bridal formals can be captured in the studio before the wedding. They can generate significant extra profit.



PORTRAIT BY MARIAN OLES

If you add a lot of body and background, the subject becomes proportionately smaller. As a result, they buy a bigger sized portrait. Virtual backgrounds enable you to take advantage of this fact.

am going with this. What can the local professional do to create a product that is really enticing to the bride to be? The answer can be found in every bridal magazine that every bride reads. Once again, it's the background that can make the significant difference, whether the bridal portrait is shot on location in the gardens, on the river, or lake, or whether it is created in the studio with a wide variety of backgrounds, resulting in wall photographs that look like they came directly from the magazines. Every photographer should examine closely the photography shown in these magazines. In reality, they are not "snapshots." They are generally carefully posed portraits created to look candid or semi-candid. Other words that could describe the images would be contemporary and natural.

Sample large wall portraits of this type need to dominate the bridal room at the studio. Large wall portraits need to be on display at the bridalware shop. More large wall portraits need to be displayed at the flower shop and at the caterer. Large wall bridal portraits need to be displayed at shopping mall displays and in home shows and bridal shows. This is how you turn something that is "out" into something that is "in."

The photographer can tell the bride that this type of portrait can only be done in the studio camera room or on location with special equipment and plenty of time to get everything just right. The photographer needs to tell the bride that it just isn't possible to produce a really elegant portrait in a snapshot taken on the day of the wedding as everything is happening seemingly at once, especially with so many weddings scheduled in the late afternoon or evening. Many weddings today are over in a "flash." You'll be surprised how you will be able to revive this segment of the business and the profits it will generate if you use the proper approach.

One additional very persuasive argument you can make to the bride is that if she comes in for the pre-bridal, you will ask her permission to print a 16 x 20 or larger wall portrait and bring it to the wedding, setting it up in a beautiful frame for display on the



PORTRAIT BY JOSEPH & LOUISE SIMONE

Portraits like this cannot be taken as part of the wedding. There is not enough time and the bride is typically too nervous on her wedding day.

bride's table for all the guests to view. Once a few prospective brides see this display in their community, word will get around town quickly that this is a really great new idea.

I've watched guests hundreds of times at our weddings gather around and admire the bridal formal portrait on display on the reception table. Be sure that you have signed the print, that you have a light over it, and that you have your business cards available right there on the table or the easel. Your bride will most likely love the idea, especially once she has heard of other people in her town doing it.

When you have the formal print on display at a wedding, stand in the shadows and you'll hear guests exclaiming "Oh my God...what a beautiful portrait...I wonder where they went to do it to get that spectacular background? Who was the photographer that created this?" The advertising/promotional value alone that you can get from this display is more than enough to justify the effort and cost of making the print, but 9 times out of 10, you'll sell the display portrait as well, if not before the wedding, then very shortly after the wedding. And if by chance a year goes by and she still hasn't bought it, offer the print for 1/2 price because you've used it as a sample. If she is still married, it is almost certain she will buy it. We know. We've been there/done that many, many times. This is just one example of how a special background coupled with good photography and good marketing can contribute to developing great new revenue and generate new business opportunities. You have to set a goal, create a plan of action and then go after it. Changes won't take place overnight, but they will happen if you continue to push.

I Don't Do Weddings Any More

It has become popular among some photographers to brag, "I don't do weddings any more." That's okay because as an independent business person, it's your choice to discard that segment of the business if you want to, although personally, I would hire someone to do the candids I didn't want to do myself so I could still get the major chunk of the revenue and take advantage of the fact that weddings are a great place to be seen and to develop new business. However, if you don't want to be involved in the candids, if you follow the plan described here for offering clients unique and enticing bridal formals, there is no reason why you can't still make a pile of money on weddings.



If you don't do candids and if the candid photographer can't do formals, why not have the candid photographer refer their brides to you for the formals? Even if you have to share the profit with the referring candid photographer, it is really senseless to miss this highly profitable opportunity. Never forget, there is no money in portraits that are not taken.

However, before you entirely eliminate weddings from your business, consider this. The really good and profitable weddings can bring you many thousands of dollars. **Can you really afford to walk away from that?**



A small yellow page ad can direct viewers to your web site where you can really tell your story.

Yellow Pages Don't Work All That Well

I'll never forget our experience with the yellow pages when we first moved into San Marcos, Texas. We had very little business so we counted the days until the new phone books came out with our large ad in the yellow pages. Then the books hit...and nothing happened! We waited with baited breath. Still nothing much happened. It wasn't at all like what the ad salesperson promised. That was when we realized we were going to have to take a more aggressive role in our studio promotion. The yellow pages were certainly not enough. You need to be there, but you don't necessarily need to have the biggest ad, especially today with web sites. What makes the yellow pages even worse today from the standpoint of the business person is that there are so many "yellow pages." A single city can have two or three different yellow page books. You can't afford to advertise in all of them. If you go big in the yellow pages, you need to make certain you do it right.

Get Your Message Out with Your Web Site

Your web site is a wonderful and inexpensive way to get your message out. You can minimize your advertising dollars by emphasizing not much more than your web address and then spend your dollars creating a really spectacular web site that truly displays the many advantages of coming to your studio.

In a way, you can "rob Peter to pay Paul." Instead of dumping big dollars into the yellow pages, buy a yellow page ad that primarily emphasizes your web address, in big bold letters with a statement or two that pushes the "looker" to take a few minutes to navigate to your web site. There, tell your story infinitely better than any yellow page ad. By now, most people have access to the internet so why not take advantage of it?

Do **NOT** advertise esoteric aspects of your operation that may mean a lot to you but nothing to the public. For example, don't advertise, "We have a virtual background system." That doesn't mean anything to the public. Show them instead sample after sample of what can be done in your studio without the hassle of going on location. Emphasize the technology that you have and clearly show the results. Remember the old expression, promote the sizzle and not the steak. Create a website that makes the visitor anxious to get involved. For our own studio, we promote variety with our many different locations including our facility at the beach on the Gulf of Mexico, our ranch studio which even includes a horse, our real railroad train that is great for kids, our classical traditional studio look, and, of course, we place special emphasis on our virtual backgrounds.

Create a Promotional CD

Another modern way to advertise your studio is to prepare a special CD that you can hand out to prospects. The CD should be a fast paced promo with music, voice over, and plenty of spectacular sample images that are designed to capture the viewer's attention. You are a photographer and you create photographs. What better way to capture customers than by showing what exciting things you can do?

The CD doesn't have to be long. It can be just a few minutes, but when it ends, the viewer should simply sit there for a moment and say, "Wow!" Making a really good CD isn't necessarily cheap, but if it does the job, that's what it's all about. You can also have multiple CDs, perhaps all with the same

introduction but then a special emphasis. Or the CD can be divided into sections and be interactive with the viewer. If the viewer is interested in bridal photographs, they click here. If there are interested in prom photograph, they click another button.

A CD has an advantage over a web site in that you can put a lot more photographs on it and can move from one page to another very quickly. You can put a lot more action into a CD. A web site is always limited by download times.

The Simones of Montreal created a very powerful 6 minute DVD that clearly illustrated the uniqueness of their operation and their product. After viewing the DVD, the prospect is naturally drawn into the studio. Copies of the Simone DVD are available from Virtual Backgrounds as long as the supply lasts.

Get on the Radio

When was the last time you saw a professional photographer in your area advertise on the radio or on television? Most likely, it was a long time ago, if ever. But why shouldn't a portrait studio advertise on the radio or television? Just about everyone else does. It's just that radio and television does get into bigger dollar investments, so it becomes increasingly important that it is done right. It can't be amateurish.

Once again, interesting new technology like virtual backgrounds and digital services can help develop some highly effective advertising. Let's look at radio as an example. Many people listen to the radio at work and home. Meet with the station advertising department and talk about the types of ads they can produce for you. It is in their best interest to help you be successful with your advertising on their station or you won't be coming back. I feel that one of the most effective ads is the kind that runs as part of a popular hometown talk radio program listened to primarily by women in the morning or afternoon. Think about developing an ad that sounds like a candid conversation by the announcer(s) where they give their personal

endorsement of your product and services. It's called "live" advertising rather than "canned" scripts.

A script could read something like this...

Announcer One: Hey Bob, when's the last time you've been in a portrait studio?

Announcer Two: Jeez...it's been a long, long time...I think when I got out of high school.

Announcer One: Boy are you going to be surprised at the exciting new things going on today. My wife and I took our family to ABC Studios on Fifth Avenue last night to get the family photographed...professionally. You won't believe the new equipment they have. They've got this special machine called a virtual background system that makes backgrounds so it looks like you are anywhere in the world without leaving the studio.

Announcer Two: Really? How does it work?

Announcer One: Well, I don't know everything but I just saw them put a color slide in this machine and wow...it became our background! They made us look like we were in the most beautiful locations and we didn't even have to go there. It looks so real. It was really great to not have just that same old plain canvas background that I thought they were going to use.

Announcer Two: What's the name of that studio again?

etc. etc. etc.

Here's another idea for a radio ad. The announcer calls the studio and a perky enthusiastic person answers, "ABC Studio." The announcer asks some questions about the kinds of photography the studio does...and about wanting something different, not just an ordinary portrait...you know...like most studios do. This gives the studio receptionist a chance to talk about all the really exciting and new things they can offer.

These approaches are a lot like the ads for "On Star" car communications system. The ads don't say anything about how the tech-

nology works. The ads give examples of the nifty things the product does for the owner. The listener feels like they are “listening in” on a conversation. For the studio, this method really works to catch their attention infinitely more than if the studio advertised that they have a new Hasselblad camera or a Scene Machine. Instead, the studio should talk about all the nifty new things the studio can do for the customer. You can really get this message across in an ad like this.

These kinds of ads can be rewritten countless ways. It’s an informative ad. It’s an interesting ad. The listener is less likely to tune it out. It’s an endorsement by the announcers. It’s an advertorial. It’s a whole lot better than an ad that says, “Need a portrait...go to ABC Studios. Right now they are having a sale on...” Traditional ads get tuned out.

Be an Expert

Once again, because photography is such an interesting subject for most people, another possibility is for you to approach a local radio station program manager and propose that you conduct a brief question and answer session on their station. You’ll have to be very selective as to which stations you approach. Most won’t be interested because it doesn’t fit their program format. But those stations that feature talk and family programming could very well be interested. They probably won’t pay you anything but the marketing advantages will make it well worthwhile.

People have a lot of questions about photography in general. Because you are a professional photographer, you could be seen as an expert on all aspects of photography. You could possibly field a couple of call-in questions in a weekly program, or another announcer could ask the questions in an interview style. Being the recognized “expert” can be a very powerful way to

promote your name. I know that if I have a question about hardware or building materials, I will call Johnny Chook from Acme Building Centers. Johnny has a Saturday program on a San Antonio station. He comes across as a very sincere expert on most anything that has to do with building or remodeling. Acme Building is a comparatively small San Antonio operation. I would be much more likely to go see Johnny rather than anyone at the big box stores like Lowe’s or Home Depot. In the same way, if I had a serious problem with my vehicles, I would go see Steve Gurlong at Cambridge Auto. He has impressed me with his knowledge and sincerity from his help programs on the radio. Also on a prime San Antonio radio station is a weekly Sunday afternoon 30 minute program by a dentist who talks about health in general and especially dental health. He takes calls from listeners. If you needed dental work done and you heard this dentist on the radio discussing interesting issues about dental health, would you not be inclined to call him first for an appointment?

If you can’t find a radio station to air the series, try the local newspaper. A small town local newspaper may be very interested in running a regular column about photography. Before you reject this approach, thinking that the local paper wouldn’t be interested, keep this in mind, they have to fill their newspaper every day with interesting material. If you think photography is hard, try filling a newspaper on a daily basis. If you approach them right, they may be very receptive and the long term benefits to your business could be enormous. It costs you nothing but a little bit of time to try this approach. But in order to get their attention, you are going to have to have something special, something unique about your operation. You can’t be just like every other photographer and expect to get the opportunity.

Is Television Advertising a Possibility?

Photographers in general have almost completely avoided television commercials. But, television is the leading media. It's the prime method for advertising. Why can't studios advertise on television?

It's true that photographers have not been very successful with TV advertising in the past, but maybe that is just because they didn't run very good ads. It seems that just about everyone else in retail besides photographers advertises on television. Cable, especially local cable, certainly makes the rates affordable. The key to success has to be in coming up with really good brief commercials that drive home key points about your photographic services. Think of some of the possibilities if you created really good television commercials featuring your digital creations and your use of virtual backgrounds, promoting the concept of creativity combined with convenience for all types of portrait photography. Maybe it really is time to break out of your restrictive paradigms and

break into serious media marketing.

Some photographers will say, "Television...I can't possibly afford television advertising." A great many businesses who have a much, much smaller profit margin than photographers manage to advertise on television. Cable television offers many possibilities. But, if the costs seem too high, think about forming a coalition with several other studios and jointly do television advertising.

Learn From the Dentists

Can you think of anything more difficult to advertise and promote than dentistry? Who likes to go to the dentist? The dental office is often seen as a "house of pain." Dentists are feared. In addition, dentists are losing their traditional base business...drilling out and filling cavities and removing teeth. Fluoride has dramatically limited cavity formations. So, dentists have multiple problems.

How do you get people to come to a dentist other than when they are in severe pain? After all, isn't the dentist office one of the last places you would ever want to be? Do you

"One Beautiful Look"

COSMETIC & GENERAL DENTISTRY

Now... Straight Teeth With or Without Braces! Amazing Results In Just Two Visits

Feel Better with Total Confidence About Your Self-Image

In A Single Visit We Can Replace Metal Fillings & Crowns With Natural Looking Porcelain.

Would "One Beautiful Look" Improve Your Life?

Cosmetic Dental Associates

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WE CREATE SAN ANTONIO'S BEAUTIFUL SMILES!

Look... Can Be You

GENERAL DENTISTRY

Comprehensive Family Dental Services Provided:

From Simple Fillings to the Advanced Rebuilding of A New Smile with Permanent Replacements

In House Laboratory

SE HABLA ESPAÑOL

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INTEREST FREE FINANCING (WAC)

This is only one of several double page ads for dental services in the San Antonio yellow pages.

just advertise, "I'm an award winning dentist?" I don't think so! But, try this on for size. All across America today, you are hearing radio ads for "Sedation Dentistry." The radio announcer talks about how important it is to have your dentistry done, how fearful you probably are, and how great a particular dentist is because he just gives you a little pill and you sleep through the entire procedure and "bingo," everything is done. Then the dentist himself comes on and talks about his sedation dentistry procedures. It's brilliant. Some marketing company sold specific local dentists on the sedation dentistry concept and provided them with a script for radio advertising. It's the same script no matter what city I visit...only the dentist who is speaking the words changes. The prospective patient can even go to the internet and type in www.sedationdocs.com and get information about the process and the name of a sedation dentist near them.

If it works for dentists, why can't this concept work for a photographer? Photography is far more pleasant than dentistry. Sedation dentistry just brings something new to the

table that interests the public. Virtual backgrounds bring something new for portrait photographers to talk about and catch the public's attention. While you might initially be negative about this type of marketing, I am sure many dentists who are not official "sedation dentists" were also negative about that idea too...at least until they saw their colleagues' waiting rooms fill up.

Go to your yellow pages and look up dentists. In most cities, you'll be absolutely amazed at the ads, often full page ads. Although the ads appear under dentistry, the substance of the ads are not so much for dental procedures but rather for such things as smile care, new smiles, and even how the viewer can help the beautification of America with a better smile! A pair of Houston dentists run a full page color ad in the Continental Airline Magazine and claim to attract patients from around the world for their "smile makeovers." Their waiting room features a 10 foot high waterfall, black marble floors and a piano. Another Houston dentist includes massage therapy as an optional extra! Wow! The ads make you want to hurry up and schedule an appointment. There is no mention of cost...just benefits.

Now go to the yellow page listing for photographers and look at all the dull traditional ads. There is a huge difference between the flavor of the dentist ads and the flavor of the photographer ads. Generally speaking, photographers do a very poor job of advertising. Most are still stuck on, "We do weddings, children and families" and "We win awards."

Advertising and marketing is a whole lot easier if you have something interesting or exciting to promote. If photographers would promote the phenomenal results that can be achieved through their use of intrinsically interesting new tools like virtual backgrounds and specialized digital services as a basis for their advertising and promotion rather than just talking about how good a photographer they are or how cheap they are or some special discount package, the results can be far

more interesting. Always remember, emphasize the benefits to the customer. Do it right and your appointment calendar will fill up. While I am not a believer in spending big dollars on yellow page ads, if you are going to spend, then do it in a way that brings maximum results.

Marketing only gets the customer to your telephone or your door. To keep the customer, you must treat them like royalty. Meijer, the big variety store based in Michigan calls their customers their "guests." There are so many ways you can turn a customer off...or on. In calling some dental offices, I get exceptionally perky friendly receptionists. I get a really good "message on hold." Collectively it melts away "the house of pain" and makes you want to visit the dentist for a "fun experience." It can be that way for photographers too.

Will it Sell...And if So... Then Do It

"I don't wanna do it. It's a gimmick. It's not my style." Some photographers make excuses, often not based on fact. Imagine General Motors not selling a red car because the CEO doesn't like the color red. In business, if the public likes red cars and red cars sell, then the business needs to supply the public with the product they are looking for. To not sell red cars because the CEO doesn't like red is ludicrous and certainly counter productive to the company's success. If your customers want a particular kind of photograph and if you are in the business of creating photographs for the public and selling photographs to the public, then unless creating that photograph violates some fundamental moral code, you should do it.

Extreme Makeovers

A very popular television show right now is Extreme Make-Overs. Subjects are selected who are then given an extreme body makeover including their teeth. Television audiences are seeing weekly what wonderful things modern dentistry can do for a client. When they see it actually happening to others on television, they begin to think about the possibilities for themselves. I would contend that the television program will bring millions of new dollars into dentistry and much more into plastic surgery. It is changing the way people think about medical and dental science. Professional photographers need to show more examples of what they can do and display their work wherever they can, home shows, fairs, anywhere. This is how you create a need across society.



AFTER



BEFORE

Shirley Robinson specializes in make overs for women but she avoids the "Foo Foo Look" that was popular in the 80's and early 90's. Shirley's work is much more personalized.



What could be better than a background "painted" by the subject himself?

Customer Designed Portraits

Many photographers act like traditional medical doctors. They want to tell the customer exactly what to do. They don't ask the customer what they want. Here's a twist that can bring you a lot of attention and business. Let the subject, or their parents, help to design a portrait from the bottom up. Once they understand the parameters that are possible with virtual backgrounds and digital processes, let them come up with the poses, the outfits, the props and even the background. They can even select a background from your files. It's the family's portrait so why should they not have a lot to say about how it is to be done?

Your first thought will be, "Oh my God... what a disaster this will be." And you know what, sometimes it will be a disaster although interestingly enough, they will probably still buy the photographs because it was their creation. But most of the time, they will come up with some really great ideas that you can then further develop. They will love being "the photographer", and getting to put it all together. You will serve as their coach. You might even consider having a contest, complete with judging for several different categories such as the most artistic, the most ingenious, the wildest, etc. Then, once you have them in the studio, do some additional exposures that you direct. You don't care which they buy...those that you directed or those that they directed...it's the same money! You'll be absolutely amazed at what some people will come up with, although you may not wish to stamp your studio name on some images.

You can go even one more step. Let your customers create their own backgrounds. This can be especially interesting for child photography. The child can create their own background by making a drawing, as elaborate or as simple as they want. You can then scan this drawing and have it turned into a slide which can then be used as a background for that child's own portrait. Think about the possibilities. Think about how excited you can get the parents in this aspect of the portrait. You can even work this into a children's portrait contest where one of the categories is "Most Original Background."

Background Smalltalk Reduces Subject Tension

As a general rule, the very first pictures the photographer takes in a session are the worst and the very last ones are some of the best. Do you know why? Much of the reason is subject nervousness. Never forget how fearful most people are of being in a portrait studio and this fear is often transferred to their appearance. But, if you start talking about the backgrounds you are using, making general interesting small talk, you can almost instantly reduce the tension and start getting relaxed cooperation which translates into better looking portraits.

You'll be absolutely amazed how nearly all of your clients really get into the background stuff and by thinking about the backgrounds, they start to relax, therefore, they look so much better...and have fun. As they think about what you are saying...they get excited...and can't wait to see the results. They expect the results to be great. Some photographers who are negative on virtual backgrounds complain that they don't like the process because the subject can't actually see the background. I take the opposite view. Because the background is mostly virtual, because they can't see it, the photographer can take more control and talk it up. It's often been said that the old radio mysteries were more exciting and even more scary than movies because the imagination was involved. It's exactly the same when one uses virtual backgrounds. And, of course, with virtual backgrounds, you can jump quickly from one look to the next.



This beautiful area of "The Dom" in Schleswig, Germany is not accessible to the public. I was able to press my camera against the glass window and capture the image as if I were inside. Now, photographers worldwide can use it with virtual backgrounds, but not location photographers in Schleswig.

What do I mean by background small talk? Try this.

"Oh, let's see here...I'm going to use some very special backgrounds for you. This first one is just perfect. It is actually part of a church built in Germany in the year 1300, or maybe it was 1400. I know it was a very long time ago. You're not going to see all of the church, just some very interesting parts of it. This background is going to complement you beautifully. Right now, you have behind you these beautiful columns. Can you just imagine it? You are going to love it...love it. Ahhhh, it's spectacular...especially with your elegant bridal dress. This is gonna be great! Now, let me add just a little bit of window dressing. Let me move this plant in over here....and let me add this little prop...oh...oh...it's looking so good. Wow! This is looking like a photograph for Modern Bride magazine...or maybe one that the dress designer would just love to put in their catalog. Turn your head just a little bit to the right, bend you right knee...give me your best smile. You really will love this. Good, good. Got it. And now I am going to take you on another trip...to another special location...one that years ago I found, this perfect little church in New England and I captured the stained glass windows just at the right moment. Sunlight is streaming in...but it isn't an overpowering harsh sunlight. It is really another ideal background for your dress. Can you almost feel it? Ok, turn this way...move your head to the left...feel the light coming in through the stained glass...great, great...the biggest problem you are going to have is making your final selections. You look great, your dress looks beautiful, and the background really complements you in so many ways...etc., etc."

Sell While You Shoot

Some years ago I had the experience of working with Monte Zucker on board Carnival Cruise Line ships. We provided Carnival with a state of the art total digital portrait studio which included a Scene Machine Virtual Background System. Monte took to it like a "bee to honey." The most important thing I learned from Monte was his process of selling during the sitting. He had his clients so fired up that they were sold and really ready to buy wall enlargements before they left the camera room! Monte talked continuously while he worked with the clients. He talked about them. He talked about how good they were going to look. He talked about how good he

was at making them look really fantastic. And he talked about the Scene Machine and how great the backgrounds were that he was choosing and how they were going to love the results. He wasn't the least bit bashful. He talked about what a great photographer he was. I watched him again and again with subjects...it worked every time. They couldn't wait to see the results and pay out money for a Monte portrait they hadn't even seen yet. And, they didn't even know who Monte was before they came into the camera room. But they sure knew who he was when they left and they were literally drooling to buy. Monte is a master at one of the most important aspects of selling. **"Always Be Closing" the customer. It's ABC.**

The Walmart Portrait Studio

Most every photographer loves to hate Walmart portraits. They complain about the lighting, the posing...everything they do is wrong, wrong, wrong, including their ridiculously low prices. They can't imagine how they will be able to stay in business. But, something is really wrong with that thinking because Photo Corporation of America, (PCA), the concessionaire who operates the Walmart studios, has been in business for a long time and they are still in business today and doing quite well. PCA is a business that knows how to make a profit. They know they don't put out work that matches what the highest level professionals can do. They accept that. They produce a product in a way and at a price that sells and makes them money. It's that simple. And all things considered, they do a very good job.

One of the interesting things that I've noticed about Walmart studios in the last few years is their emphasis on backgrounds. Walk up to the foyer of your local Walmart. You will see a poster displayed there advertising the portrait studio. The poster will include sample portraits of children with interesting backgrounds, usually seasonal backgrounds. The poster ad will also promote the backgrounds that are available.

Granted, the backgrounds are only a very few simple painted or inkjet printed backdrops which are extremely limited and often not very realistic, but maybe the professional photographer can learn something here. Walmart is making money even with these very simplistic and limited backgrounds. The public is buying it. Think of what the professional photographer could do with a real background system!

Basically Walmart studios understand the power of back-grounds. They get it! Today they do it the most simple way possible. When they start to get some competition from other competitors, they will probably look at a more sophisticated system like virtual. But, for now, they are way ahead of the competition.



This Walmart Studio display is in every Walmart in North America. It changes every 30 days with new images and new backgrounds.



For the last two years, Walmart Portrait Studios have placed special emphasis on backgrounds. New seasonal backgrounds are added just about every month to keep the customer coming back for new portraits again and again.

Market Research Guides the Way

PCA has the advantage of being able to do serious market research. Independent professionals don't have access to market research. PCA has learned from years of experience that when they emphasize the background, they get larger sales and make more money. They have also learned that the background is a strong marketing incentive. Seasonal backgrounds are used to give parents multiple reasons to bring the kids to the studio more often, instead of perhaps once a year. When the Christmas backgrounds get old, it's time for Spring and Easter backgrounds, followed by Summer scenes, followed by Fall scenes and Halloween. The background becomes a major part of the incentive to get the kids photographed again and again, each time with a new background. It's such a simple concept.

**More backgrounds = More sittings =
More Profit**

Face the Giant...and Stare Him Down

Some photographers say, "Well if the chain store is doing it...I don't want to." That's a pretty ridiculous thought. The chain store studio does portraiture. Does that mean you shouldn't do portraiture because the chain store does it? If the customer calls the chain store and asks how many backgrounds they have and they say a dozen including seasonal backgrounds and if the same customer calls the professional studio and asks the same question and they are told two or three different canvas backgrounds and no seasonal backgrounds, what do you think the customer is likely to do?

The key to expanding your business is to learn from Walmart and then find ways to better serve the customer. Walmart is a giant company. They are very successful. They are very well organized. But they can be beat by

BACKGROUND POWER!

the aggressive local entrepreneur. If you ever visit San Marcos, Texas, you'll find Stewart's Hardware, a very successful business located in an old feed store. They compete head to head with Walmart, Target, Home Depot and Lowe's. Stewart's thrives because Phil Stewart provides exceptional customer service. Walk into Stewart's Hardware and a knowledgeable employee greets you, asks you what you would like, takes you to the product, helps you select the product and walks you to the register. They will also carry your purchases out. Try getting that kind of help in a Walmart!

In San Antonio, you will find Chester's hamburgers, often located within the shadow of a McDonalds, Wendy's or Burger King. Chester's distinguishes themselves with a



Chester's has proven that it can open next to McDonalds and thrive because it offers a decidedly different product in a different environment.

Not all hamburgers are created equal!



Stewart's Hardware thrives because of the exceptional service offered as well as its unique environment inside an old feed store. Stewart's Hardware is featured in the book, *Up Against the Wal-marts*.

better custom burger as well as over 200 different brands of beer from around the world. Chester's least expensive hamburger is \$3.69, but it is worth it. They now have 4 locations and are building 3 more. Even though you are small, it is very possible to survive and thrive as long as you clearly differentiate yourself in positive ways. Every independent business person should read, *Up Against The Wal-Marts: How Your Business Can Prosper In The Shadow Of Retail Giants* by Don Taylor and Jeanne Smalling Archer. It can really help you win against the giants. Unfortunately, it was not a widely read book, but it is full of great ideas.

David & Goliath

The story of little David beating Goliath with a little rock and a slingshot is classic. David won because he was creative and different. He was a very resourceful little guy. The pressure is often on the little guy to try to act like the big guy. When the little guy forgets he is indeed the little guy and then tries to act just like Goliath, the little guy is destined for quick extinction. I've seen it happen! Capitalize on the advantages of being the little guy. **Know who you are!**

Be Different...Distinguish Yourself from the Crowd

I will always remember the "tootsie roll preacher." Why? In my activities as a wedding photographer I have met hundreds and hundreds of ministers, priests, and rabbis. They are all a blur in my memory except one...a minister in Youngstown, Ohio who always had a Tootsie Roll in his hand when he shook your hand. As he shook your hand, he passed a small Tootsie Roll over to you. I



When someone passes you a Tootsie Roll as part of a handshake, you remember them.

remember what he looked like, how he sounded, and exactly where his church was located. The free and totally unexpected Tootsie Roll did it. It was his most distinguishing aspect. It always provoked a smile and brought out casual conversation. It worked wonders.

Then there was Charlie Satter of Satter Sales in Denver. Satter Sales wholesaled thousands of photographic products to camera stores across the country like my Cameo Photo Center in San Marcos. I had a choice of perhaps a dozen or more such wholesalers. Charlie was different from the rest, but not so much in price and service. Charlie distinguished himself and his company by sending out cans of food, usually cans of beans, with most orders. The cans had his own private Satter Sales label with a picture of Charlie on the front. He also sent out a can of beans to all of his customers for Christmas along with a card and a "thank you." It was "fun" to find

Charlie's little gift and to get his thank you. No one else did that. As a result, we ordered most of our wholesale supplies from Charlie.

With the Tootsie Roll minister and Charlie Satter in mind, I decided that my company would hand out something special rather than the traditional ball



San Marcos brand jalapenos make a great giveaway for our company. People remember it!

point pen or some other gift catalog item no one really wanted. I came up with two items that represented our fundamental philosophy: the importance of being different. I selected little cans of sliced jalapenos and popcorn vacuum packed on the cob. When visitors came to our trade show booth, they were surprised at our little gift.



Anyone can get popcorn in a bag but not everyone can get it still on the cob.

Of course, the gift has a little explanation printed on it that talks about how being different is fundamental to our company and our products. Giving out these unique gifts often starts casual conversation and brings forth smiles.



The Simones' Christmas card... a work of photographic art that people remember and keep.

Don't Go to the "Give Aways" Catalog Like Everyone Else

Why did I select jalapenos and on the cob popcorn? Jalapenos are part of the southwest and Mexico and Virtual Backgrounds is located in the southwest. Jalapenos also represent a spicy enhancer to food which is exactly what virtual backgrounds are to portraits. We tell people to put more spice in their business with virtual backgrounds. In the same way, popcorn on the cob was a product that almost no one has ever seen before. It is truly different. We tell people to "put more pop in their business with virtual backgrounds," or "explode your creative talents with virtual backgrounds."

I found it interesting that some of our own employees had so much paradigm paralysis that they didn't like the idea of giving out non-traditional gifts, preferring instead the traditional ball point pen or similar trinkets from the traditional trinket catalog. They just could not get themselves to think out of the box. My philosophy is, if we are going to hand out an item at a trade show, it isn't going to be something traditional. Not on my watch.

When you have the opportunity to give out a little gift, take time to come up with something really different. It doesn't have to be jalapenos or popcorn on the cob. The

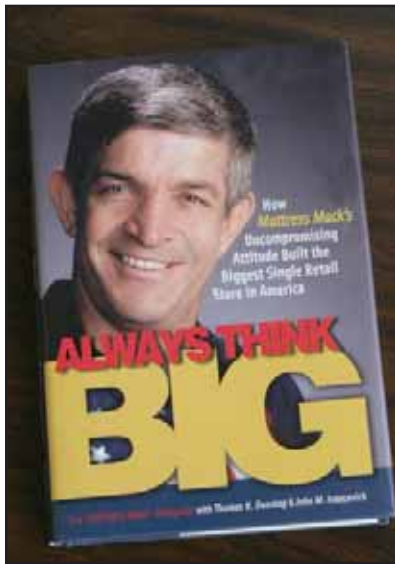
possibilities are endless if you'll just put your imagination to work. It will pay you big dividends. Even years later, some people still remember us for the jalapeno gift we gave them. They may even stop by and tell us that the can of jalapenos is still on their pantry shelf. Eating the jalapenos isn't the objective...it's being reminded of our company that is the primary objective. The longer that can with our label on it stays on their shelf, the better it is for us because they continue to be reminded of our company.

The Simones of Montreal send out Christmas photo greeting cards featuring an artistic image of Montreal in the winter. For Christmas, Images, a cruise ship photo company, sends out a privately commissioned limited edition art piece. In both cases, the gift is appreciated and kept and, therefore, remembered. Some people frame the images for display.

There are an infinite number of things you can do to help promote your business. Force yourself to look beyond the traditional. Traditional is always the easy way to go. Find something really special, ideally something that represents you or your business. Make yourself and your work really stand out from the crowd.

Always Search for Ways to be Different

You should never stop looking for ways to improve your product, to improve your services, and to make your business stand out and be noticed, in desirable ways, of course. If you ever visit Houston, stop at Gallery Furniture on I-45. A check of the yellow pages shows many hundreds of furniture stores in Houston, but there is only one Gallery Furniture. It's a huge place that features delivery and set up today for what you buy today. When you visit, you are likely to be offered free homemade ice cream and other desserts, free sandwiches, free soft drinks and popcorn. On my most recent visit, a BBQ grill was fired up and they were serving sausage slices near the front door.



Gallery Furniture's owner tells how he made it big in Houston, Texas by being different.

A clown played with the kids while an attractive woman directed parking lot traffic. Two giant jum-botrons were showing recent movies. There's a play area for kids with supervision. There is also an indoor practice tennis like game.

Before the tennis court was built, there was an indoor putting golf course. Elvis Presley's favorite car is on display, as is some Princess Diana memorabilia. The bathrooms are another experience. They are so unique you actually want to visit each one. Just about everything about Gallery Furniture is different.

Mac, the owner, makes shopping for furniture at his store an experience. He doesn't promise to be the cheapest, just the best value. He openly admits that he has made



Can you name another furniture store that serves free food? It sure works for Mac!

millions in the furniture business but he also contributes back to the community. His recently published book, *Think Big*, is great reading for anyone in business who desires to separate themselves from the competition.

In my personal life, I never like to do what everyone else does. I try to look for a better way...a different way. My initial involvement in virtual backgrounds in our studios many years ago was a direct reflection of my desire to be different from other photographers. A visitor today at Marian Oles Photography quickly recognizes that this isn't just another studio. Check out her studio web site at www.marianoles.com.

At Virtual Backgrounds we continually work at developing non-traditional ways to promote our products and services. We always begin by looking at the needs of our customers.



A two day training workshop is included with every Virtual Background system purchase.

When we recognized that a training program would be helpful, we established our workshop program. We used to charge extra for the workshop and only a small percentage of our customers attended. To encourage more customers to attend, we give free tuition with the purchase of a system. When some customers asked for a more simple and less expensive projector, especially one that would be ideally suited for traveling road work like school photography, we built it.

Our building complex in San Marcos includes an old railroad freight siding that still parallels a major Union Pacific rail line. I decided that it would be both different and fun if we purchased and refurbished some historic rail passenger cars. If you attend one of our workshops, you will be served lunch on board our private club car. When we finish the restoration of our two 1947 Pullman

sleeping cars, instead of staying at the typical interstate hotel, our workshop participants will have a chance to stay in the Pullmans with other workshop attendees. It will be a truly unique experience with freight and passenger trains passing within 50 feet. It's all part of my "modus operandi" to be different... to make life more interesting and more fun. When I purchased the train cars and had them delivered by rail, there were a lot of strange looks on people's faces because it wasn't the traditional thing to do. As the plan came together, those strange looks are now pretty much gone. Going the traditional route usually seems like the easier solution, but that is what everyone else does. Instead, always search for a better way, a more unique way to reach your goals. You can always go back to the traditional solutions.

It's Fun To be Different... And Profitable Too

When the company needed more space, the normal thing to do would be to build or find something. I found a 60 year old abandoned wool mill on 12 acres. It had more than 600 broken windows, a leakly roof and water in the basement. Most people saw it as total trash. I bought it. People laughed. Now it is a thriving successful business park. No one laughs any more. **I stepped outside the box.**

If I were starting my studio career again, I would hope that I would be continually looking for new and different ways to catch the attention of my potential clients. Virtual backgrounds would be an absolute must. Digital would be an absolute must. An assortment of special props would be a must. The ability to show my proofs immediately would be important as well as a projection

system to project the proof images to encourage the sale of large wall portraits. I would also offer the subject the opportunity to take home paper proofs immediately after the sitting. Today, with so many studios going digital and not providing paper proofs, offering paper proofs would be a decided advantage.



The Old Mill, home of Virtual Backgrounds and many other businesses. The Union Pacific tracks are on the left. Between the UP tracks and the building is our private train.

I would also want to have the ability to deliver finished work in a very short time, especially if time were critical to the customer. I would certainly want to offer same day delivery of 8 x10 and smaller prints but at a premium price. If I were developing a wedding business, I would go back and learn from the writings and photography of Bill Stockwell and Rocky Gunn and promote their unique styles of image making that the local amateurs couldn't possibly do. If you don't know these names and you do wedding photography, it would pay you well to look them up and study their techniques and start to create a market for them.

I would look for unique cost effective methods of advertising. Basically, I would look at what everyone else is doing, pick and choose, and then develop methods that no one else is yet doing. I would most certainly talk with my customers about their needs. I would hold focus groups periodically.

I would also get very active in doing posi-



We are in the process of restoring two Pullman railroad sleeping cars. In the near future, workshop attendees will have the option of staying in the car instead of a motel. The main Union Pacific track is just 50 feet away providing great audio and visual "effects."

tive things in my community. Anything is better than nothing. Get involved. Join the Chamber. Join a service club. Be active. A local photographer built a lot of his studio business by being a dog trainer. People came to him for dog training and got to know him and when they needed a portrait, they thought of him. On the other hand, his portrait customers would learn about his dog training so they would come to him for that. This year we held four "Polar Express" Christmas parties for 100 children on our railroad club car. Next year the parties will be a more serious fundraiser serving many more children. You can imagine the enthusiasm of the children, most of whom have never been on a train. It was fun and a perfect picture taking opportunity. It also got our photograph on the front page of the local newspaper. Tune in to your community if you expect your community to tune in to you.



Workshop attendees and other visitors use our restored vintage railroad car for lunch and dinner. It is also a special gathering place for meetings and parties. No one forgets the experience of being on our private train. Everyone in town knows where it is.



Our "Polar Express" Christmas parties, held on the railroad club car, created a lot of enthusiasm in the community. That's me in the conductor's uniform reading the story.



No Excuses Accepted

There is no excuse for not being successful in professional portraiture today. The keys to success are there but you have to use them. A photographer recently told me, "I don't want to do anything right now...my business is down, I don't want to spend any money and I'm 50 years old. Let me just wait and see what happens." You and I both know what will most likely happen. With this attitude, his business will eventually disappear. The opportunities are everywhere for those who are willing to invest in the tools and techniques and methods to bring them forth. Psychologists often talk about "learned helplessness." People who are down often feel that there is no way out for them. There is always a way out.

Avoid getting stuck in the traditional paradigms. They are unbelievably difficult

for many people to break away from. Most people will fight and kick and bury their heads in the sand to continue what they have always been doing and avoid seeing the light. I cannot over emphasize this point. Resistance to being different has been one of the most startling discoveries of my life. But again, if most of your competitors are stuck in their ways, that means more opportunity for those who are not.

I'll say it again - both success and failure are options!

Quoting Roger Berg of Columbia, Missouri...

"There is more money to be made in portrait photography than ever before...you just have to be smarter and more creative in the camera room and in how you market, how you advertise and how you sell."

WAR GAMES!

Fighting for business has many similarities with fighting a war. If you want to win, you are going to have to be both innovative and aggressive. Sooner or later, most every portrait photographer decides that it is time to go after a formal contract to be designated as the “official photographer.” Usually, the bidding is for the high school senior contract although it could also be for underclassmen photography. The contract could be in the public sector or the private sector. In the private sector there usually are no rules of so called “fair play” or “fair decision making.” Because public money is not involved, the decision makers can choose any bidder they wish. They could even choose the highest bidder with the worst product. It could be a personal friend or a good ol’ boy type decision. There isn’t much you can do about it legally if you are not selected.

If the decision is being made in the public arena, such as for the official public school photographer, then the bidding process is more open and it is supposed to follow prescribed rules. In many respects, the battle for the school contract is much like a war game, only there usually are not just two combatants. There may be a dozen or more combatants. Each combatant is expected to show his “muscle” to the judges and the judges then select the winner.

Rules Of War

So, what does the photographer have in terms of armaments to display before the judges? A typical school contract will specify that the photographer must submit examples of their work and perhaps some statement about their policies, procedures, and customer service. They absolutely must submit their prices and what they are going to offer to the school in



Filling out a bid form is the first step to securing a contract. It's part of the battle to see who wins. Fortunately, there are “more ways than one to skin a cat.”

terms of free equipment, free services, and cash rebates, which are usually, but not always, a percentage of the gross.

The prices to be charged for various size prints, free equipment, free services and rebates are pretty black and white. They are all components that can be easily quantified so that each combatant can end up with a number, a score of sorts. Because it is so difficult for the selection committee to judge portrait quality and actually assign a value to it, it is generally assumed that all photographers who are bidding are about the same in terms of their artistic properties and even customer service. Therefore, the sole criteria becomes money... how much are you going to charge the kids and what are you going to give the schools? The process is essentially the same as if the school were selecting a contractor to pave the parking lot or plant new grass in the football stadium. It all seems to come down to money.

With price and freebies being the deciding factor, serious bidders fall all over themselves to present the lowest bid in order to get the contract.

Confounding the Bid Process – Asymmetric War

What can a photographer do in order to increase his chances of winning in the bid process while not lowering prices to the point where winning the contract may actually result in a bottom line loss? The photographer does have a few options. One option is to confound the bid process by throwing in a unique twist to the photography that is highly attractive, powerful, innovative, and not offered by the competition. This twist must be something that the decision makers can appreciate. If the bidding process were for new grass for the football field, the bidder would have to present a completely new, much softer, much greener grass than the decision makers ever saw before...grass they can only get from this one single bidder.

In portrait photography, confounding the process can't be just about better lighting or better posing or a better looking studio. That isn't enough to make a difference. However, the introduction of custom unique backgrounds, which when combined with innovative posing and lighting, is clearly one of the few ways a photographer can clearly distinguish their product as decidedly different. The photographer can introduce an array of samples that demonstrate the wide range of poses matched with complementary backgrounds that are made possible by the photographer's implementation of a virtual background system. The intent is to entice the decision makers so that if they have the option to consider "other factors besides price and giveaways," they will give creativity maximum weight.

As an example, let's assume a church is looking for a new photography company to create their directory. Every bidding company except one presents a sample directory that is highly traditional. One company presents a sample directory that is distinctively different and the photographer does an excellent job of explaining the reasoning behind the differences and their advantages. Assuming all else

is about the same, who do you think will get the job?

Admittedly, it's a gamble when you know the decision makers are looking at price and supposedly price alone with minimum opportunity to consider anything else. But if the decision is between pricing one's services so low that it would be difficult to make a profit after investing an inordinate amount of work and submitting a bid package that may be slightly higher priced but includes a style of photography that really catches the imagination of the committee, the second option becomes a real possibility.

This whole approach assumes that the photographer is introducing a benefit that the bid reviewers can clearly recognize. If the benefit is such that it isn't noticed or meaningful to the reviewers, it won't play a role. Here again is why the addition of backgrounds is so important. Backgrounds are distinctive. They are noticeable. One can build a case for having complementary backgrounds. It is very difficult for the decision maker to clearly see slightly better portraiture. But what you would show must be clearly different and enticing. This is how you avoid getting into just a pricing battle.

Other Enticements

Let's suppose you want to secure contracts with day care centers and preschools. The schools are all privately owned and, therefore, looking for ways to promote their existence with the public. Here's a great way to get their attention and a contract. Offer them a portrait package that includes a photograph of the front of the school in the background, with the name of the school clearly visible. The school administrators love it because it is a subtle way of advertising their school with everyone who sees the pictures. The parents love it because it shows their child's school. A variation of this may use an artist's sketch or drawing of the school building, again with the school's name plainly visible. Simply have an artist create the drawing, perhaps while look-



To make "school days" photography different, try using a background of the school. It is much more meaningful and not at all hard to do. Everyone loves it.

ing at a photograph of the school, and then convert the drawing into a background slide. The drawing can be realistic or very abstract. It can be in color or even just a pencil sketch. If you are the local photographer, imagine the advantage you would have over the national photography groups or even the other local photographers who might not be so interested in doing something special.

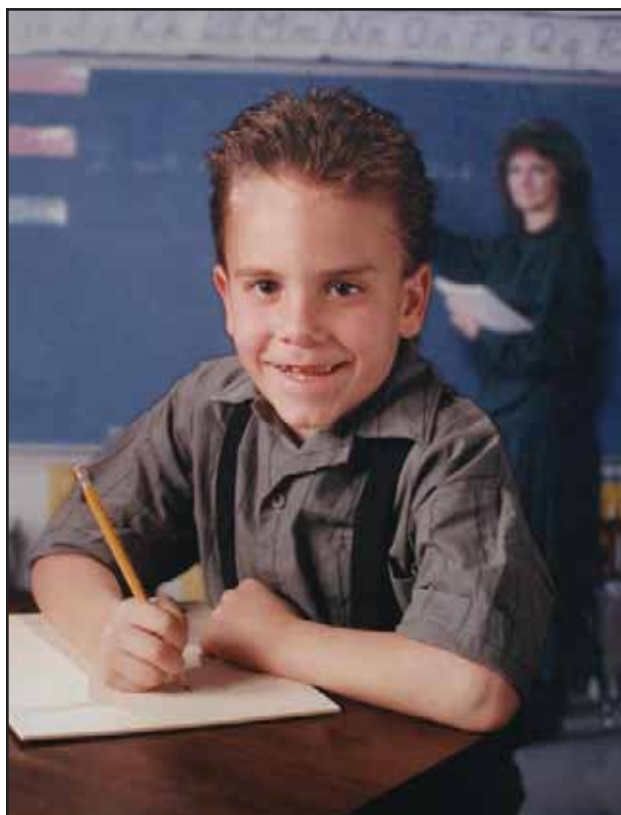
How do you recover your cost of this approach? Multiple ways. You get contracts that you may not otherwise have gotten. You may be able to charge a little more for your packages. And, parents may be so pleased that they buy more than they would ordinarily have purchased.

The Ultimate School Photo Enticement

Who was your third grade teacher? What did she look like? Do you have any pictures of her? Do you have any pictures of her with you? Would you like to have had a picture of her? Would you like to have had a picture of both you and your teacher? Here is an

approach that requires a little bit of advance work and planning but brings with it a dynamite punch when you present this approach, with samples, in your contract bid. It is the most powerful way I know of to secure school contracts and to increase sales averages. It is special because it is so different from normal school photography which, except for going color, hasn't changed much in 75 years.

A week or two before your scheduled school shoot, make special arrangements with the principal to come into the school at the end of the school day to quickly move from one classroom to another to photograph each teacher. Position each teacher in a teaching situation as if they were standing before the class, perhaps at the board, or sitting at their desk. You can probably take two or three quick shots on transparency film or digital and then move on to the next teacher. It is conceivable that you could do a different teacher every few minutes so covering the school



How's this for a unique customized school day portrait... with the teacher's slightly out of focus image in the background? Compare this with a traditional school portrait.

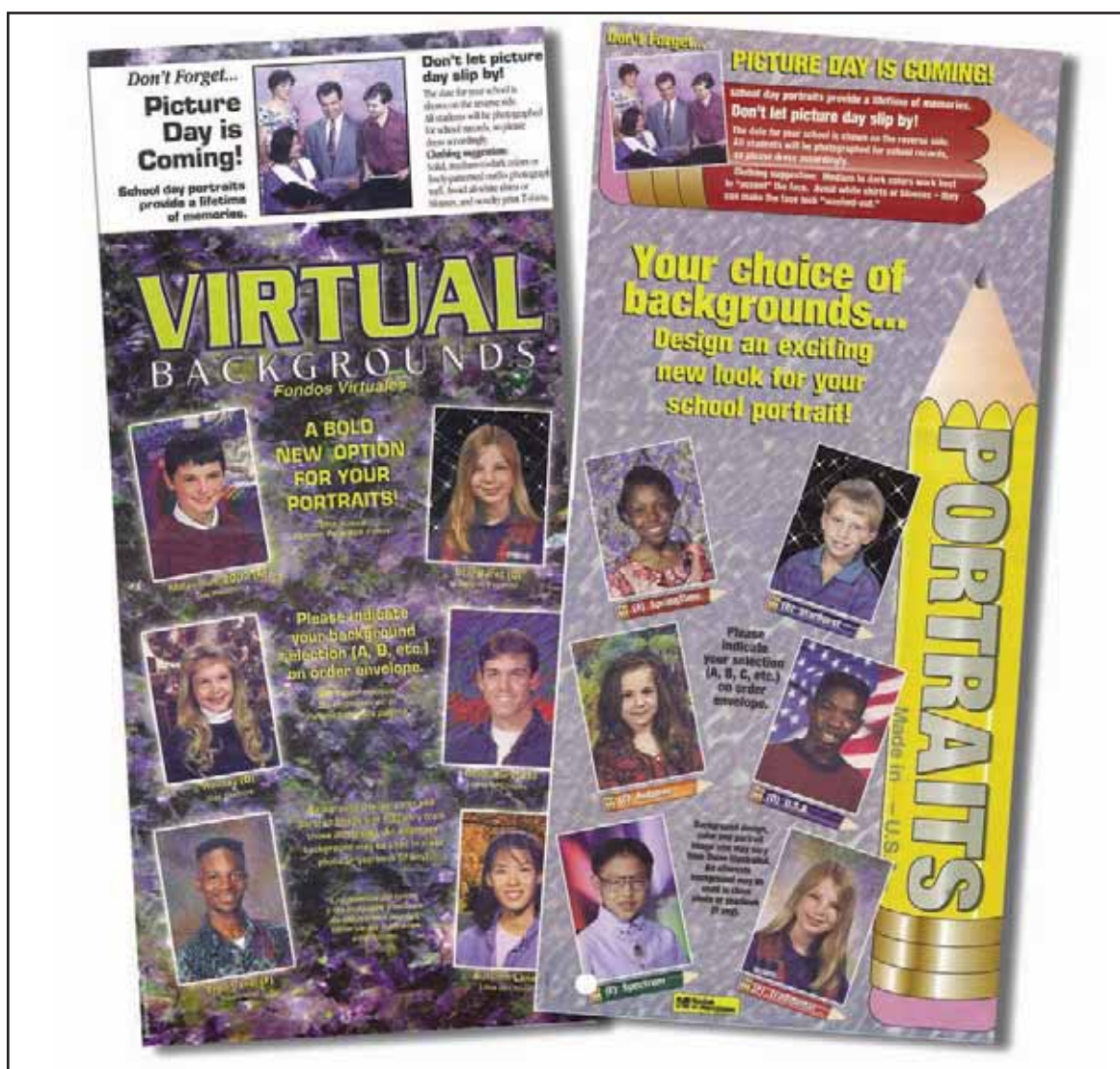
wouldn't be hard to do.

When school picture day comes, you may wish to do two shots of each child, one with a traditional background and one with the teacher in the background. The teacher should be slightly out of focus with the real focus on the student. The student's family should be given a chance to purchase either pose. They will probably purchase from both poses.

This program can be so successful that it should almost guarantee that you get the contract the following year. After all, who else already has the background pictures of all the teachers? The second year, all you have to do is photograph the new teachers and any teachers who prefer to have a new image. So,

not only does this approach help you get the contract in the first place without having the lowest price, it also helps guarantee that you will be able to keep the contract in future years, plus it should result in significantly higher sales averages and greater participation.

I've recommended this promotion in a number of programs I've given to school photographers but I don't know of anyone who actually tried it. They always make excuses like, it's too complicated, it takes too much time, etc. But, what if it also not only got you the job but doubled your profits on every child? I know that if I wanted to break into school photography in "your" town, this is an approach I would use.



These school photo advance handouts heavily promote background variety. See next page...

JEFF MCLEOD OFFERS COMMON SENSE SOLUTIONS

The keynote speaker at the 2004 Professional School Photographers Association conference was Kodak's Jeff McLeod. He took a hard look at reality in underclassmen school photography and offered a variety of potential solutions that revolve around better promotion and new product innovation.

The fact is, since the 1990's, package purchases have been dropping about 1% every year. This represents a huge reduction in sales in what has been an "institution" since the 20s...the school portrait package. School photographers measure their success in two ways. First, it's participation. Participation is the percentage of students photographed who purchase a package of pictures. Second, it's total sales. Most school photographers offer several different package options at different price points.

The image itself – the content – is a priceless record of a unique moment in a child's life – a moment that will never come again. Context gives school pictures relevance that no alternative can match.

"Thirty percent, or more, of the parents do not purchase any school photographs. Possibly these parents don't see the value in school pictures because no one has

presented it to them in a clear and persuasive way. McLeod suggests holding focus groups and customer surveys, including surveying non-purchasers and purchasers, with exceptionally valuable information coming from those who didn't purchase. McLeod suggests finding compelling reasons to cause Moms to purchase.

Jeff's thinking fits precisely with my proposal of photographing each child, especially elementary school age children and pre-schoolers, with their teacher in the image as well as parts of their classroom. It is a powerful way to create a compelling image. It provides more reason to buy. Instead of finding reasons why such an idea can't be done, the innovative school photographer should find ways to make it work... to create a product the parents can't refuse. When he was with Interstate Photo, Chris Wunder reported that just offering the students a choice of background color significantly increased sales!

Maybe putting the teacher in the image does take some significant extra effort, but if that extra effort is well compensated, then why not make the investment? A good way to start is to test the concept at just a couple of schools. The resulting numbers will tell the story.

Based on a report in Photo Imaging News

Want Background Choice? A Contemporary Background Will Cost You Extra

Some photographers bid the contract with a simple canvas background. However, just before picture day, the students are offered a choice of the standard canvas background at no additional cost and a selection of one of several non-traditional backgrounds for an extra cost of from one to five dollars. A key component of this approach is the flyer that is sent home to the parents to sign whereby they select whether they want the plain

background or one of several contemporary backgrounds.

One dollar extra may not sound like much until you run the numbers. If just fifty percent of the students order the special background and pay just one extra dollar, and if the photographer can shoot 500 kids in one day, that's \$250 of extra almost pure profit per day, or \$1,250 extra dollars per week, or \$5000 extra per month. That's a lot of extra profit!

Many school photographers will say, "that's just too much trouble." I agree that these approaches to school photography involve



Walmart Studio pricing is very simple. If you don't buy the \$4.88 special which comes with the first exposure, you buy prints by the 8 x 10 sheet. Walmart also offers extras such as CD screen savers, etc.

some extra work, but the returns can make it well worthwhile. That's the way business works in a capitalistic system. He who has the better idea gets the rewards.

The Loss Leader Approach

Here is still another option that can work well especially for senior portraits. The photographer can bid a package so low that it is likely that the bid will be accepted, knowing full well that the studio will have a powerful marketing program that will cause the vast majority of the students to pay extra to go beyond the basic offering. Here again, the availability of a variety of virtual backgrounds can be part of the up sell, along with more poses, more changes of clothing, real outdoor locations, and digital composites. In addition, the extra cost options of using powerful special effects such as those that can be obtained with programs like Adobe Photoshop and Corel Painter can be profit enhancing add ons. In this way, the

studio may lose money on the students who select to stay with the cheapest package of services and product, but if they execute a good plan, it will be possible to up sell most students into the profit generating range.

This is exactly the approach taken by the major retail store studios. They advertise a huge package of pictures for a ridiculously low price...so low that if they didn't have a huge up sell, they would soon be out of business. How, you might ask, can they up sell a customer who already is getting 50 or more individual prints for the advertised price? It's relatively easy. In many cases, the advertised package comes from the very first exposure which is often the worst image in terms of expression. The first exposure also usually includes a plain "blah" background and little effort is made to help the client look their best. If the customer wants a special background, they have to pay more money. If they want to select a package from the 3rd exposure, they have to pay more money, often a lot more money. Most retail studios end up with an average sale of between \$30 and \$60 when the advertising leads one to think that they can get 50 portraits, including the sitting fee, for just \$3.95.

The school can't stop the photographer from attempting to up sell the students. The more enticing the up sell and the better the studio personnel are at getting the up sell, the more profit will be made. The contract price gets the kids in front of your camera. Then it is up to you to offer options that they will buy into. Just about everyone up sells. Did you ever look at a model home and be really impressed with the price until you found out that many of the items in the model home were available at extra cost? The price quoted for the home was for the basic package and did not include all the amenities. It's done all the time.

Still Another Hot Idea

I started in photography doing class reunions. It was a good business. Many photographers do class reunions today. But, what does a class reunion opportunity mean to you? Generally, it means taking a group picture and possibly delivering it the same night for which you charge \$10, \$15 or maybe \$20 a head. But, in order to get the reunion contract, you had to be very careful you were not charging too much.

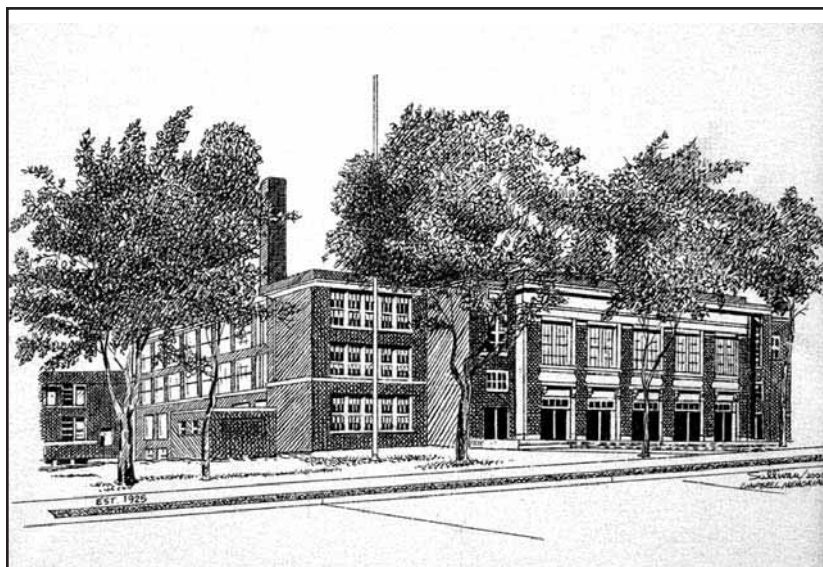
Try this on for size. Provide the decision maker with a price on the group picture, but then tell them that you will also provide them with some additional purely speculative services. Not only will you photograph the class group, but you will also have the photographer remain and do small group pictures, couples' pictures, and even individuals. But there is still more. You will bring a virtual background system with you and for the small group, couples and individual pictures, you'll have various backgrounds from their school. You may be able to shoot the school beforehand as it is today or you can get a copy of the yearbook and make some copy slides. It doesn't matter if the background is black and white and the subject is in color. That adds to the effect. Also, you might also



If you graduated from Texas State University in San Marcos, you would want an image of "Old Main" in the background.

offer the class a CD of all the pictures you take that can be sent to them after the reunion.

What will happen if you make this kind of offer? First, you'll have a great chance of getting the contract even if you are not the cheapest reunion group picture maker. Second, you'll be creating all kinds of opportunities to sell extra pictures. The backgrounds will certainly be a big bonus. So, instead of walking away with maybe \$20 per class attendee, you could easily pick up another hefty sum. And, you can also sell the photo CD. Most people who come to a reunion spend hundreds if not thousands of dollars on attending their reunion. Why should the



To you, it's just a sketch of an old school. To Memorial High graduates in Campbell, Ohio, it is something special and could be a great background at the next reunion. The actual building is only a memory.

photographer be satisfied with only perhaps \$20 when in fact it is possible to average much more?

When you decide to go after a major contract, think of it as a war game. Don't approach the process like cattle sheepishly lining up for slaughter. Use your head. In a war game, it's not pure brute strength that always wins the war. It's ingenuity that can make the difference, often propelling the little guy, the dark horse, into the winner's circle. Come up with a unique approach that turns the decision maker's attention away from pure price. Or, develop a plan to up sell so you will seldom have to actually sell the cheap package that got you the contract in the first place.

How Much Do You Charge For An 8 x 10?

How many times have you been asked this question on the phone? The caller is obviously just pricing and has no conception of differences between photographers. If you answer the question directly and if you don't have the lowest price, the potential customer is lost. The "War Games" philosophy just discussed applies to individual customers as well. Before you give them a price for that 8 x 10, confound the process. Start your response to the 8 x 10 price question by saying, "We offer many different services...may I ask you what you are looking for in a portrait?" From this point you can talk about virtual backgrounds, numbers of poses, number of outfit changes, various kinds of portrait finishes, digital enhancement, on location photography, etc. You are taking the customer away from just getting an 8 x 10 price and moving towards providing them with an understanding of the many factors that are involved in a professional portrait, hopefully leading up to

having the potential customer actually visit your studio where they can actually see what you are talking about. Then you have the maximum opportunity to impress them and get the job even if your pricing is higher than what they originally intended to pay. When I was a full time wedding photographer, I closed 95% of the couples who came to see me, even if they visited a half dozen studios and even though I was definitely not the least expensive. I did not want to waste my time talking to 10 couples to get one. I made sure we had the best offer... but definitely not the cheapest.

It's "war" whether you are seeking a school contract or the business of an individual customer. Use your head. If you handle it badly, you lose. If you handle it well, you win.

There are many ways to win a war, regardless of your size or financial strength. Once again, think of the story of David and Goliath. Also remember that David had to be exceptionally agile and innovative or the giant would have squashed him. When a "David" behaves just like the giant but still retaining his small size, he would soon perish.

I am reminded of the book titled *It's Not The Big That Eat the Small, It's The Fast That Eat The Slow* by Jason Jennings and Laurence Haughton.

To be successful, you have to be fast!



“GUERRILLA WAR”

What can the photographer do if he loses at the war games stage and the highly coveted contract goes to someone else? Is that when you hang up your camera, unplug your lights, and go out looking for a non-photo industry job? DEFINITELY NOT.

Remember the old expression, “It ain’t over until the fat lady sings?” You may have lost the war, or you may have chosen to not even bother participating in the formal war games. Either way, you can engage in very effective guerrilla war tactics.

In real life, a guerrilla-waged war, even if there are just a few guerrillas, can play havoc with a much larger force that originally won the war. But, in order to be effective and avoid being destroyed, the guerrillas have to be highly creative. If they would go head to head with the big guy, they would get nowhere. If they get innovative, they could end up being the ultimate winner.

It’s the same in the world of business. The small guy, the apparent loser, can come out being the winner IF the big guy doesn’t cover all of his bases, which they seldom do. Usually, there are big holes for the enterprising guerrilla to crawl through.

How To “Kidnap” The Kids

Let’s assume that you have been trying to get a particular high school contract but find it impossible. It always goes to “the good old boy studio” or the national chain, or perhaps to a studio that bid so cheap that they can’t possibly make any money. What can you do to still get the kids in front of your camera?

Remember the old expression, “there is always more than one way to skin a cat”? The contract studio is giving away the farm to

get faces in front of their cameras. The contract photographer does have a very powerful “club” to get the students in line. In many schools, if you want to appear in the yearbook, you have to go to the contract photographer. In most cases, the contract photographer must offer each student the basic sitting and a yearbook photograph for very little or no money. It sounds like a pretty tight deal that would be difficult to beat. There are, however, many ways for the guerrilla operator to kidnap the kids...and the profits.

The guerrilla photographer isn’t bound by any contracts. The guerrilla photographer doesn’t have to kick a percentage back to the school or give away cameras and services. The guerrilla photographer is free to direct his attention toward attracting the kids and providing them with decidedly superior options. The guerrilla photographer must devise a unique marketing program for a decidedly more attractive product. The differences can’t be subtle. The differences have to be dramatic. The guerrilla photographer isn’t going to make it if he just promotes the fact that he uses three studio lights and the contract photographer uses only two. Here again we come down to the question, what is the most powerful extra component an aggressive photographer can add to his offering that probably isn’t being offered by the contract photographer? Obviously, good posing, lighting and expression are important. But let’s assume the contract photographer is also good at these fundamentals. Then a key answer is backgrounds which are utilized to enhance the entire portrait process. And, the easiest and most efficient way to generate those backgrounds is through the virtual background process.

Lots of Marketing Ideas Don't Work Well - But Some Do!

While backgrounds are important, how does the guerrilla photographer actually use them to get the kids in front of his camera? Just having the equipment certainly isn't enough. The kids aren't going to sniff around on their own looking for the photographer that has a virtual background system. Showing samples in the window may attract a few people, but what is really needed is a powerful marketing method that really drags in the kids. The method the typical guerrilla might use is to run a huge expensive ad in the local newspaper. The results will be disappointing at best. The photographer may be a guerrilla, but running a typical big ad in the newspaper certainly isn't guerrilla advertising. Guerrilla marketing has to be innovative and unique. It has to draw people in, but it doesn't have to be expensive.

Student Reps or Student Ambassadors

One method that has been used for years is for the guerrilla photographer to hire student representatives to promote their services directly to the students in return for a fee for every head they gather. Many non-contract photographers try this method. Here again, if your photography isn't clearly and distinctively different, why should the students bother to have another portrait session, even if you do the sitting for free? This method will pick up a few subjects, but not that many. People today are too busy to take their precious time and do another sitting unless there is a really special reason.

Turning Backgrounds Into People Magnets

The savvy, creative guerrilla photographer can take a very different approach. He should focus on various campus groups like sports teams, the band, cheerleaders, etc. The con-

tract photographer isn't interested in these groups because he is concentrating on those seniors who will be essentially coerced to come to his studio so they can be in the year-book. The guerrilla photographer can go directly to the sub groups and offer them a special they can't refuse and one that probably doesn't have to go through the normal school channels. In most cases, the school can't stop the photographer or any other vendor from marketing to the students. The administrators might try to make it difficult, but very often interference with the guerrilla's marketing can be turned around into a plus that actually brings the guerrilla more attention among the very group whose attention the guerrilla photographer is seeking.

The "Pied Piper" Approach

Let's use the high school band to serve as a typical example. The band may have 100 or more members. The guerrilla photographer can meet with the band director and the student leaders of the band and show them samples of an entirely new kind of band photography that will require only a little bit of cooperation but no cash, unless they choose to buy something. Come prepared with samples to show them a variety of composite images that were actually quite easy to create, but which are highly desirable to the subject.

Remember that your primary goal is to get these band members to come into your studio for a formal portrait sitting. Here is the plan. You are going to photograph every band member on 35 mm transparency film with a typical 35 mm camera. There are steps in the shooting process. At a designated time, the band lines up on the practice field in a big bunch and the photographer photographs the whole group with them all looking forward toward the photographer. He can also photograph the band in a tight formation from above. Next, one by one, each band member marches out to a specific spot and poses in a couple of different ways with their instrument.



Alan Delaplante

The perfect personalized background. This approach may be used in an infinite number of ways to generate new profits.

The photographer takes two, three or even more shots in rapid succession on transparency film and then the next band member marches out. The photographer may spend just 30 to 60 seconds with each band member to get these "action shots." The photographer should strive to have an interesting location background in these shots such as the high school or the stadium.

The band leader is then invited to come to the studio at a designated time dressed in full band uniform, plus he is asked to bring several changes of clothing, including a suit and tie. The band leader is photographed with projected virtual images of himself in the background and then he is photographed with his entire band as his background. Then he changes into a suit for more portraits and, finally, he changes into something casual for additional shots. Several enlargements are made and strategically hung in the band room. The composite portraits will cause a great deal of student interest because they have never seen anything quite like this. The composite image ties together his enthusiasm for

his band activity with a portrait of himself.

The entire band now knows that you can produce some extremely unique and highly enticing portraits using this special virtual machine that incorporates images of themselves into their portrait. They know that the only way they can see these transparencies of themselves and get these unique images is to come to your studio. They also know that if they do come to the studio, they need to bring several changes of clothing because they have heard that the photographer is really good and can come up with some very enticing pictures.

If you do this right, the appointment calendar will quickly fill with one band member after another clamoring for appointments. Each band member is photographed first in his uniform with himself as



My son, David, absolutely loved fishing as a boy and still does today. This "Studio Shot" shows him with his special hat, his special jacket, doing his special thing. I call this a form of personality portraiture. We carefully created the lighting effect.

a background, then with the entire band as a background. Then he is photographed with both casual clothing and with his best suit, with his high school as a background as well as with a variety of other backgrounds including a library scene and even some "Old Masters" type projected backgrounds. It's all possible because the virtual background technology lets the photographer change backgrounds in seconds.

The student is later presented with perhaps 20 proofs with this tremendous range of variety. The orders will tumble in and the contract photographer will be wondering why so many seniors are not showing up for their appointments or why those who do come in for their standard appointment purchase nothing or very little. They have already purchased all their portraits from the photographer who offered them so much more variety. It's a simple basic rule...

more variety = more profit.

"Kidnapping" the Prom Couples

Very often the opportunity to do the prom photography is tied to the high school senior contract. If you don't have the senior contract, you don't get to even bid on the prom pictures.

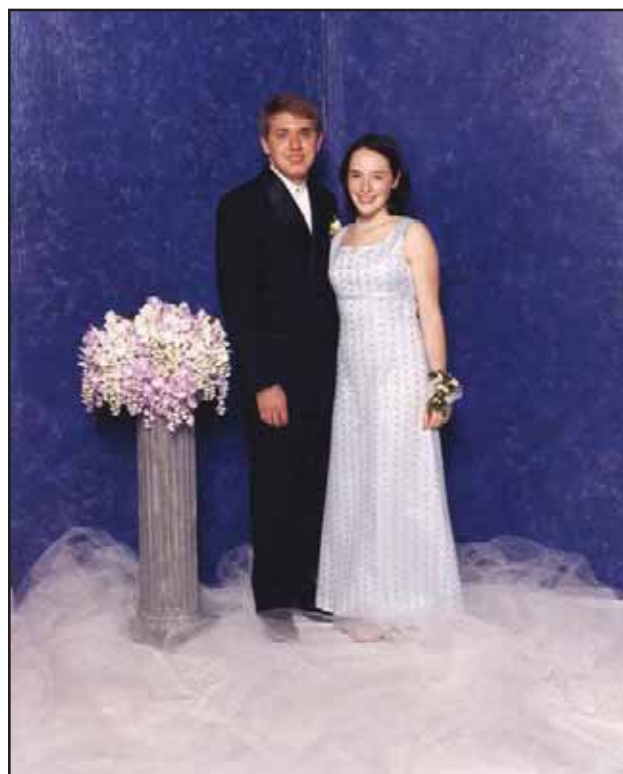
Here's how the guerrilla photographer gets around that. If your studio is located within a reasonable distance from the prom, set up a special prom theme related virtual background and have a student representative let the students know that you will be taking couples' photographs before the prom and there won't be any long lines. If the regular prom photographer is using a dorky old trellis background, you've got it made.

If you don't have a studio or if your studio is not nearby, find out the name of a popular nice restaurant that many of the couples would like to patronize on the night of the

WHICH PROM PHOTOGRAPHER WOULD YOU SELECT?



Rick Harding provides his prom groups with a complete set for their proms that harmonize with the theme of the event.



Too many photographers provide only the absolute bare necessities and then wonder why they don't get called again.

prom. Work a deal with the restaurant. You'll get him the business IF he'll have an offer of some sort for the students and if he allows you to photograph the couples before or after they eat.

In either case, you may be able to photograph a significant number of couples before the prom starts and the stodgy old prom photographer wonders why the kids are no longer interested in his prom pictures. It's Guerrilla War 101!

More "Kidnapping" Ideas

Think of how you could use this exact same program with all the other student groups. What about the football team, the baseball team, the ski team, the golf team? It just rolls on and on and on. And, what's your cost of acquiring all these sittings? It's nothing more than a little advance planning, some leg work, taking the transparencies, and then marketing and selling. If the extra effort brings you the contract and helps you keep the contract, then it will probably be worthwhile.

Using this method, you are, of course, not just capturing seniors; you are working with all the group's members although you could potentially limit it to seniors. But who says that only seniors purchase pictures? Stop and think for a moment. How many different ways can you use this promotional concept? The answer is unlimited. Or perhaps we should say, limited only by your imagination.

The Poster Promotion

There are as many guerrilla marketing methods as there are creative thinking guerrilla photographers. T.A. Schmidt of Redding, California, came up with one of the more innovative maverick marketing ideas that I have heard of. T.A. was frustrated because of the extreme competitiveness in his area for the senior contracts. He decided to take a different approach which he calls the Student Poster Promotion which actually goes after a market three times larger than the senior market with no competition.

"Everyone fights over the senior contract but no one makes any attempt to cultivate the freshmen, sophomores and juniors other than the traditional school picture photographer. Standard school pictures are fine for elementary kids, but are rather repulsive for the high school crowd." Underclass students have money to spend and they will spend it on portraits if given a chance. T.A. also recognized that there has to be a specific need to get people to come in to the studio to have a sitting. The Poster Promotion developed into the perfect tool. The promotion does require some serious organizing and promotion at the beginning because it is a completely new concept. The local photographer has to create an interest in even having class posters and then in getting the students to participate. Each member of the class is invited to be photographed and have their photograph appear on the class poster. Each student receives a copy of the finished poster. The hardest part is getting the project started. Once it gets going, with good publicity, students won't want to be left out. Once he got the poster project going, T.A. had many students calling to make sure they didn't miss their opportunity to be on the poster. The class posters soon can become a yearly event that everyone looks forward to.

The project can also be a fund raiser for the class. Students can go around town and sell ad space on the front or back of the poster. In return for their advertising support, each business is issued a laminated poster for display in their place of business. Most businesses put the posters on display. Most of the money generated from the advertising sales goes to the class with the remainder set aside to help pay for the basic cost of printing the posters. Keep in mind that when local businesses display the posters, your studio will be getting the benefits of year long exposure.

The poster promotion wouldn't take off if each class member were simply photographed in a standard pose with a standard background. It would be a pretty boring piece. Instead, each class member is encour-

aged to come up with some of their own posing and background ideas that reflect their lifestyle and their personality. In this way, the kids bring in their own ideas which can be coupled with the photographer's ideas. Each student can be photographed "their way" for their own portraits and perhaps a little more traditionally for possible sales to their parents. It's amazing how much creativity students can come up with...and they love the opportunity to pretty much "have it their way."

The cost of the poster portrait session should be kept low, so the students see it as a "super deal" and want to participate. The session cost can include one 8 x 10 portrait print and one poster of the entire class. T.R. reports that his average sale on this promotion is around \$250.00

Special times are set aside for photographing students from each class, ideally times when the photographer is not already busy with regular activities. Each student is quickly photographed in perhaps 6 to 8 poses with at least one clothing and background change. Because the poster involves printing the student's picture, it is a good idea to get a signed release from a parent. This becomes a tremendous excuse for making sure the parents come in to the studio with the student to help select the pose for the poster and to sign the model release form. It's a perfect opportunity to generate additional sales.

The poster promotion can be highly profitable in its own right, primarily on the sale of additional prints. However, it also has another huge advantage. Freshmen become Sophomores. Sophomores become Juniors and Juniors become Seniors. If the kids love what you do for them, you would have a higher opportunity to get their senior contract when that time comes. If you can't get the senior contract, who do you think the seniors might go to for their senior portraits? If the contract photographer still does stuffy old traditional work, the seniors will come to you for the portraits they want to buy.

The latest digital technology has made the poster promotion more attractive than ever before. With digital cameras, you can take more images without appreciably increasing your costs. More poses means more customer enthusiasm and the possibility of more and larger orders. Digital also makes it infinitely easier to lay out the portraits on the poster, including adding the students' names, graphics, and advertising. Large format inkjet printing makes it economical to print exactly as many posters as you need. Other methods of printing are available for printing larger numbers. In its next generation, T.R. is going to semi-customize every student poster. Each student will receive a poster where their portrait is in the center and larger than the rest. This can be easily automated so it takes minimal time.

T.A. Schmidt has many other promotional concepts for portrait photographers. His new web site is **www.portraitgurus.com**. T.A. can be reached at tom@finephotos.com.

Prospecting Where Others Don't Go

There are herds and then there are mavericks. Most people have herd mentality and stay with the group doing what the others also do. Some people are mavericks and strike out on their own in new and different ways. Mavericks are not always successful, but if they use good common sense, they are often able to open up new opportunities long before the herds hear about them. In this book, I have illustrated a number of mavericks. Actually, getting involved in virtual backgrounds has been, up until recently, a technique for the mavericks. The herds stuck together with traditional approaches not only to backgrounds, but to portrait photography in general, and in how they promote and operate their business. Being a maverick takes some special effort, but the rewards can be bountiful in more ways than one.

Is This Ethical?

Are these guerrilla methods a legal and ethical way to operate a business? I can't imagine why it wouldn't be legal, and although it is just my opinion, I feel it is ethical as well. After all, the contract photographer could have done the same thing, but since they didn't and you did make the offer, more power and more success goes to you. If the contract photographer fully serviced the students, the guerrillas would die on the vine. The contract photographer could always modify their methods and perhaps neutralize the guerrilla's weapons, but because of paradigm paralysis, it is highly likely that the traditional contract photographer will keep plugging away, stubbornly refusing to make any changes... much to the delight of the guerrilla.

If you are the contract photographer, cover your bases completely so there is no room for guerrillas to sneak in. If you are the guerrilla photographer, scout the enemy and determine their weak points and then engage in innovative guerrilla marketing tactics. In either case, the implementation of unique and complementary backgrounds will be an important component.

Mobile Units

Have you ever considered taking your studio on the road? Motor homes and trailers make it possible for the aggressive photographer to take the studio to the customer. Customers can either be brought on board to have their portrait taken, much like the blood banks have their traveling blood mobiles, or the studio set up can be brought into the retail store. This method of operation is suited for many kinds of work, including sports and event photography.

Mobile units do not have to be expensive to put into operation if you buy used and are sensible in how you do the modification process. The real problem with mobile operations is logistical...reasonable scheduling. The Pixel Magic vehicle spent far too much of its time traveling. That would be less of an issue if you worked your local area.

Traveling portable studio operations that spend a few days in an aisle of a big box store or medium sized retail store and then move on to the next location are still a very viable profit generator. The implementation of virtual backgrounds in these operations can significantly improve the bottom line of a traveling operation. At this time, most traveling studios are relatively primitive and I know of none that offer significant background options. The simplicity and portability of the newest background systems make them excellent options for a traveling studio operation.

Being a Guerrilla Fighter Isn't Easy

A word of warning. Guerrilla marketing techniques are not simple. They are not traditional. It is so much easier to just run the newspaper ads or offer a bigger discount. Even successful guerrillas often slip back into more traditional methods. Successful guerrilla marketing requires continuing effort, year after year. You must continually come up with new ideas. You'll continually have to fight those who try to drag you into the traditional methods. You will even have to fight with yourself to continue to be non-traditional. It is so easy to slip into the traditional mold. **Don't do it. Dare to be unique.**

IF THE CUSTOMER DOESN'T COME TO YOU... GO TO THE CUSTOMER!



The Pixel Cruiser parked at Carnival Cruise Lines' home office.

At Pixel Magic, we converted a 38 foot motor home into a traveling showcase for Pixel products and a Digital Portrait Studio with virtual backgrounds. The cruiser criss-crossed the country.

A growing number of photographers are turning motor homes and travel trailers into high tech studios and going to the customer for maximum convenience.

It's one more example of being different!

Summary

Over the years, I have heard so many excuses from photographers for not being successful. It's always involves the words, "I can't." "I can't get the school contract because of political ties or under the table pay offs. I can't do the prom photographs because they always automatically go to the contract photographer. I can't get the weddings because the other photographer is giving them away. I can't get the weddings because the brides are just letting the amateurs do them. I can't make by business successful because of the town that I am in...these people here are crazy...they won't spend any money on portraits or they all go to Walmart. I can't make any money because my town is too small. I can't make any money because there are too many competitors."

It has always been my philosophy that if you can't get in the front door, go around to the back door or check the windows, or maybe come down the chimney! Where there is a will, there is usually a way. Just take the "t" off of can't! If traditional methods don't work, try the guerrilla methods. Reach out. Push the limits. Come up with new ideas. Take your "show" on the road. Go to adjacent communities. Team up with other businesses to form "win-win" relationships. Success is out there waiting for you to find the right combination for admission. When someone tells you no, that should be your signal to try harder.

MAKING IT ALL WORK

“New methods and new ideas are the fundamental spirit of adventure. Without adventure, there is no progress.”

It’s Just Like the Theatre

A portrait operation, especially when backgrounds are involved, has many similarities with being involved behind the scenes in the theatre. The subject is the actor. The photographer wears many different hats, mostly all at one time. The photographer is the Director. As such, he is responsible for coordinating the entire event. The photographer is the Technical Director. He has the responsibility for all the technical aspects of the production. The photographer is the Scenic or Set Designer. As such, he is responsible for all aspects of the background. The photographer is the Lighting Director. He has to make certain the lighting is positioned and adjusted to illuminate the “actor” in ways that are coordinated with the total effect the scene calls for and as coordinated by himself, the Director. The photographer is the Props Coordinator. This involves decorating the set with appropriate props and making certain the “actor” knows how to work with the props. In a portrait studio, the photographer must perform all these different functions in an absolute minimal amount of time and even change from one “set” to another in just minutes.

How far the photographer goes along this line is, of course, determined by the photographer. In the most basic studios, the photographer has one or a few plain canvas backgrounds. The lighting is nailed down. It isn’t moved for any reason. The subject sits on a posing stool, possibly utilizing a small prop, and the sitting proceeds. This is exactly the way most of the “big box” store photographers work. In the Walmart studios, the

photographer simply changes the background. Most everything else stays the same. This is also basically the way many independent photographers work. It is fundamental to the philosophy of this book that the further the photographer can move away from this extreme simplicity, the greater the opportunity for more success. However, one must be careful that they don’t over do what they are technically able to do in the situation in which they work.

To continue with the theatre analogy, every photographer must ask himself what level of production are they wanting to do in the daily operation of their studio? For example, are they doing an elementary school Christmas production? Are they doing a high school production? Are they doing a college level production? Are they doing a community theatre production? Are they doing a major production on Broadway? In reality, the independent portrait photographer is most likely at different times doing all of the above. It just depends on the necessities of the moment. Ideally, the successful portrait artist pushes their level of sophistication to at least one level higher than what would normally be expected. It would be foolish to do an elementary school production on the level of a Broadway professional production.

First Things First

In order to be successful with the implementation of any level of production, it is first assumed that the photographer has successfully mastered the basics of good portrait photography, including basic lighting and basic posing. No amount of specialized backgrounds can ever make up for poor quality portrait photography or poor customer relations. These are absolute musts.

If the basics are in place, then there are two primary components for making virtual backgrounds a successful aspect of your studio operation. First, you have to have good quality background images. While there are many stock slides to select from, it is critical that the photographer also know how to take or make his own background images. Second, it is critical that the photographer be able to actually create composite images which include an amalgamation of the subject, the background and appropriate props coupled with good posing and lighting.

When a photographer uses a plain canvas or muslin background or basic black or some other plain color, there is little to consider. The background is just there. It is indeed pretty much a non-issue. But, when a more meaningful background is included, real or virtual, then not only does that background have to be appropriate in every way, but also the subject has to be properly posed and lit for that particular background.

As discussed in another chapter, one of the very best things about using virtual backgrounds is that it provides the photographer with total background control. At the same time, that total control also means that the photographer now has responsibility for that background, along with their normal responsibility for the subject. If you don't have control of something, you can't be held responsible. But, when using virtual backgrounds, it very much means that the photographer is 100% responsible for making the background right. Of course, this process can be greatly simplified by having pre-tested backgrounds and posing and the photographer just follows step by step directions. This is fine for production line work like school photography, but most studio photographers are more than anxious to use the virtual background process to help them be more creative.

Picture Every Potential Background With a Subject in Place

With a canvas background, you just sit the subject down in front of it, do some basic posing, and shoot. Some photographers use the same canvas for years and years and don't even vary their nailed down lighting. When using virtual backgrounds, the photographer now has an infinite variety of backgrounds to choose from. Posing and lighting depends to a great extent on the actual background that is selected.

Start by looking at the stock slides that you received with your system and then use your imagination as to how you would pose a subject with each background. Think in terms of the lighting and the props that would help complement the final product. This does not have to be complicated or terribly time consuming although, at first, it will pose a bit of a challenge because it is a new way of thinking about studio photography. Like learning how to do anything, gradually you'll develop your perceptive skills and it won't be too long before you'll be zipping along and wondering how you ever got along without virtual backgrounds.

Virtual Backgrounds has more than 1,000 stock backgrounds available that are divided into various sets. The smaller sets are theme related. The larger sets are variety packs. You also have the unlimited versatility of the Designer Disks available as well.

Make Your Own Backgrounds

The real fun comes when you are able to create your own backgrounds. All the backgrounds sold by Virtual Backgrounds are quite generic. They are not specific to any community. The backgrounds you capture yourself can be generic or very specific. For example, you can photograph your local churches, schools, monuments, stadiums, or anything that makes sense as a background for some purpose. Plus, you can photograph them at the best possible time.



A slide viewing table is a handy way to view potential backgrounds for selection

When first learning how to capture your own backgrounds, you may want to work with a real subject. Place that subject in a location with a desirable background as though you were going to photograph them right there. Then, ask the subject to "step aside" and photograph the actual background. This background can then be brought into the studio to produce an image that would be very similar and sometimes even better than what would have been achieved on location. That is, the photographer can place the subject exactly where the subject would have been when the background was captured only now the photographer has total control of the key elements.

Once the photographer begins to get the idea of what would make a good background, he can capture backgrounds without having to travel with a quasi subject. Whenever I look for backgrounds (I call them background safaris), I picture in my mind's eye exactly where I would place the subject

and what would then appear in the background if I were using a normal portrait lens on my camera. If it looks good, especially when glancing through the viewfinder, I capture the background. If it doesn't look plausible, I leave it.

Backgrounds should be captured using Ektachrome, Velvia, or similar slide transparency film or they can be captured on negative film or in the digital camera and later turned into slides. When capturing backgrounds on transparency film or digital cameras, exposures should be either right on the money or just slightly underexposed so the resulting images have good color saturation. When using negative film, slight over exposure is good. There are companies that specialize in turning both negatives and digital files into slides.

Scenic backgrounds do not always come out best on bright sunny days. Think for a moment about the kind of day the location photographer prefers for portraits. It is usually a cloudy bright day, early morning, or late afternoon. Maximum contrast in the background is, therefore, not always desirable. Some of my best outdoor backgrounds were shot on cloudy days and then color balanced.

Almost Anything Can Be A Background

Never forget that you don't have to go on location to capture backgrounds. Great backgrounds are everywhere...absolutely everywhere. The carpet beneath your feet or the ceiling above your head or the wallpaper just in front of you just might be a great background, in focus or out, lighter or darker, or perhaps with a change in color. As mentioned earlier, a piece of tissue paper or a very small piece of bubble wrap can be a great background. This is what makes the virtual background process so exciting. You never run out of ideas.

You can photograph your current canvas

backgrounds and muslins and turn them into slides. You can paint your own backgrounds on 16 x 20 inch matte boards and then photograph them. That is exactly how we created our Old Masters series.

Sometimes you'll capture a background that you won't know what to do with for years...and then the perfect situation will come up. I know some virtual background photographers who have collections of 5,000 or more backgrounds in their background library. Of course, they have their favorites which they use most, but with their library, they should have something for just about every situation. Seeking out and capturing backgrounds can even help to make some of your travels tax deductible! Think about all the possibilities to save on your taxes!

When capturing your own backgrounds, recognize that you can always zoom up a background slide that is too small to be large enough on the screen to produce a good result. However, if you create a background slide that is originally too close up, there is no way to reduce its size. Therefore, it is usually better to do most of your location photography with a wide angle lens to make certain that you are able to capture enough of the background and then you can enlarge it with the zoom projection lens to be in the proper proportion to the subject. For example, if you are capturing a living room scene with a burning fireplace, if you get in too close, you may find that even when you zoom the background down, the fireplace is too big to be realistic. Had you backed off a little, you would have had more flexibility.

It's Like Fishing

Great backgrounds are everywhere, but you don't know when you will come upon one or more of them, so you should always be looking and you should always have your camera with you. Just recently my wife and I were visiting New Orleans, poking around the French Quarter, looking for special back-

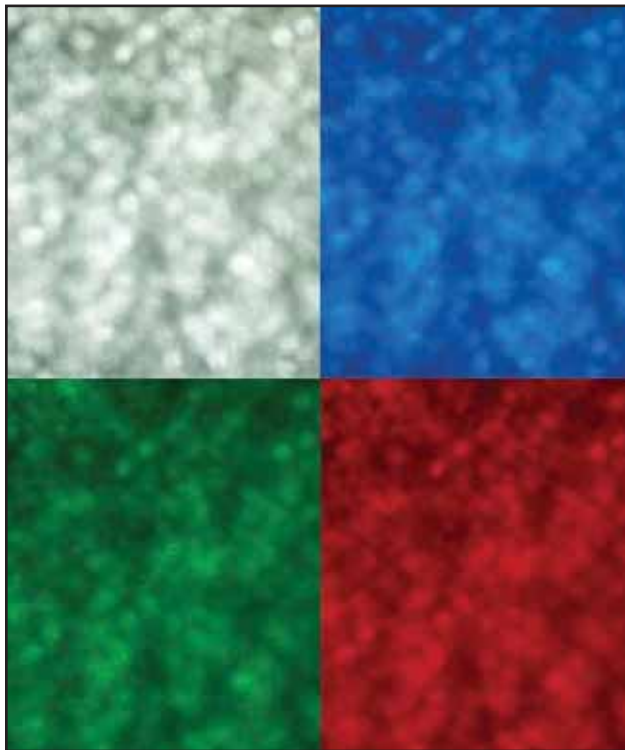
grounds, besides being a tourist. I noticed an open doorway to what looked like an alley. I peeked in and immediately found that the alley wasn't really an alley at all and it led into a beautiful courtyard from the 1700s. I was immediately approached by a woman who was selling tickets for a fund raiser. She explained that for just \$10.00, I could view ten of the French Quarter's "Secret Gardens." I paid for the ticket immediately and within an hour had captured 20 or 30 beautiful garden backgrounds that I can't wait to use. Eventually, they will become part of our more than one thousand stock backgrounds that are available.

One photographer who has used virtual backgrounds for years discovered a most unusual background that his high school seniors absolutely loved. The background was very abstract and came in any color imaginable. The photographer would carefully harmonize the color of this special background to the subject's clothing color. The only problem was, this photographer could never tell his clients what this very popular background was actually of. Believe it or not, the photographer had taken a very out of focus, overexposed macro image of the hair on his very hairy arm! If the clients knew that this popular background was actually a blurry image of the hair on their photographer's arm, the results would have been UGH! But, they didn't need to know what they didn't need to know. This is just one more example of the fact that backgrounds can be found anywhere...anywhere indeed.

A similar abstract background can be made with toilet paper! Simply separate the layers and place a single layer on the slide stage. The background will be a greatly magnified image of the structure of the paper. Now you can lighten or darken it, throw it out of focus, and change its color by adding a colored gel. Imagine that... a whole series of abstract backgrounds for the cost of about 1 square inch of toilet paper! You can also use bubble wrap or a feather or anything at all that influences the passage of light.

A very few locations may make a big fuss about “no pictures allowed.” I usually honor that. However, I have been known to have a camera hidden behind my tie while visiting some castles in Europe! I just stayed behind the crowd and grabbed the backgrounds I wanted. You probably would not want to do that around a nuclear power plant!

Most places, such as hotels, don’t post “no pictures” signs. However, if you ask permission to take pictures, especially if you say you are a professional photographer and you want to capture backgrounds for use in your studio, you’ll probably open up all kinds of problems. I would suggest that, normally, it is easier to beg for forgiveness than it is to ask for permission. I’ve found that if you act like a tourist and use a small camera, no one will even ask you what you are doing. Just be quick and unobtrusive. In some locations, such as hotel lobbies, I find a time to shoot when they are least crowded, even if that is 4 a.m. When you do a background safari, sometimes you hit it big and come back with some great ones and sometimes you come back with not much.



A plain piece of bathroom tissue paper can form a variety of different backgrounds when you add color with gels.

Again, it’s just like fishing!

It’s Fun To Capture Backgrounds

I wish I could convey to those readers who are just considering venturing into the world of virtual backgrounds how much fun it is to find beautiful places and be able to capture them for pennies. It’s even more fun to use these backgrounds in the studio whenever you wish and to even modify those backgrounds with Photoshop. I almost feel like I am revisiting the site when I look into the viewfinder to adjust the background. Until you start doing it for yourself, you won’t know how much fun it can be. Capturing backgrounds is a whole separate element of professional photography.



These backgrounds were captured in a centuries old convent in Germany which has now been converted into apartments.

PhotoShop Your Backgrounds

Today's technology enables the photographer to create backgrounds that are even better than real. With PhotoShop and a little imagination, you can enhance, distort and even combine background images. Rick Harding of San Antonio has become a master at enhancing his background images. He even turns the digital files into slides with his own film recorder. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.



The above background does not exactly exist. Rick Harding captured several night images at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas and combined them together and then added his moonlit sky.

Paint Your Own Backgrounds

You can also paint your own backgrounds such as Old Masters or even children's story-book backgrounds. But, instead of painting a full size background, you can paint on a matte board that is perhaps 16" x 20" or less. Then you can photograph your miniature and make it any size you wish with your projector or you can "paint" entirely on the computer and turn your digital files into slides. Your only limitation is your creative spirit. If you don't have artistic skills, hire someone who does.



Many backgrounds are ruined because of obstructions. However, with the magic of Adobe PhotoShop, this beautiful historic church has been dramatically improved.



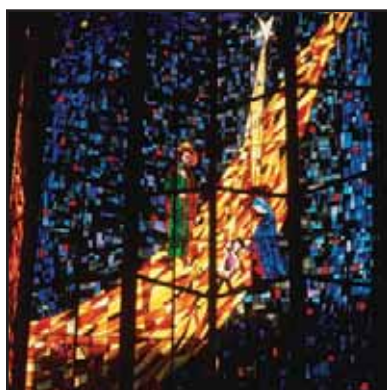
Background Examples

Realizing that a picture is worth a thousand words, let's look at a sampling of different backgrounds. Generally, backgrounds can be categorized as outdoor environmentals, indoor environmentals, Old Masters, and graphic designs. The Joseph and Louise Simone collections are customized extensions of backgrounds that represent their unique and very artistic style of work. Once again, keep in mind that most of these

sample images of backgrounds from our stock libraries are not "postcard" type images but are instead the type of images that can produce the results you want depending on a multitude of factors.

Here are some examples of the types of backgrounds Virtual Backgrounds offers from its stock library. The entire collection of background libraries can be viewed online at **www.virtualbackgrounds.net**.







BACKGROUND POWER!



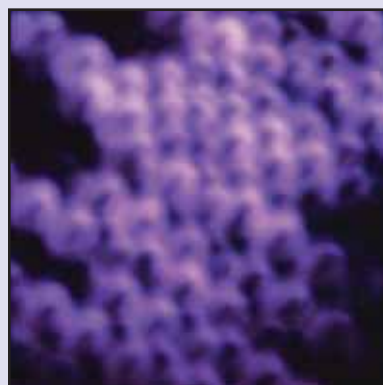
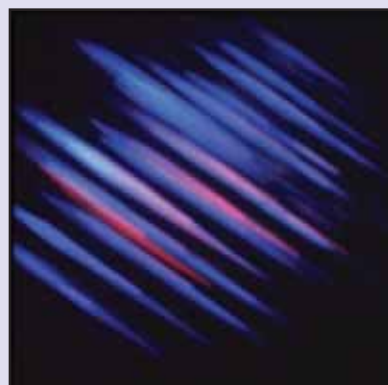
Masters Collections

For the traditional look, Virtual Background's artists have assembled several sets of "Old Masters" type canvas backgrounds and a not so traditional "New Masters" set. These sets provide the photographer with more variety within the traditional look than was practical and economically feasible when purchasing full size hand painted canvas backgrounds.

Old Masters Collection Samples



New Masters Collection Samples



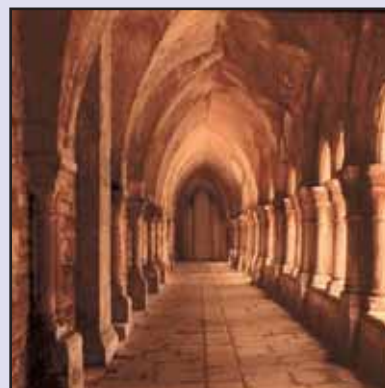
Neons



The Simone Collections

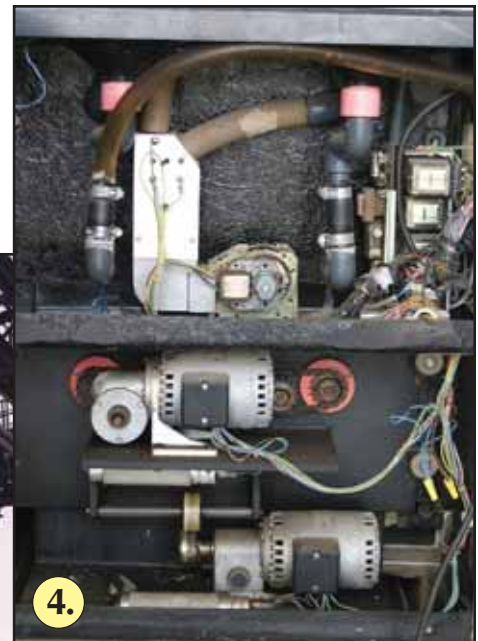
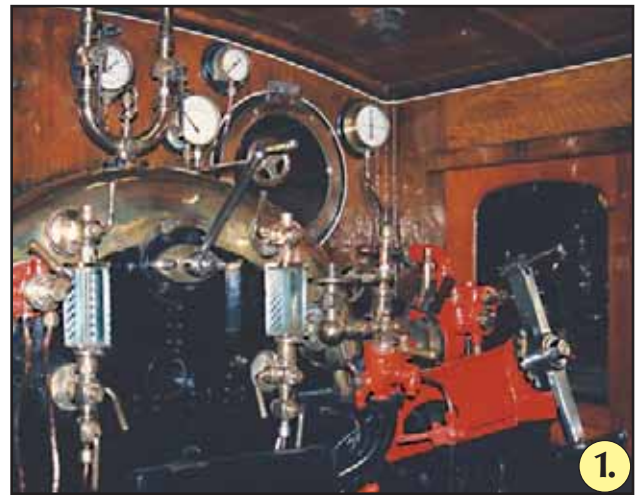
Joseph and Louise Simone have created 30 new backgrounds (3 sets of 10 each). Many of these backgrounds were used for images that appear in their new book, *The Portrait...Mirror of the Soul*. Each back-

ground is a combination of various components artistically manipulated with Painter and other tools by Louise Simone. These backgrounds are amazingly universal in their application.



Machines!

Recently photographers have been using what are commonly called “machine backgrounds.” Several set manufacturers offer polystyrene sets which can be quite expensive and, at the same time, not terribly realistic, but the customers seem to like it. The virtual photographer can pick up a camera and photograph real machines. The possibilities are everywhere. Keep in mind that you can photograph little things and make them look big and you can photograph big things and make them look little. Even a lawn mower engine can be an interesting background!

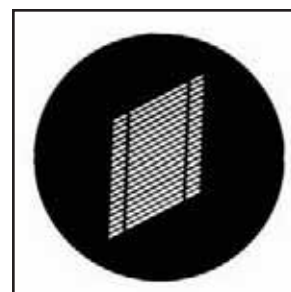
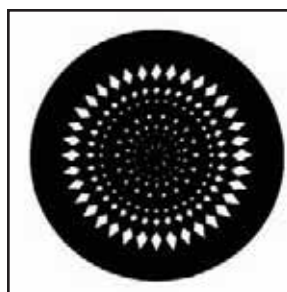
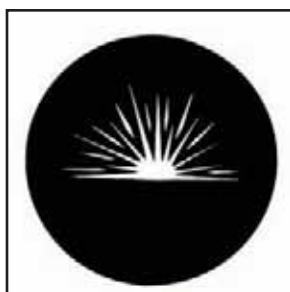
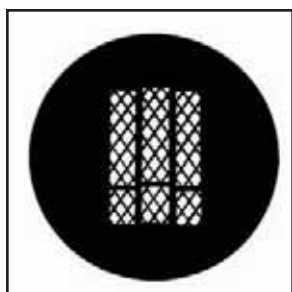


Great backgrounds can be found everywhere.
Engineer's cab of a steam locomotive. (1.)
Old steel plant in Monterrey, Mexico. (2. & 3.)
Inside of a Merz print processor. (4.)
Part of the wheel assembly on a train car. (5.)

Designer Disks...Another Kind of Background

Don't forget black and white backgrounds. Black and white backgrounds can be striking. You can also use ultra high contrast slides and then add colored gels. You can even project a black and white or color negative for a really interesting effect. In addition, you can use any of the Designer Disk series of gobos combined with various color gels. A Designer Disk is a very thin piece of metal with a design stamped in it. It is inserted in a special carrier just like a trans-

parency. The image can be projected in sharp focus or extremely out of focus. Any imaginable color gel can be placed over the disk to harmonize the background color with the subject. There is no end to the possibilities. A single Designer Disk can be used in a wide variety of different ways depending on how it is enlarged and focused, how bright it is, and what colors are added. The special Designer Disk carrier has multiple levels to allow extreme distortions in focus. With Designer Disks, it is extremely easy for the photographer to instantly coordinate background colors with the subject's clothing.

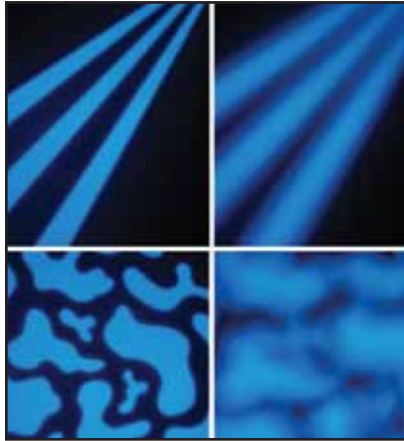


Designer Disks are a combination of the metal disks (gobos), colored gels, and a special carrier for holding the disks at various focal levels.



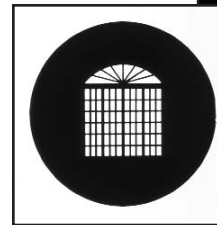
There is no limit to the variety of backgrounds that can be created with Designer Disks and color gels.

A Designer Disk of a window can be combined with a slide to produce a scene "outside" the window. This method can be used to turn a background slide of an outdoor scene into one that can be used with a



Designer Disk backgrounds with color gels. The disks were used both in and out of focus and with different power intensities.

subject posed as though they were indoors. For example, a snow scene can be placed under a window Designer Disk. The subject is then posed as though they were indoors with the snow scene outside the window.



Designer Disk used over virtual background projection.



Finding and Cataloging Good Ideas That Work With Virtual Backgrounds

I am always looking for good location portrait images that can be easily created in the studio. This image by Georgia photographer Susie Butler, serves as a perfect example. Let's look at it globally and then let's take it apart. Globally, it's an excellent full length location portrait of a child in a very attractive environment. I notice that this setting could be used with multiple subjects, even small family groups. Then I also realize that this setting would be very easy and inexpensive to build as a great setting for virtual backgrounds in the studio.

Let's start with the steps. They could be created with real bricks built on a sturdy wooden frame with heavy duty wheels. While real bricks would be very heavy, this prop could be pushed around relatively easily. Or, the steps could be made from light

weight Z-Bricks glued to a wooden frame. One could also create a low brick retaining wall that attaches to either side of the steps. The floor could be just dark or it could be one of the

rubberized floor materials. Numerous artificial plants, both tall and short, could be used to round out the scene. A few small leaves or twigs could be scattered around to complete the set.

The distant background could be anything you want it to be. It could be a forest in any season of the year, the mountains, a sunset, a residential scene...anything that fits. This setting could be easily varied in many different ways so it doesn't become "old." It's a perfect application for a virtual background system.

I cut images like this out and catalog them in a three ring binder. Every so often, I thumb through and choose an image to serve as a basis for what I then create.



PORTRAIT BY SUSIE BUTLER

Props Are Very Important

When the photographer works on location, he usually looks for props. Props can be anything that add dimension and variety to enhance a photograph. Props might be a park bench, a tree, a potted plant, or an infinite variety of other items that can round out a photograph. Props don't even have to be realistic. Larry Peters of Ohio developed a whole series of props that were never intended to look real. They were designed to be complementary, to add variety. The Peter's circle serves as a classic example.

It is seldom that a photographer photographs a subject on location without something in the foreground, something for the subject to be around, and perhaps layers of things in the background. This is what makes the location portrait so attractive. However, too often virtual background photographers

completely violate the rules when they first start to use their system. Instead of sitting the subject on a park bench or rock or tree trunk or a living room chair, they sit them on a traditional posing stool. They use no props at all, nothing in front of or behind the subject. It's just the subject, sitting on a very unnatural stool and a flat background, or perhaps even a very inappropriate background off in the distance. Then they wonder why the subject looks "pasted in." How could it be any other way? If the photographer would build the image in the studio to be as much like what it would have been if at the real location, the end results become much more realistic and desirable, sometimes better than what could have been accomplished on location.

Ideally, the photographer must pose the subject to the background and adjust the background to the subject.



Virtual Props

Rick Harding of San Antonio got tired of sometimes having to lug around a van load of props to enhance his virtual background prom sets. He decided that he might be able to replace the bulk of his props, at least in some cases, with virtual props, so he began to experiment. This prom photograph shows the results. Contrary to what your perception may lead you to believe, there are only two non-virtual props in this photograph. The floor is Scenic Design's Flextec. Behind the subject along the floor is a row of greenery. Everything beyond that is part of the projected virtual background.

Rick used Photoshop to blend together a number of images. He started with his very popular moonlit sky. He then digitally added the brick walls, the gate, the lamp post and the tall shrubs with white flowers. The end result looks as though the only part that is virtual is the sky. Set up and tear down is a breeze.

Easier Than You Might Think

In some ways, natural posing in the studio with an environmental scene and props is actually easier than posing for a standard portrait. Think of it this way. A posing stool is a terribly unnatural seat to sit on. The typical client slumps in just about every direction. The photographer has to literally force the subject into a pose that might look good, starting with the feet, the back, the shoulders, the head, the hands. But, if you seat the subject on a more normal seat, such as a park bench or leather chair, or even a large rock, the subject poses themselves in a natural and more photogenic way. The photographer actually has less to do in such a situation to make the subject look good.

Building A Composite Image

The virtual background photographer must always remember that in order for the results to look natural, it is important to build a composite image, a combination of the projected background with props in the foreground and background, with good lighting, and, of course, including good quality poses of the subject. Do it well and the results are fantastic. Do it poorly and the results are less desirable. Such “layering” is not required every time. Most certainly there are backgrounds and poses that just don’t need it. But, many situations, especially those with realistic indoor and outdoor backgrounds, require layering.

There is no limit to the variety of background enhancers that can be used. The Off The Wall and Scenic Design companies provide a large variety of background components that are not likely to be found at the local flea market. The flea market and antique stores can provide a wealth of mostly smaller props. Probably one of the most useful props that every virtual background photographer should start with is an artificial ficus tree that can be found at most any Walmart, Sam’s or Cosco. Your area undoubtedly has hobby/decorator type stores that will have a wealth of prop ideas also.



To add dimension, a single prop, the fence rail, was used for this elegant bridal portrait by Don Blair.



Using real props and natural poses is usually much easier than trying to pose a subject on a very unnatural posing stool.

Create an Instant Balcony



A railing is a very simple prop that actually enables the photographer to use postcard type backgrounds. Imagine that you have a slide of the skyline of New York City at night. You want to photograph a prom couple with the city skyline as the background. Think about it for a moment. Where would the photographer be most likely to take a couple in New York to do such a photograph? Answer... a balcony such as what one would find at a high dollar high rise condominium or hotel. There, the subjects could be posed leaning against the railing with their backs to the city. They could then be photographed, full length, with the beautiful breathtaking skyline in the background. Prom and other event photographers make use of this style of portrait at many affairs. But, take away the railing and let the carpet under the subject's feet just suddenly turn into skyline and the end result looks fake.

Going to the Dogs



DEAN McDONALD



PAT RILEY

When photographers think of backgrounds, they nearly always think in terms of backgrounds for people. They seldom think of using creative backgrounds for animals. However, there is a big market for animal photography, especially if it is well promoted and well done. Most animals look best if photographed in natural surroundings, but natural surroundings can be extremely distracting and difficult to deal with. The photographer with virtual backgrounds can create the perfect environment for each animal, in the studio or on location such as at a dog or cat show. Green screen doesn't do well because of the animals' hair, but optical virtual does a great job.

Imagine being able to photograph animals, from pet birds to just about anything else that will fit in the camera room, with a variety of complementary backgrounds, with and without the owner.

People will often spend more on their animal portraits than on people portraits!

Lighting the Subject with Virtual Backgrounds

Lighting is one of the most critical issues in portrait photography. After all, the very roots of the word “photography” are “painting with light.” It is the lighting that can make a portrait range from unacceptable to fantastic. Lighting is indeed a key element when using any background system.

When optical virtual background systems were first introduced, the photographer had to be extremely cautious with his lighting in order to avoid washing out the background. In those days, the use of the background system actually dictated the lighting method and that method was often not conducive to achieving the best portrait of the subject. New technology changed all that with the introduction of Blackscreen and special light resistant coatings on the projection screen. Today, the portrait photographer using optical virtual backgrounds can use just about any lighting they wish, with the exception of placing lights very close to the camera or using the flash mounted on top of the camera. The good news is that very few professional photographers ever do this type of lighting. Most professional photographers use lighting that is at least slightly off the camera axis and, therefore, it is usually compatible with the virtual background process.

The real key to success is to make the lighting used on the subject look realistic in relation to the background. The “purists” actually get ridiculous when they complain that any lighting other than totally natural light is fake. In reality, all professional photographers use supplementary lighting to fill in shadows or even to illuminate a subject when natural lighting is impossible. For example, when photographing a subject with a real sunset background, some source of supplementary lighting is nearly always a necessity unless you are willing to accept a silhouette. The exact same approach is followed in the studio using a virtual sunset. Unless the intent is to get a silhouette, the



This sunrise portrait was lit in the studio to simulate what the photographer would have achieved using reflectors to light the subject.

photographer uses some lighting to illuminate the subject while also maintaining the sunset.

Most professional photographers never go on location without supplementary lighting to enhance their subjects. When a high end location shoot is taking place, the photographer may bring a whole set of studio lights and reflectors. Therefore, when creating the same scene in the studio with virtual backgrounds, the same lighting is not only appropriate but necessary.

It is my philosophy that the lighting used with virtual backgrounds should be a blending of lighting that looks natural, as per the background, but also lighting that best complements the subject without looking artificial. That is, if the lighting on the background clearly indicates that the main source of lighting is to the subject's right, then the studio lighting used should not come from the subject's left. That would be highly incompatible and make the result look fake. If the main source of lighting in the back-

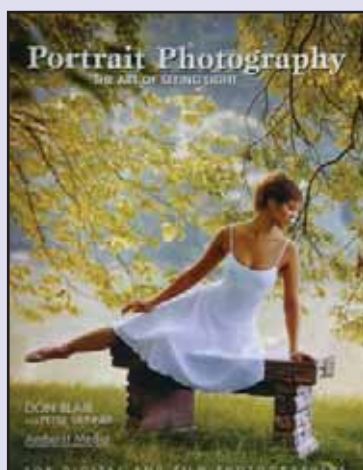
ground is obviously gold tinged, then cool bluish lighting on the subject would not be appropriate. Just as when working in the real environment, the lighting used on the subject should be complementary to the subject AND reasonably realistic for the overall image. Typically, basic simple studio portrait lighting is reasonably compatible with many backgrounds. It is only when the photographer goes to more specialized lighting methodology that the results must be compatible with the background.

The bottom line is, the lighting must look realistic and in most cases, it must be complementary to the subject. Most lighting that is found in most studios is compatible with the virtual background process. Therefore, this means that you don't necessarily need to vary your lighting specifically because you have a virtual background system. However, when you have a virtual background system, you will probably want to vary your lighting in accordance with the background image and the total effect you are trying to create in the final image. Some photographers seem to be almost proud of the fact that they have their lighting "nailed down" and don't vary it no matter what subject matter they are shooting. While I personally feel that this is

a serious mistake which severely limits your creativity, if that is the way you choose to work, so be it. The virtual background process does not demand that you vary your lighting. It is an option. In fact, if you are a school photographer, photographing 800 to 1,000 or more kids a day, lighting variability is not an option and, therefore, not a requirement.

The possibilities with lighting and virtual backgrounds are unlimited. The photographer can use umbrellas, softboxes, parabolic reflectors, silver reflectors and much more. It is even possible to use soft natural window light, possibly combined with a reflector. It's also possible to use no subject lighting. When the subject lighting is turned off and only the background is flashed, the subject forms a perfect silhouette. Rather than limiting your lighting possibilities, the virtual background process opens the door to more creative variety in lighting than ever before.

Lighting is for the most part a separate and complex topic. It is not the scope of this book to discuss portrait lighting other than to clearly state once again that the use of the virtual background process is completely congruent with most normal studio lighting. When there is an issue, it is easily handled.



Don Blair's New Book - *Portrait Photography... The Art of Seeing Light*

This new book includes an entire chapter on the Scene Machine virtual background system and has many great examples for posing and lighting. It is available from Virtual Backgrounds.

“TOUCH OF WARMTH™” Reflector Adds Warmth and Realism



Reflectors play an ever increasingly important role in studio portrait photography. Don Blair and Terry Deglau developed a new style of reflector which they have appropriately named, "A Touch of Warmth™." Instead of the standard silver reflector, they created a quilt-like patchwork of silver and magenta metallic material. The magenta part provides just a touch of warming color to the reflected light that illuminates the shadow side of the subject's face resulting in an image that is more pleasing and realistic.

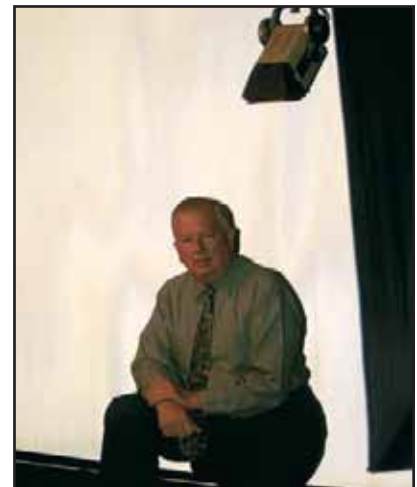
Touch of Warmth™ reflectors come in three sizes, with and without boom arms and stands. They can be used in the studio or on location. They are available from Virtual Backgrounds.

A Side Benefit of Using Virtual Backgrounds

How many times have you set up the perfect poses at various events such as weddings or when shooting sports teams or proms only to have amateurs shooting away over your shoulder with their personal cameras. Some of those cameras may be equal or better than the professional's camera. The photographer finds himself in a double bind situation. He is damned if he does respond and forbids others to capture his poses and he is damned if he does not respond and amateurs capture his poses. The photographer can put up signs and forbid others to take their own pictures but that will irritate the public. I know of at least one sports photographer who lost his contract because he forbade others to capture the poses he set up. He won the momentary battle but lost the war.

Now, there is an answer. If the photographer is shooting with either green screen or projected virtual backgrounds, he can let the

amateur shutterbugs shoot to their heart's content. If green screen is being used, they will only get an ugly green background. Worse yet, if projected virtual backgrounds are being used, the flash on the amateur's camera will not only wipe out the background but the resulting flare will also



This is what the amateur gets when he shoots over the professional's head.

pretty much wipe out the subjects, resulting in a perfectly worthless image. It's the professional photographers dream situation! It's just one of the many benefits that come with the use of virtual backgrounds. It's something that makes the pros chuckle!

Create An Idea Book

Highly creative photographers have no trouble coming up with ideas and concepts not only for creating background slides but also for creating finished images. Most of us, however, don't just come up with all the creative ideas on our own. But, we can copy. In reality, everyone copies and then adds something of their own creation. One of the most valuable things the virtual background photographer can do is to continually look at magazines and pick out those images that represent the kind of photography any photographer would like to do on location. Cut out the images, classify them according to type, and start an idea book. Glance at this idea book any time you are looking for something to do. It can be a big help, especially for the photographer who has some creativity handicaps.

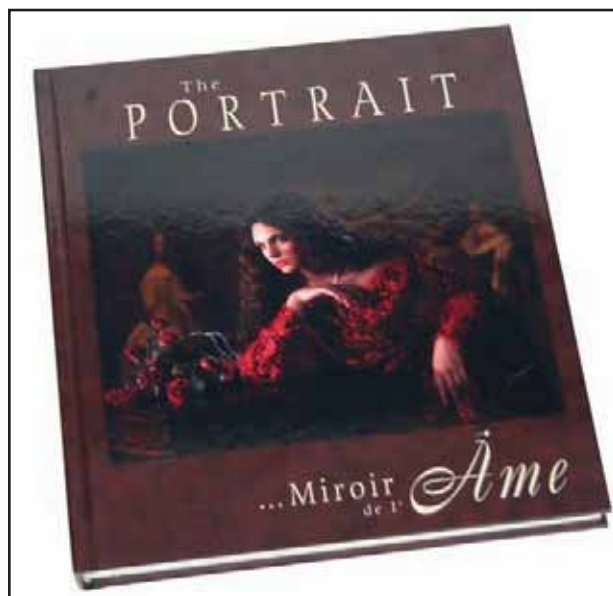
One of the best idea books is Joseph & Louise Simone's new masterpiece, *The*

Portrait...Mirror of the Soul. This "coffee table" book includes a wealth of lighting, posing and background ideas, Don Blair's book, *Portrait Photography...The Art of Seeing Light*, is also full of great ideas.

Staying Current

One of the most positive things about investing in a virtual background system is that it can stay compatible with changing trends. Regardless of what may be the current trend, the virtual background system can adapt. Computer graphics is a clear example. For a while, they were extremely popular and photographers used computer graphic design slides extensively. After a few years, the abstract computer generated images declined in popularity. If canvas becomes more popular, project canvas. If elegant indoor scenes become more popular, project elegant interior scenes. Virtual backgrounds is a completely flexible system. You as the photographer simply have to keep up with what's "in" today and tomorrow.

Simply by updating the slides, the virtual background user can always be on top of new trends. There are no expensive backgrounds or sets to put in storage or sell.



Background and posing ideas are everywhere. A great place to start is the Simones' new book, *The Portrait...Mirror of the Soul* and Don Blair's new book, *Portrait Photography...The Art of Seeing Light*. You may also collect clippings from various magazines, including fashion type magazines and store them in a binder for review. Both books are available from Virtual Backgrounds.

Too Dark Is Better Than Too Light

The most common mistake photographers make when first learning to use virtual backgrounds, and one that is the easiest to handle, is the brightness of the background. Photographers generally make their virtual backgrounds too bright.

The basic rule is, if one must make a mistake on the brightness of the background, make the background too dark, do not make it too light. Too dark is almost always more desirable than too bright. When backgrounds are too bright, they dominate the image and the background can look fake. Photographers seem to make this mistake whether they are using virtual backgrounds or “Off The Wall” type backgrounds. The background should not dominate the portrait, at least not normally.

Always remember, you are taking portraits of people with backgrounds and not pictures of backgrounds with people.

Here is one very simple but effective way to check yourself. Turn your portrait upside down and hold your portrait at arms length, moving it up, down and around. If the first thing you see is the background or even some very dominant aspect of the background, you have probably made the background too bright or the background is of such a nature that it is too distracting from the subject. You don’t want the background too bright, and you don’t want it too sharp.



Background is too bright.



Background is too dark.



Background is about right.



Turn the subject upside down to see if the background dominates the subject.

The viewer’s eye goes first to the brightest part of a photograph and also the sharpest. The subject’s face should be the brightest and sharpest.

I am making only generalizations about the background intensity. What is too bright or too dark is situation specific.

Digital Makes It So Much Easier

Implementing virtual backgrounds in every day studio operation became significantly easier when digital cameras replaced film. Before digital, the photographer usually had to guess at how the background was going to look, unless they went to the bother of doing a Polaroid test print with each background

change. With digital, the photographer instantly sees what’s happening. Instantly you know if the background is too light, too dark, too off color, too big, too little, too sharp, too soft, crooked, or just completely inappropriate. In seconds, the photographer can make adjustments to change a potential problem into a winner.

Backgrounds Should Not Be Sharp

A few photographers complain that in virtual backgrounds, especially the optical approach, that the background is too soft. What they are not understanding is that in the process, the background that is projected onto the background screen can be perfectly sharp, if the slide is sharp and if the projector is properly focused. It is so sharp that the system can be used as a copy system. Because the subject is normally placed 2, 3, and 4 or more feet in front of the background screen, normal depth of field fall off in the camera lens causes the background to be slightly soft, which is actually good because it results in a more realistic image. To make the background sharper, if that is what the photographer desires, he simply has to move the subject closer to the background. A problem with green screen is that no matter where the subject is placed, the background will be razor sharp unless efforts are made to soften it. This is one factor that causes green screen results to look contrived because it is not natural for both the subject and the distant background to be sharp. This isn't natural with a camera nor is it natural with your eyes. When your eyes focus on a subject, the background is seen as soft. If a portrait is otherwise, the brain reacts by saying that something is wrong.

Looking For Problems

Many photographers, especially when it comes to virtual backgrounds, set out to look for problems, sometimes to the point of seeing problems that aren't even there. It has always been my business philosophy to understand the parameters of a product and then decide if I could make money with it. That should be the real bottom line of decision making. When I saw my first virtual background system, back when they were very primitive and difficult to use, I carefully studied a sample print. The sample wasn't very good. In fact, it wasn't very good at all

and certainly not something I could sell. But in looking at it, I decided that the process actually worked and the problems I saw in the sample print were basically photographer related. I, therefore, decided I could use that same tool better than the photographer who made the sample print and I immediately purchased my first system. It isn't any different in evaluating a camera. Just because one photographer can't focus the image and chops off heads and has a crooked horizon line, doesn't mean that every user of this camera will have the same problems!

The list of reservations many photographers bring forth as reasons to not use a virtual background system seem to be almost endless and really are groundless from both a business standpoint as well as from a photographic standpoint. The most common ones are: "It's too big. It's too complicated. I can't hand hold it. I don't want to change my lighting. There is a shadow around the subject. It's too expensive. My customers don't want fake. It's a gimmick. It takes too long. My photographers aren't smart enough to use it. I don't want my customers to buy my photographs for the background."

Still another excuse for not using virtual backgrounds is this. "My subjects like to feel the grass blades between their toes, they like to feel the sand and the wind." There are several fallacies to this argument. First it assumes that the only use of virtual backgrounds is to generate outdoor environmental backgrounds such as the seashore. In reality, most users of virtual backgrounds do a minimal amount of outdoor photography and instead use it mostly for indoor backgrounds, abstract backgrounds, colors and designs.

Second, at our beach studio, the best time to do outdoor portraits is between the hours of 6 and 8 a.m. Kids don't appreciate getting up that early for a portrait. Many adults don't either.

Third, the photographer has infinitely more control of the lighting when working indoors, not to mention all the environmental factors.



The Photographers' Arsenal Against the Bugs

The real outdoors can be a great place to take portraits, but it doesn't come without problems. In addition to all the regular issues such as wind, rain, clouds, temperature, humidity, daylight and more, the varmints can be especially troublesome. There are always the mosquitoes, the flies, black flies in some locations, chiggers, ticks, fire ants, and wasps, not to mention the possibilities of snakes, scorpions, and other critters. The photographer bears some responsibility when taking clients on location. These critters attack both the subject and the photographer.

Hiding From the Facts

Amazingly, a surprising percentage of photographers are so entrenched with their negative opinions that they refuse to even look or partake in a demonstration. Once again, it's the old Orren Lucht statement... "Don't confuse me with the facts, I already have my mind made up!"

In reality, the most important question a photographer should ask is, "Can I make more money with this process?" That's the real bottom line. Personally, I'll drive a dump truck into my studio camera room if it can help me make more money! To look at it any other way simply doesn't make good business sense.

A common concern from photographers is: "It always looks fake...I can always tell when one of those virtual background machines is used." Some years ago, I very carefully tested this complaint by hanging several photographs in our trade show print display that were done on location. The virtual background process was not used at all. It was both interesting and sad that so many photographers who viewed the display issued as many complaints about the non-virtual

background images as the virtual background images! They identified problems in these non-virtual background images and directly attributed them to the use of the process which in fact wasn't used at all. This clearly demonstrated, more than anything else, that the viewers were looking for problems so hard that they made some up in their own minds!

To go back to our theatre example, some people in the audience can completely spoil their experience by continually complaining about too many aspects of the production instead of just enjoying the production.

Whether or not an image looks real or unreal is purely a function of the photographer, not the process. When looking at the work of Joseph and Louise Simone, no one ever even thinks about how their backgrounds were created, even when they are extremely abstract. In many cases, the only way I know that a photograph used a virtual background system is if I recognize the background.

In the end, the only really important factor is whether or not the process being used generates new opportunities to be

more creative, generate new revenue and significant new profit. If the process wasn't a good decision, customers wouldn't buy it. It's as simple as that.

Another issue often brought forward about the projected virtual background process is that the process demands that the photographer use uncomplementary highly modified methods of lighting the subject in order to be compatible with the background. When normal studio lighting is used, the background gets washed out.

Twenty years ago, this was partly true. The photographer did indeed have to be very careful with the lighting to avoid washout but, even back then, it was possible to produce the highest scoring award winning prints with virtual backgrounds. Today, with new technology, this just isn't an issue.

Virtual Backgrounds Solves the Camera Tilt Problem

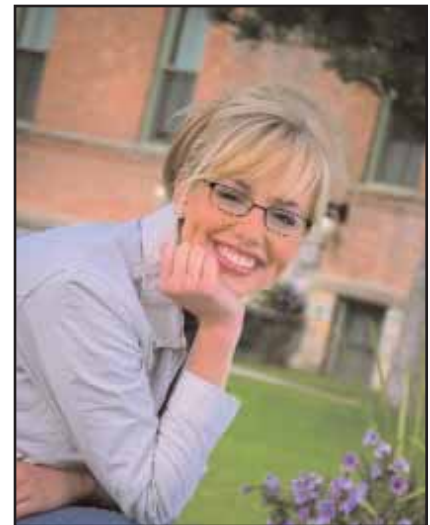
For years, innovative studio portrait photographers have used camera tilt to enhance their portraits. Tilting the camera so the subject tilts 10 to 20 or more degrees can produce a very desirable result for some portraits. However, camera tilt has only been possible when working in the studio with very plain backgrounds because when the camera is tilted, the background also tilts. If the background is plain or totally abstract, the tilt isn't perceptible in the background. But, when working outdoors or in the studio with standard scenic backgrounds and props, tilting the camera produces a totally unacceptable result and, therefore, camera tilts could not be used...until now.



A Lesson From Leonardo Di Vinci

What is the background Leonardo DiVinci used for his Mona Lisa? Your first thought might be, there is no background or it is some classical canvas background. For her background, the Mona Lisa has a gentle, not too bright, not too sharp country scene. It complements her. It doesn't take away. It isn't in fact strikingly noticeable. It's just there...doing its thing. And, in most cases, that is what you should aim for in your photography...unless of course you think you know more than Leonardo.

With virtual backgrounds, when the camera is tilted to get the desired effect on the subject, the background can be straightened out again in seconds. It is just a matter of looking into the viewfinder of the camera and adjusting the magnetic slide carrier so that anything that is supposed to appear vertical, such as trees, columns, etc., once again appears vertical. The precision camera rotator used on the virtual background system for doing vertical and horizontal format also enables



When working with real backgrounds, if the camera is tilted, the background is also tilted, creating an unacceptable result.



Tilting the camera can produce a desirable effect but it also tilts the background. When the virtual backgrounds process is used, the photographer can instantly correct the background tilt by simply adjusting the position of the background slide.

the photographer to use any desired degree of tilt. It's just one more example of how the virtual background process enables the photographer to provide a higher level of creativity in everyday photography.

What If Nothing You Have Seen So Far Is Exactly What You Are Looking For?

Every photograph has a background, even if it is just all white, or all black, or a traditional painted canvas. You obviously have the

option to stay with the background repertoire you now have or you can expand your selections, but you may or may not be able to conceptualize exactly what it is that you want. Virtual Backgrounds offers over 1,000 different stock backgrounds. We have already discussed capturing your own backgrounds. There is also an additional option. If you are not an artist yourself, you can consult with artists and work together to conceptualize entirely new background images that are exactly tailored to you.

Joseph and Louise Simone are a perfect example. They have their own conception of what their product should look like in terms of the subject posing, lighting, expression and background. Because Louise is a highly creative artist, she has been able to develop her own series of backgrounds that fit their style. Their style may not be your style. In which case, you should work to develop backgrounds that fit your specific needs. The beauty of the virtual background process is that you can commission an artist to develop customized backgrounds that are painted in great detail, in miniature, that are then photographed and turned into transparencies that can all be stored in a little plastic box. Every studio owner has limited space and, therefore, soon runs out of room as they try to expand their collection of backgrounds, unless they enter the world of virtual backgrounds. Only then can they have an unlimited variety of whatever kinds of backgrounds that fit their needs. When space limitations force you to retire a favorite classic canvas background, photograph it, turn it into a transparency, and place it in your archive box, for use whenever you need it. In some ways, it's like taking all your treasured family movies and video tapes and condensing them on a DVD.

If it's a background, it can most likely be efficiently implemented with virtual backgrounds. And, as times change, as they surely will, it is so easy to create the next generation of backgrounds. Instead of abandoning thousands of dollars...and even tens of thousands of dollars worth of background drops and whole sets, one simply comes up with new slides.

What If This Looks Like More Work Than You Expected?

At its most elementary level, portrait photography is pretty simple. The subject sits on a stool in front of a stationary background, the lights are nailed down, the camera is nailed down, and the photographer simply snaps a few shots as the subject turns in different directions. The public is demanding much more. In business,

any business, delivering a better, more desirable product, is how one gets to success. Background variety, however it is done, does indeed add complexity. However that complexity is completely under the control of the photographer. Whereas one can make the virtual background process quite complicated and time consuming, it can also be streamlined to the point where it requires very minimal extra effort. It's just like a very flexible and versatile tool. It's a tool that can be used at many different levels of complexity. In the end, it is always up to the photographer to determine how they will use the tool.

In Summary

The virtual background process is very much like a camera. It will work to produce the product the photographer wants. The photographer is in control. The results reflect the photographer's control coupled with the photographer's artistic creativity. The outstanding work of master photographers like the Simones, Don Blair and others is clearly demonstrating both the quality and power of virtual backgrounds. In the next chapter you will view samples of the works of highly successful users of virtual backgrounds. Each uses the process in their own unique way, which is how it should be. Backgrounds are a tool that every photographer can use to enhance their work.

Still have reservations? The only logical approach is research. Check it out for yourself. One of my "pet peeves" in life is decision making without the benefit of research. I've worked with several large studio chains that absolutely would not even look at, let alone test market virtual backgrounds. I find such "head in the sand" thinking to be impossible to justify. But, if you aren't prepared to do your own research, then a good alternative is to look at what others say and do. Chapter 9 gives you an excellent opportunity to see what a wide ranging sampling of photographers are doing with and saying about virtual backgrounds.

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHERS

In this chapter, we will take a brief look at several widely different photographers, who have been highly successful with using the virtual background process. These featured photographers were selected because they use the virtual background process in their own unique way to complement their subjects, to be more creative, and in the end, to enhance their business and their profits.

It is very common for photographers to critique the work of other photographers. When virtual backgrounds are involved, the process is often criticized if the photographer/viewer is unimpressed with any aspect of the photograph, including aspects that have nothing to do with the background. But again, photographers who use the virtual background process have developed their own methods. This is the absolute beauty of the virtual background process because it is so adaptable to just about every kind of

portrait photography that exists. It is a highly flexible background system.

As you review this section, look at the photographs and begin to imagine how you could make the virtual background process work for you...your way.

Backgrounds are a tool. Like any tool, there are right ways and wrong ways to use them. A virtual background system is no different in many ways than a radial arm saw for a carpenter. One carpenter buys the saw and may never create anything of value. Another carpenter, using the exact same saw, carefully develops his skills, produces phenomenal products and actually starts a highly successful cabinet shop. Both carpenters had exactly the same tool but drastically different results. **It wasn't the tool that made the difference but rather the methods, the effort invested and the talents of the tool's user that made the difference.**

JOSEPH AND LOUISE SIMONE

Joseph and Louise are two of the most outstanding photographers in North America and the world. Working together, they create highly artistic portraiture that, as they say it, "captures the soul." Their work is stunning. Their style is clear. They are indeed perfectionists. Everything has to be perfect. They adjust their lights to within 1/10 of an f stop to get the very best from their digital images.

I first saw their work on display at the WPPI convention in Las Vegas in 2002. I immediately noticed that they put a lot of attention on backgrounds but I knew that they didn't have a virtual background system. However, every one of their backgrounds could have been generated with a virtual background system instead of the very difficult and tedious methods they were using. I invited



Don and Gary Blair captured this portrait of Joseph and Louise at the Triangle Institute. Louise is creating a background with chalk which will be eventually projected full size.

BACKGROUND POWER!

them to visit our facility in Texas to get acquainted with virtual backgrounds.

Two months later, Joseph and Louise were in our studio. We spent one day introducing them to the technical considerations. The second day, they eagerly started photographing our grandchildren. Every exposure was merit or even Loan Collection quality. They were ecstatic, not only with the fact that they could work so much faster than they had in the past, but also by the fact that virtual background technology would allow them to venture into new areas never before possible or practical.

Up to this point, Louise created many of her own full size backgrounds. She would sometimes compose or create a background with chalk on black seamless paper for use with one particular customer and then she would throw the background away. Now, not only does she not have to create full size backgrounds, but she can capture them on transparency film and use them again and again, sometimes with modifications such as adding a filter to change the color tone or vary the brightness or even the size of the background.

The Simones have been totally digital for four years. They now use the Kodak DCS with the Scene Machine Digital background projector. They complement many of the images with carefully selected props.



The Simones appreciate the fact that they can see both the background and the subject in the viewfinder so they can precisely compose an image before they capture it. The background is an intimate part of the image. They show their clients the results instantly. Selected images then get varying degrees of additional enhancement with PhotoShop and/or Painter.

The Scene Machine is now a fundamental component of their Montreal studio as well as a key part of their one day and five day educational classes. They use the Scene Machine for the vast majority of their work.

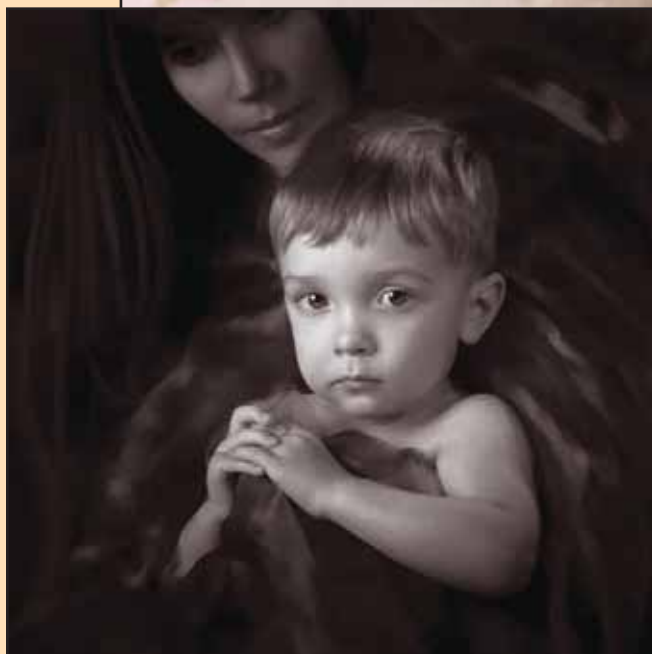
Never satisfied with the standard, the Simones have taken virtual backgrounds to a new level by creating their own background slides that reflect their style. Borrowing from their existing large assortment of images from around the world and creating some new ones, the Simones have created three collections of ten backgrounds each. Each image was carefully manipulated in PhotoShop by Louise, enabling her to significantly alter the original image. Sometimes she will combine several images into one. A few background images were deliberately left



The Simones use an 8x8 foot background. Their lighting is a modification of Don Blair's style.



The Simones use virtual backgrounds for both high and low key portraits. Once the background is selected and positioned and the lighting is set, all of the Simones' attention goes to posing of the subject.



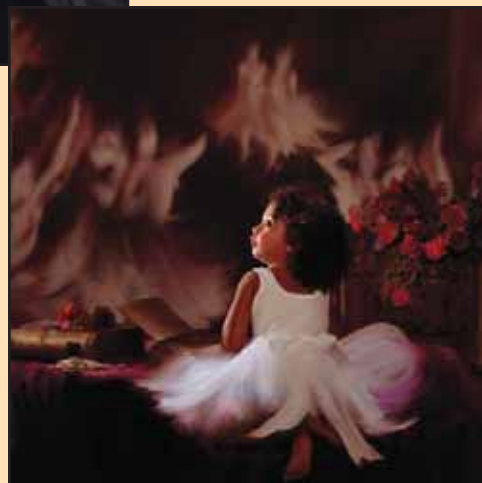
in black and white so the photographer could add any colored gel they wished. The Simone Collections of backgrounds are available through Virtual Backgrounds and may be viewed at www.virtualbackgrounds.net.

Always anxious to share, Joseph and Louise are two of the best known educators in the world today. They have taught in many cities in Europe, the Philippines, and throughout Canada and the United States. In 2005, they will do a teaching tour of Australia and New Zealand.

To see more samples of their work, visit www.simoneportrait.com. In 2004, the Simones published a comprehensive "coffee table" style book, *The Portrait... A Mirror of the Soul*, presenting a compilation of their work. Most of the images in the book that were taken in the last two years used virtual backgrounds. The 220 page oversized color book is available from Virtual Backgrounds. The book is so attractive that many copies are being purchased by non-photographers.



Simones' portraits are distinctively different. They are individual works of art. Most of their work is inspired by the great artists.





The Simones create artistic backgrounds to blend with and complement their subjects. They are generally more interested in the impact of the portrait than seeking realism in the background.



The Great One, DON BLAIR Discovers Virtual Backgrounds... Twice

"Virtual backgrounds...it's fantastic...it's just a fantastic way to be so much more creative in the studio." Don Blair

No one is better known in professional portraiture than Don Blair, also affectionately known as "Big Daddy." He is truly an icon in the industry. Besides operating a studio in Salt Lake City for nearly 50 years, Don has traveled around the world and to hundreds of cities in the US and Canada to teach his methods. He's also been to Japan six times. Don was a master at photographing his clients in the natural environment, sometimes traveling great distances to find the perfect spot. It was ten years ago that Don first discovered the Scene Machine which he put to use in this Utah studio, now run by his son Gary. He created a video training tape for his Masters Series on Special Effects Photography and its applications.

Now near 80 years of age, it is difficult for Don to get around as he once did. He discovered just how much he could actually do with a virtual background system without leaving his studio camera room. In 2002, Don had an opportunity to get back in the camera room in Utah with a Scene Machine system and it was then that he became cognizant of the full scope of virtual backgrounds. *"I always knew it was a great tool but until now, I just didn't realize just how much could be done. It's fantastic. It really is."*



"Big Daddy" Don Blair, as we know him best with his bright red beret and his Hasselblad.

Don is famous for many reasons including his precise lighting and posing. Don's lighting is completely compatible with the virtual background process. In fact, most lighting configurations used today are compatible with virtual backgrounds.

Don creates all kinds of portraits with the aid of his virtual background system...from children, to dancers, to young people, to mature couples. He does close ups, full lengths and even groups. Most of his shooting is with his Hasselblad camera equipped with a Kodak digital back. He generally does a minimal amount of post processing to enhance the image.

Most of Don's work with virtual backgrounds is done as part of his busy teaching schedule, either in preparation for a class or as a key part of the class. Students who observe Don at work are always enthralled with his methods. In the classroom, he immediately projects each captured image on a large screen for evaluation.

Don's videotape on using special effects backgrounds is available from Virtual Backgrounds. His new book, titled ***Portrait Photography – The Art Of Seeing Light***, published in 2004, has a number of images created with virtual backgrounds. The book is available from Virtual Backgrounds and other book suppliers. Don has also created a number of accessories for the studio photographer. These accessories include his "Touch of Warmth" reflector and "Punch Panel" for special spectacular highlights.



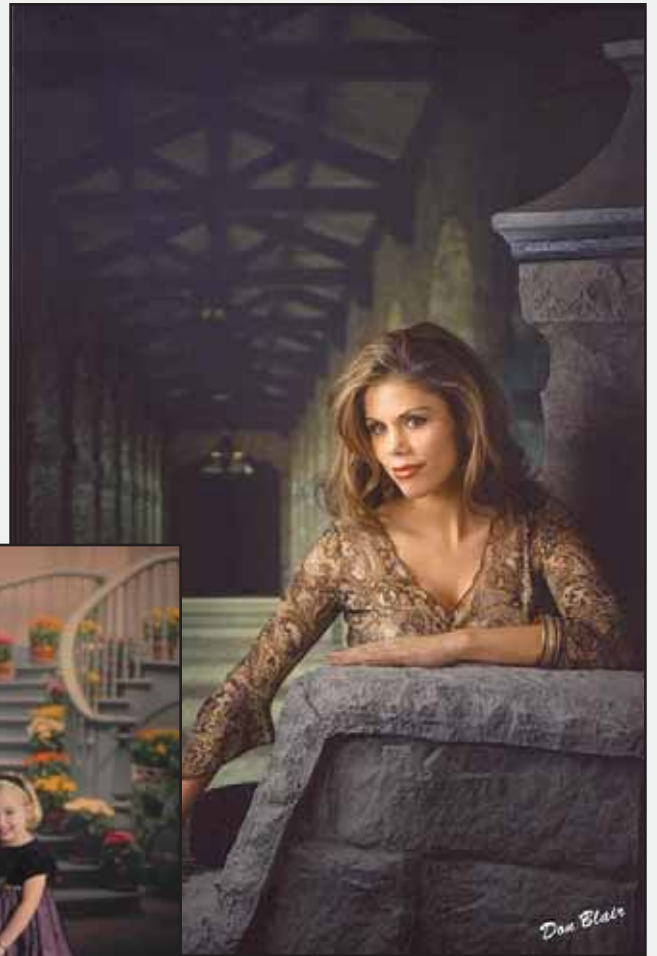
Virtual backgrounds enable Don to have an infinite variety of backgrounds without having to leave the studio. He chooses his backgrounds to harmonize with and complement the total image.





Don Blair's fundamentals, his lighting, his posing, even the position of the fingers is always perfect, along with his selection of the appropriate background.





Don often uses full length backgrounds for his work.



Two Brits Produce Award Winning Work With The Scene Machine

Two of the most outstanding photographers from the United Kingdom have produced exceptional results with their Scene Machine virtual background systems, using it for much of their studio work.

STANLEY BURGIN

Stanley Burgin of Mansfield, Nottinghamshire was about the first to acquire a virtual background system in England. With only the most minimal of training (the instruction booklet), Stanley quickly saw the wide ranging value of using the system which quickly replaced nearly all of his other backgrounds.



Stanley is a very quiet non-imposing photographer operating in an area that once was a thriving coal mining community. Most of his customers are working class, but through the magic of his talent and the

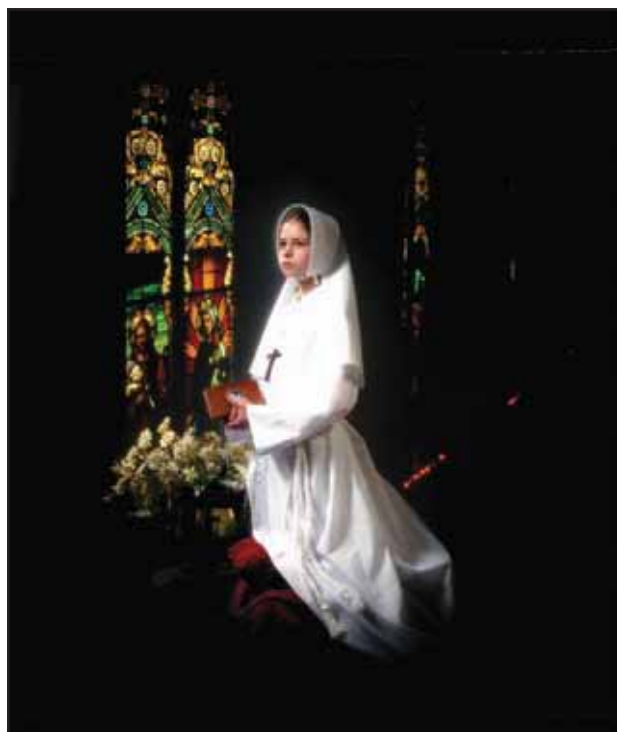
virtual background system, he is able to create individual masterpieces. Some of his portraits are so special that one might want to hang them even if they didn't know the subject! Stanley generally aims for realism, but in an almost surrealistic way, in that he creates images that would be difficult to achieve in the real environment. His work is a merger of the best that can be achieved on location with the best that can be achieved in the studio.

Props are very important to Stanley's creations, not only behind the subject or along side the subject but also in the foreground. When looking at an entire portfolio of

Stanley's work, one immediately thinks that he must have a warehouse full of props, which just isn't the case. He works in a very small camera room with no storage. His carefully selected assortment of props is made to look like more than they are by simply mixing and matching. The same exact prop is used in many different ways.

Although he was soon clearly recognized by professional societies in the UK, Stanley was never one for bragging or even talking or writing about his work. He is an Associate of the Master Photographers Association of Great Britain. He was also honored when invited to be an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. Stanley was the first UK photographer to earn these coveted positions solely with images created with the assistance of a virtual background system. The print judges never knew a virtual background system was involved! Several articles have been written about his work for the professional UK magazines.

Stanley Burgin is semi-retired today. He still does some studio work and he is continually experimenting with his system and developing new applications.



There is no limit to the variety Stanley Burgin has been able to offer even though his second floor studio is very limited in space.



DEAN McDONALD

Dean McDonald of Preston, Lancashire purchased his first Scene Machine virtual background system after seeing a demonstration at a professional photographer's trade show. He immediately began experimenting with how he could incorporate the system in his style of portraiture and soon found that it could play a very critical role in most all of his studio work except that which involves high key full length white backgrounds. Although he could generate high key white with the Scene Machine, he preferred using white paper for his full length work.

Dean developed a reputation throughout England for his "waif" type images. He photographed children and family groups as if they were from the nineteenth century or even older. Much of Dean's work is full length. Dean installed a tiled stone floor in front of his background screen that looks like something you would

find in a very old barn or home. He often accentuates the floor with spriggles of straw and other items to add realism. Like his fellow countryman, Stanley Burgin, Dean finds many different ways to use his limited assortment of props.

Several years ago, Dean switched totally to digital. He found that digital enabled him to experiment even more with new poses and new ways to use the virtual background process. Dean's work covers the full range of subjects that he photographs, from children to brides to golden agers. It's a tool that he would not want to do without.

Dean has been honored to be named an Associate of the Master Photographers

Association of Great Britain. Dean has spoken in the UK, in the Canary Islands, for WPPI in Las Vegas and for an advanced workshop at Virtual Backgrounds. He teaches his general methods of photography, virtual background technology, digital methods, and web site development. His studio web site address is www.deanmcdonald.com.



Dean McDonald and his wife Sally in costume for an event he photographed.

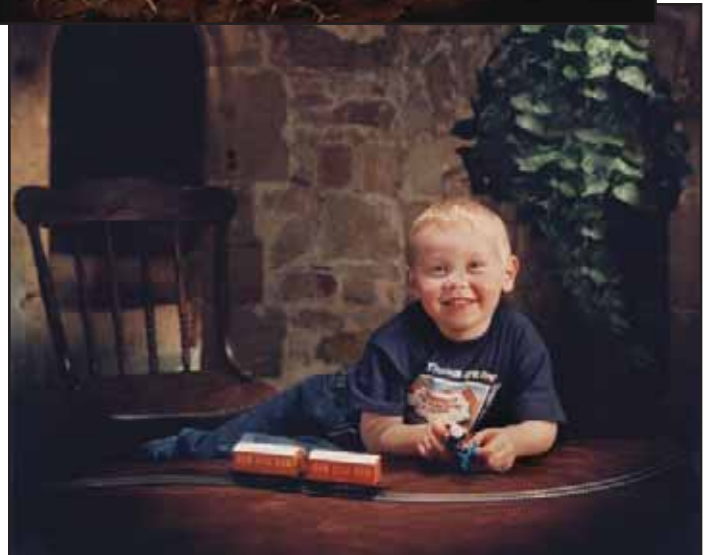


Dean McDonald has built a reputation in England for his speciality photographs of children.





Elegant professional images of life, as it is or as it was, are key elements of Dean McDonald's work.



RICK HARDING – From Proms to Schools and More

"Without my virtual background system, I probably wouldn't be in business today."

Rick Harding

Rick Harding's father, Fred, started Harding Studio in 1946. As Rick took over the business, he found himself growing tired of fighting for the San Antonio prom business by continually lowering his prices and not having anything really special to offer to ensure that he got the contracts. Frustrated, he decided that he was going to quit doing proms if he could not find a way to sign up the best proms without being the cheapest bidder. He chose to build his prom business



around custom created backgrounds. Initially, he used large cardboard murals as backgrounds. Then he discovered the virtual background concept. With virtual backgrounds, he could promise the prom committees that his new technology would enable

him to create any imaginable background setting to match the theme of their prom. For example, if the theme was "Evening In Paradise," he could produce a choice of spectacular sunsets, complete with a beach, ocean waves and even some palm trees! Whatever their theme, he had a variety of spectacular backgrounds.

The plan worked. Rick soon began getting one prime prom after another and eventually he purchased a total of eight Scene Machine virtual background systems to generate the backgrounds for all the proms he was booking. Some of his largest proms required three simultaneous shooting stations. The larger proms could easily generate in excess of \$10,000 in one night. An entire virtual background system would be more than paid for in one single night! Now, years later, he continues to get his choice of the best proms

in the area without worrying about having the lowest price. His prom package prices range from \$15 to about \$50. The students listen to his proposal, look at his samples and sign the contracts, enabling him to bring in hundreds of thousands of prom dollars. During some parts of the season, all eight virtual background systems are in use.

Rick explains, "Prom contracts are never automatic. You have to go after them every year. There are always new students and sometimes new advisors. I do have competitors who try their best to get the contracts, but if I can get the students to let me make my proposal, Harding Studio usually gets the contract."

Rick is continually upgrading his methods. The students get to not only help choose the background, but they can even get intimately involved in the creation of the background in that Rick now uses Photoshop to create backgrounds that don't even exist. For example, he can combine many different elements into a background, taking into consideration student suggestions. While it sounds like a lot of work, Rick reports that most of his custom prom backgrounds take between thirty minutes and an hour to create on his computer. The students love to have input and Harding Studio likes the rewards. At the same time, Rick is making his life a little easier by inserting some of his props into his background slide rather than having to bring the props to the affair.

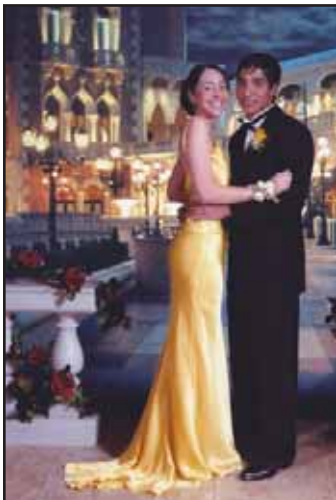
Proms are definitely not the only thing the studio does. Harding Studio is one of the largest senior and school photographers in San Antonio. Virtual backgrounds is involved in 90% of the work produced, helping Harding Studio be one of the most successful operations in the ninth largest city in the US.

Rick Harding now makes available to other photographers (outside of San Antonio) his custom background slides, promotional materials, and instructional materials. He can be reached through his web site at www.hardingstudio.com.

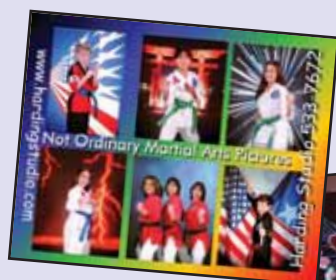


RICK HARDING... the Prom "KING"

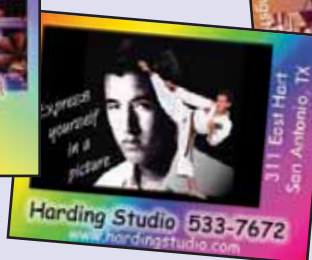
No one does proms like Rick Harding. He offers his clients a clearly distinctive product. He works with his clients to customize their backgrounds and they respond with sales.



Rick Harding's Custom Business cards



Rick Harding creates customized business cards according to the type of assignment he is trying to get.



Virtual backgrounds are a key element in most of the work produced by Harding Studios.



BASIL PECKNYO – Like The Bunny...He Keeps On Going and Going and Going

Basil's first memory of photography was watching his friend being photographed on a pony by an itinerant photographer in his ethnic neighborhood in Michigan. Basil was more interested in how the photographer made the pictures than in the pony. Basil's first developing tanks were made of thin wood, sealed inside with candle wax. His first camera was a "pinhole" camera. These early experiences eventually got him a job mixing chemicals for a neighborhood photographer who paid him with food.



Basil became an Army photographer during WWII. After the war, he purchased Van Dyke Studio which is still his present location in downtown Flint, Michigan. Offering his customers maximum variety, especially in backgrounds, has always been one of his hallmarks. This studio has 4 camera rooms, one all white, a boudoir room with curtains, a main camera room with 6 crank down backgrounds, and a muslin room. He was one of the very early purchasers of a virtual background system which quickly became one of his most important tools. He bought the Scene Machine because he wanted to be different from the other photographers in his area plus he wanted the variety that was possible without having to leave his studio. He reports that he has over nine thousand backgrounds to choose from, nearly all of which he took himself.

Basil says, "Our studio can put our subjects anywhere in all four seasons...including countless interior and exterior locations. Our clients have so many choices. No one can match me plus my background system is

energy saving. It saves my energy and my time which lets me photograph more people. It also gives me the desire to be more creative and to keep coming up with new ideas. Most important, I please the client with excitement and happiness. My Scene Machine is a very valuable workhorse."

Basil, now 78, has been in his studio for 54 years. He expressed disappointment to me because he had to miss the PPA national convention this year...only the second PPA convention he has missed in 54 years, because he is finishing his brand new studio in Flint, Michigan. Working hand in hand with his wife, Margaret, Basil still maintains a heavy schedule, he continues to capture new backgrounds, and he is in the process of converting from film to digital. Basil's enthusiasm for photography and being ever more creative is obvious in everything he says and does.

One might ask, how does a white 78 year old male photographer manage to capture so much of the teenage business, especially considering that 75% of his customers are African American with the remainder being Hispanic and white? He answers by saying... "It's many things. They like my work. They like the variety I am able to give them. I give them what they want. They like our attitude. They like our prices and our fairness. They like the Scene Machine. And when they leave with their portraits, they are glad they came to Van Dyke photography and they tell others to come to us."

Basil charges a session fee of \$21.75 which includes one look and one change of clothing. If they want two different looks, even using virtual backgrounds, the second look costs another \$21.75. Most sittings generate \$80 - \$90 in session fees. An outdoor session is \$38.00. His average sale for a high school senior is approaching \$500.00.

Although Basil is thinking of slowing down a bit when he gets into his new studio, one thing is certain. There is no grass growing under Basil Pecknyo's feet!



Variety and fairness are key elements in Basil's success.



Every customer is treated as a unique individual. There are no "cookie cutter" portraits at Van Dyke Studios.





Basil's customers, mostly teenagers, know that their portraits will be colorful and uniquely tailored to their personality.



APRIL & LARRY HELSEL... New Directions In Children's Portraits

April and Larry Helsel are relatively new to the portrait business. They opened Keepsakes Studio in 1998 in the small Pennsylvania town of Duncansville. Looking for the latest technology, the Helsels found the Scene Machine virtual background system at the 2001 Photo Expo in New York City. Larry liked the concept, but April, the actual photographer, saw it as a potential headache. Nevertheless, Larry won the debate and a few weeks later they had their virtual background system. At first, it just sat in the corner collecting dust. April made a few test exposures, but nothing of interest.



April Helsel with her homemade garden prop and her virtual background projector.

Several months later, Jim Wilson, Director of Education at Virtual Backgrounds called to find out why no one had attended the virtual backgrounds workshop in Texas. April decided to attend the workshop, but had very few sample prints made with the system to bring along. April found the workshop very helpful, but she still took another few weeks to start actually using the system.

Quoting April, "My oldest daughter, Ciera, served as my first serious subject, but I didn't want to do just a plain portrait of her with a virtual background. I decided that I wanted to try to create a "story book" type image. I used a Denny rock and placed some ferns and other plants in front of and behind her to create depth. Olen Seidler, a long time user of the Scene Machine, suggested using a 4 x 8 sheet of Plexiglas to create reflections such as water. The Plexiglas became her "pond." I really got excited when I saw the results. I knew that my portraiture had just entered a whole new dimension."

"I've now used virtual backgrounds for two years and I still have a lot more to learn. It is such a versatile tool. I love experimenting with new ideas. The ease of operation saves time and money without needing to use the 20+ muslins I already had. Children open up so many doors to creativity. Repeat clients love the variety I can give them without leaving the studio. With all the variety I now have at my fingertips, there is no way I'll get in a rut again. I keep trying new set ups. My competition never knows what I am going to do next. I use my virtual background system for 90% of my indoor work."

April's husband, Larry, also comes up with some of the ideas and is actively involved in creating new props, such as the boat dock. Props they build on their own are very inexpensive and can be changed frequently so nothing ever gets old.

April is also very active with Adobe Photoshop, which she uses to enhance some of her images.

April is always eager to share her experiences with virtual backgrounds by doing programs and workshops. Her website address is **www.keepsakestudio.com**.



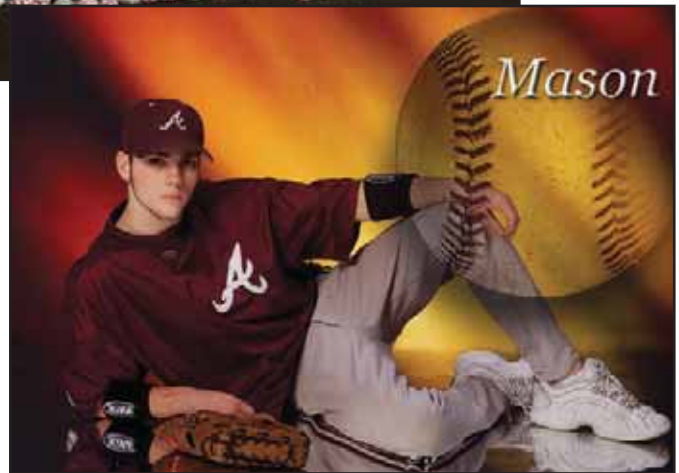
April Helsel's specialty is children. April and Larry create most of their own props. They are continually coming up with new ideas for props and posing.



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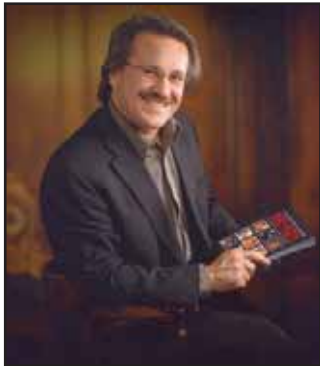
Many of April's portraits are full length. She often uses her plexiglas mirror to create special effects. The children feel "at home" on the sets.



TREVON BAKER – Photographer – Consultant – Speaker

When Trevon Baker first heard of the concept of virtual backgrounds, he was compelled to learn as much as he could about it. He persuaded the owners of the one hour lab/portrait studio that he worked for in Montana to let him travel to the Winona School in Chicago to take a week long course taught by myself and Bill Abey. A year later, he moved from Montana to Texas to work for EPS Photographic (now Virtual Backgrounds). After 4 years, he returned to Montana to open his own portrait studio, which quickly became a highly successful business.

Trevon was one of the first photographers in the country to use video proofing. He also was one of the first to convert his entire studio operation to digital. Trevon photographed a wide variety of clients including the current and past governors of Montana.



After 10 years of operating the studio, Trevon sold the business to become a full time industry consultant and educator which brought him back together again with Virtual Backgrounds as a consultant. For the past two years, he has been the primary assistant to Louise and Joseph Simone and Don Blair for their seminars and workshops. Unable to leave the role of actively being a

photographer, Trevon continued working as a portrait and scenic photographer and has opened a new studio in Montana.

Trevon's primary interest for the future, besides continuing with his photography, is in teaching and speaking. He has a unique ability to make the complex easy to understand. He has given state association programs and will do a 6 city workshop tour of Australia and New Zealand. He has published several articles, including one on virtual backgrounds, for *The Professional Photographer* magazine.

Trevon can be reached through his website, www.trevonbaker.com or www.todayinmontana.com.



All of Trevon's work shown here was taken at trade shows working in a very small area.

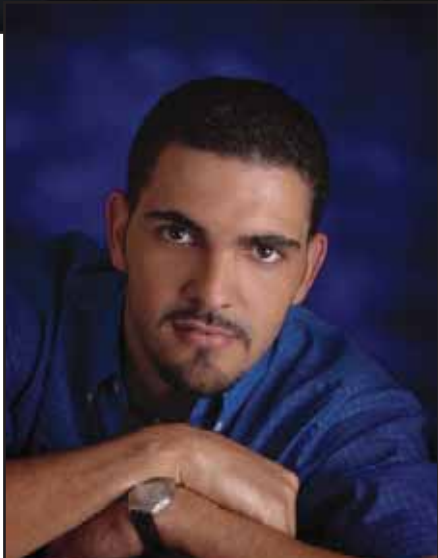


Most images shown here were captured in our trade show demonstration studio using only two lights and a "Touch of Warmth" reflector. Space was extremely limited.





Trevon's work reflects a contemporary style that is popular with today's younger subjects.



MARIAN OLES – A Pioneer Who Made Virtual Backgrounds Work When Most Photographers Said It Couldn't

It's been more than 20 years since Marian purchased her very first virtual background system from a small manufacturer who had no samples, no literature, and no instructions. Taking a chance and buying that system may have been my idea, but it was Marian who made it not only work but also "sing." She used virtual backgrounds as a fundamental tool in our then new portrait studio operation. It clearly helped us establish our business in a little Texas town that was pretty closed to outsiders, especially those who came from the North.



It wasn't long before she was able to create award winning work with her new tool. One of her early images not only scored among the highest in PPA national print competition, but also was selected for the cover of *Studio Photography* magazine. However, no one knew the image was created with a virtual background system and, therefore, the process never received the attention it deserved.

There is little comparison between the background system used back then and that which is available today. Back then, the photographer had to be extremely careful with the subject lighting to keep it off the background and very few of the features that are so fundamental today were available. She used the background system as a primary marketing tool to get contracts that may well have gone elsewhere without the added incentive of custom backgrounds. A great deal of her early work involved producing composites for sororities and fraternities. The women especially appreciated the opportunity to have a custom background

used exclusively for their group and one that harmonized well with their chosen clothing. Marian was contracted by nearly every group on campus. Her favorite subjects are brides and children. While many wedding photographers have experienced a significant drop in doing formal bridal portraits before the wedding, nearly every one of Marian's brides schedules a bridal formal sitting and has a 16x20 or larger print on display at the bridal table during the reception.

Marian has spoken about her work with virtual backgrounds and composites for a variety of groups throughout the US, including the PPA national convention as well as in Australia. She has also published a number of articles. Her studio is located in a two story cedar country house about 4 miles from town where she can use virtual backgrounds as well as a wide variety of outdoor settings.

Marian has always been my biggest critic when it comes to equipment design, always making sure that any product I created was "photographer tested and approved." Only then could I make it available to other photographers.



Back when most photographers did not even know about virtual backgrounds and the equipment was primitive, Marian created this "Loan Collection" print.



Marian's full length work is usually done with the "Create a Floor" method complemented with a variety of props.



BACKGROUND POWER!



Marian's specialties are bridal formals and children. The background, both real and virtual, has always been an important component of her work.



Leading Lady is Glamorous

In 1985, Shirlee Robinson was a makeup artist and a hairstylist in Denver, Colorado. She had the idea that someone needed to offer her clients the opportunity to be captured on film right when they looked their very best. Shirley had no experience in photography but she knew exactly what she wanted. On a gamble, she hired a photographer and created Leading Lady Photography. Back then, glamour photography was a new idea. Her initial success was such that both Denver newspapers and the three main television stations did feature stories on her "makeovers." Business began to boom.

In 1988, Shirlee discovered the Scene Machine virtual background system and she immediately got rid of all of her traditional backgrounds in favor of unlimited back-



ground variety and simplicity. Her customers loved it. One day, her photographer didn't show up so Shirlee

got behind the camera. She has been the photographer ever since.

By the early 90's, Denver was full of glamour studios, but they were all offering what Shirlee calls the over-done, head shot, heavy stage make-up, the "foo foo" look. Shirlee stayed with her original style of making women look beautiful in a generally natural and sexy way. Shirlee's clients like wearing some of their own clothing with four or five changes. Shirlee provides full-length furs, 5-inch heels, hats, gloves, miscellaneous jewelry and accessories. Her typical sitting includes a wide variety of different poses with many different backgrounds. Because of this variety, she says customers have a hard time not buying a lot more than they planned. She shoots mostly three-quarter and full body shots as most of her clients

are buying these portraits as a romantic gift for the man in their life. Ladies love to be posed on fur in front of a cozy, wood burning fireplace (created with the Scene Machine), or in her famous "cat pose."

For several years Shirlee had as many as 14 employees but decided to scale down when the "rat race" pace and headaches that come with that many employees took the joy out of the business. Shirley moved her entire operation into her home on a quiet Denver street where she works with one or two assistants. Everything is by appointment. There are no "walk ins." Her clients like the personal feeling of being photographed in the privacy of a home environment.

Her session fee is \$99.00, paid in advance with no refunds for no shows. She generally does two clients a day with a minimum order of \$500.00. Some orders go into the thousands. A session generally includes at least 20 shots with 4 outfit changes. All of her work is 100% satisfaction guaranteed. Her unique style brings her not only local Denver area women, but some customers fly in for their session. While most of the other area glamour studios have come and gone, Shirley continues with just as much success as she wants. Repeat business is common.

To this day, Shirley has no formal training in photography and jokingly talks about not knowing much about f-stops, lighting ratios or other photographer jargon. "I just focus, get the client in the right pose, put the right slide in my Scene Machine and shoot. My customers love the results. That's why they buy so much and come back. It's funny, I get asked to teach photographers about my methods but no one ever taught me. I just do it. I capture what looks good. Some photographers, especially the males, laugh a little because I don't know all the techie stuff, but what is really important is posing the subject, getting the right background, getting it on film and selling the results to the client."

One of her big sellers is her "pin up" calendar. The client selects 12 poses, one

BACKGROUND POWER!

for each month. The poses are theme related such as for Valentines Day, Easter, spring, summer, July 4th, and Christmas. Just about every client gets a calendar for their mate.

Since Shirley got her first Scene Machine, she hasn't used anything else for a background. She has a 10 x 10 foot background screen. Her backgrounds range from solid colors to solid black, to an infinite variety of indoor and outdoor scenes, all specially chosen to complement her clients.

Quoting Shirley, "I decide what backgrounds I am going to use as I get my clients in a pose...I see what goes right. It's so much fun. It's quick. My customers love all the different looks. I love the variety. I don't know how I could possibly work without my Scene Machine."

Shirley has made a number of presentations about her methods in the United States, and the Bahamas. She was also a key presenter for Virtual Backgrounds' advanced workshop. Shirley may not be a tech expert but her portraits clearly demonstrate her talent. Shirley's web site is www.leadingladyphoto.com.



Every portrait created by Shirley Robinson is customized to the client. Virtual background plays an important role in every image.

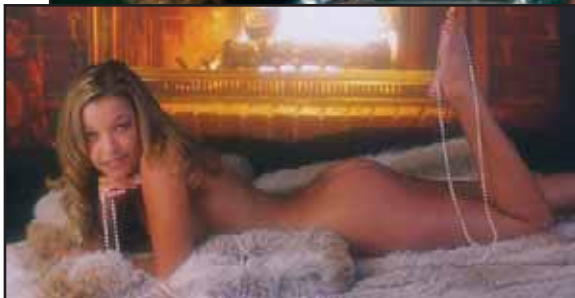


Shirley has created a wide variety of her own backgrounds in addition to her collection from Virtual Backgrounds.

Re-creating History is Possible... With Virtual Backgrounds



Shirley's most treasured print was taken on the Titanic in the Garden Room. At least, that's how it looks. Her client was in the tourist industry and was enthralled with the steamships of the early twentieth century. She brought in authentic era clothing and an actual black and white slide of the Titanic's Garden Room. Shirley inserted the slide in her Scene Machine and positioned the subject as if she were standing in the center of the room with her right hand perched on the rim of a wicker chair...a chair that now sits at the bottom of the North Atlantic ocean. The results are phenomenally realistic.



Many of Shirley Robinson's images are full length using the "Create a Floor" or the "Reflect a Floor" methods.

CINDY COFER – Ninety Days And Doing Great!

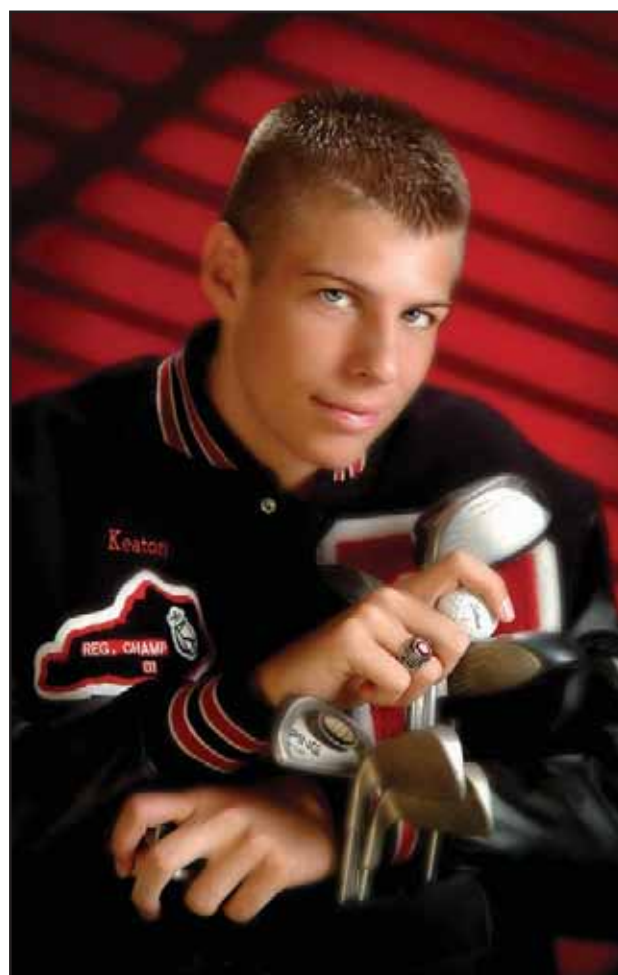
Cindy Cofer of Williamstown, Kentucky (population 5,000) started doing photography out of her home just three years ago while raising four kids and working with the school system. Last year, she purchased a house just off main street that had been a doctor's office for 40 years. It was a perfect location for her small town, one person, studio.

It was Cindy's deep desire to be more creative that caused her to take a special interest in backgrounds. Even though she has 4 acres around her studio, she wanted to do more with her studio work so she began to explore the



possibilities and discovered the virtual background concept. Although some of her friends in the business cautioned her about making such a move because of "problems they had heard about," Cindy found a Scene Machine system that was for sale, brought it home, and went right to work, using her Fuji S2 camera. After only a minimal amount of technical assistance from the manufacturer of the equipment, Cindy was off and running. Her initial experiments were with her daughter, but after just three days, she shot her first senior.

Cindy felt really great when someone at Millers Professional Labs included a short note with her order. It just said, "Very good." In addition to seniors, she is now using the Scene Machine for just about everything she does including families, romantic couples, maternity, and kids. "I love it because it's



something different...it lets me be unique and different...it lets me stand out in my area...no one else has it yet. I make images no one else has...I never get bored in the studio and I'm not cramped with big props and other backgrounds."

Although she purchased many stock backgrounds with the system, Cindy is out creating her own backgrounds. She already has about sixty. She likes her own backgrounds because they represent her local area and because they are truly hers. Current samples of her work can be seen on her web site...

www.cindycofercreations.com.



It was only after Cindy created all the images shown here that she attended the Virtual Backgrounds workshop to learn to use her new system.



¡EXCELLENTE! Portrait Artist GENARDO CASTELÁN

In every country there are many good photographers, but there are only a very few who stand out from all the others because of their overwhelming artistic talent and creativity. In all of Mexico, one name comes immediately to mind...Genaro Costelán of Puebla, Mexico. Genaro's work immediately speaks clearly for itself. It's distinctively different in many different ways. Genaro's creative touch is immediately obvious.

Genaro comes from a poor existence in his early life which he was able to overcome as he began to work for himself. His camera became his paint brush. He is always searching for just the perfect way to photograph his clients, or when he is not with a regular client, he continues to envision his next creation. He views his work in photography not as a chore but rather as a continuing adventure.

Genaro's dedication and his overwhelming concern about the background is clearly illustrated by a story he tells to explain how



he happened to be able to capture the image on a certain print. He explained it this way. "I was in a steam

room in Puebla and suddenly I saw it..I saw on the wet marble dividers an image, complete with a face and body and a very special background. I saw the pose...everything. When I saw the background I just knew I absolutely had to capture this image. I felt sure I could find the perfect location up on the mountain...on Mount Iztaccihuatl, an active volcano not too far from my studio. I

gathered together a group of assistants who were to act as porters. I also found the perfect models. Together we climbed the volcano for more than a day. I didn't know at first exactly where I was going but I knew that I would know I was there when I got there. And then it happened, I found it. We all were bitterly cold, but it was the perfect location. We did the shoot and I was thrilled beyond words with the results."

Looking for an easier way to achieve his creative aspirations, Genaro purchased a Scene Machine virtual background system and ever since, he has been turning out a wide variety of highly creative work including high key, weddings, Quinceanera, families, and children. He also has used it for competition, creating some of the highest scoring images in PPA competition. Genaro still goes on location when it is appropriate, but the majority of his work is now done in the studio. The vast majority of Genaro's virtual backgrounds are not just plain images. They display his creative variations which he did even before the days of digital.

Genaro has lectured throughout Mexico and in several US states. He was also a key presenter for Virtual Backgrounds' 100th workshop celebration which was a three day advanced workshop for experienced virtual background users.

Genaro's work truly reflects his tastes. It also clearly demonstrates once again how the virtual background process can be many different things for each individual photographer who chooses to use the system in their own way.

"Nowadays, the combination of both virtual backgrounds and digital photography allows us to create images of the highest quality and impact. This keeps us working and enjoying the long road of professional photography, knowing that there is still so much to learn!"



Genaro's work clearly reflects his Mexican culture. His backgrounds are artistic variations of local scenes.



BACKGROUND POWER!

Genaro's work clearly demonstrates his style and versatility.



THE TOOLS YOU NEED

There are those who feel that if they cannot start out with the biggest and best of everything, they just aren't going to bother at all.

Like our carpenter example from a previous chapter, if he can't get a top of the line, gold plated, compound radial arm saw, he just wasn't going to bother to cut wood. Too often, the result of this thinking is that a phenomenal opportunity is missed. The would-be carpenter could have started off with a used lower end radial saw, built his business, and then purchased anything he wanted.

When I started in the candid wedding business, I began with a twin lens roll film camera my father gave me that looked a lot like a Rolleiflex but was made in Czechoslovakia. It sold at a New York warehouse closeout for only \$19.95, but it made me many thousands of dollars. It did an amazingly good job, and eventually I was successful enough to buy any camera I wanted.

The exact same thing is true for backgrounds of all kinds, including virtual backgrounds. A lack of funds is not a problem because it is possible to begin even with a previously owned system and a smaller background screen and then one can use that equipment to grow profits until they can afford to purchase anything that is available. It is also possible to make some of your own props for little or nothing. I view complaints about cost as just an excuse for doing nothing. Cost must always be viewed in relation to ROI. **Cost is not a legitimate reason for not getting into backgrounds. When there is a will, there is usually a way.**

One reason that I have devoted so much of my life's work to professional photography is that it continues today as one of the few vocations that enables one to get started for amazingly few dollars and without formal education in photography. With the right approach and hard work, one can quickly grow the business into a highly successful

venture, a real tribute to entrepreneurship. The photographers who get into financial trouble are often those who spend foolishly. Those who don't quickly put their new tools to work, and those who don't do anything to distinguish themselves in some way, and who don't promote their business, usually get into financial trouble. The opportunities are there and with some hard work and persistence, just about anyone can be highly successful almost anywhere there are enough potential clients. But you must have the right tools... not the most expensive tools.

What are the specific tools you need to get into using backgrounds to enhance your portrait operation? We'll look once again at five different background systems, painted and printed backgrounds, polystyrene sets and props, digital green screen and optical virtual backgrounds with an emphasis on what you need to know and where to go.

Painted Backdrops

Painted and inkjet printed backdrops come in a huge variety of styles. The most popular new variation is scenic large format inkjet printed backdrops. These backdrops come in just about any size ranging from 4x6 to 10x12 and larger. Before you think that you just have to have the biggest size you can get, keep in mind that Walmart Studios gets a lot of mileage out of their very small photo scenic backdrops which are less than 4 x 4 feet! You can get a lot of production out of a very small camera room. Obviously, larger is better because it provides you with more opportunity to be creative, but it is not an absolute requirement.

When using your printed or painted backdrops, keep in mind that you will have to have at least one light positioned between the subject and the backdrop, not only to light the backdrop but also to cancel the subject's shadow. This means that you will

have to keep your subjects at least several feet from the backdrop.

A universal problem with all painted backdrops is how the photographer is to mount and unroll them and then roll them back up again for transport and storage. Traditionally, canvas backgrounds come stapled on to a semi-round stick. Canvas backdrops can be rolled on the stick, but the method will eventually provoke cracking of the paint and leave horizontal crease lines in the backdrop. Inkjet type scenic backdrops need to be rolled on a larger more smooth core. Creases can ruin a printed backdrop.

Backdrops can be semi-permanently mounted to an overhead roller system, most of which are electrically operated. However, these systems are rather expensive and are not portable. A very inexpensive method of mounting a backdrop is to use a pair of background "Roll Ups" from Virtual Backgrounds in San Marcos, Texas. The Roll Ups expand to tightly fit into the ends of either a 3 inch or 4 inch ID cardboard or aluminum tube. The Roll Ups then allow the photographer to mount the backdrop on two ordinary light stands and the backdrop can be easily unrolled and rolled back up again. It is a practical system that is excellent for portable or studio operation.

Roll Ups were originally designed for use with virtual background screens, but recently their application was recognized for all kinds of backgrounds. Today, they are used for any

variety of backdrops including paper and canvas. Roll Ups are an inexpensive and highly efficient means of handling backdrops.

There are literally hundreds of companies that produce painted canvas and muslin backdrops, with Denny Manufacturing of Alabama being one of the largest with the greatest variety. Selecting the right painted backdrop is purely a matter of personal taste related to current trends. The classic brown, gray or blue "Old Masters" type has been around for generations. A great many other types of painted backdrops, some quite flamboyant and even garish by traditional standards, are available today. It is all a matter of choosing that which satisfies the greatest number of customers.

Muslin backgrounds are also available from a wide variety of sources. Muslin backgrounds are usually relatively inexpensive, but they are also relatively limited in application. Some of the newest muslin backgrounds use shockingly brilliant color patterns. Before you pass judgment, check with your customers. They know what they like.

Most photo supply houses provide rolls of paper backgrounds, available in any color including solid white and black. Paper is cheap and designed to be thrown away when it wrinkles. Paper rolls can also be mounted with Roll Ups. The most common use for white paper is high key white backgrounds.

Polystyrene Sets, Props And Accessories

The very first polystyrene props included an artificial rock, an artificial tree trunk with no branches or leaves, an artificial split rail fence and an artificial wagon wheel. In their day, they were very useful and helped photographers sell a lot more photographs. There have been monumental changes in polystyrene design and finishing. These products can now be purchased as entire background sets which include windows, steps, arches, bridges, pillars, brick and stone walls,



Background Roll Ups from Virtual Backgrounds.

bookshelves, large machines, and just about anything you can imagine. Most of these items have two different sides so one set actually is two different sets.

Recently, we've seen the release of rubberized floor mats that offer very realistic floors of brick, stone, rock, and wood. The floor material is ideal for full length photography in conjunction with polystyrene props and/or virtual backgrounds. The two primary sources for polystyrene and the rubberized floor material are "Off The Wall" of Canada and Scenic Design which is now sold by Denny Manufacturing of Mobile, Alabama.

Small props are available from a wide variety of sources. Two of the best are Wicker By Design and American Photographic Resources. You can also find props at local window decorating companies and at companies that sell decorations for proms. Don't forget Lowe's and Home Depot. They have many products that can serve as excellent props ranging from plants to white picket fences. You can also build your own props. You can find an infinite variety of props at flea markets and garage sales. Keep in mind that it is best if you can use many of your props in other sections of your studio, such as the reception room. They, therefore, get "double duty" and do not have to be stored. Your most serious limitation is your room for storage.

Digital Chromakey

Most Chromakey involves either a very bright green or bright blue backdrop. The backdrop may be colored paper, colored cloth or the color can be painted directly on the wall as well as on the floor. You also have the option of projecting the color with a virtual background projector.

Because the background color is quite different in the subject's shadow area, unless you are projecting the color with a virtual background projector, it is critical that the subject's shadows be canceled with background lights. The sole purpose of a back-

ground light is to light up the background. You will need separate lights for lighting the background from those that light the subject.

There are many different computer programs available that enable a person to use Chromakey. Most photographers start by using Photoshop because it offers so many options for cleaning up the image, but it is also highly time consuming. There are many more simple programs for routine work such as for pasting backgrounds into event photography.

Background quality is not nearly as critical in event photography as it is in portraiture because the viewer has vastly different standards of acceptability for fun photography compared with portrait photography. Digital Chromakey is ideal for creating exotic images.

Matchlight has recently introduced a device that helps photographers match their studio light to the lighting that is in the background slide. The direction of the light in the background slide is calculated. The Matchlight device is placed in the studio image to help the photographer gauge the direction of the studio light to get it close to the light pattern that originally lit the background. The Matchlight approach is best used for commercial photography. Generally speaking, in portraiture it is not critical for the photographer to exactly match the background lighting to the subject. Nature's totally natural lighting is not usually very complementary. It needs to be modified and enhanced while still maintaining a "natural look" just as photographers work with a variety of lighting tools in the studio to enhance the subject's appearance. However, one would not want the main light to be coming from the right when it is perfectly clear that the background light source is on the left.

Tri-Prism is a California company that has created a very fine digital Chromakey system with excellent Mac based software. Tri-Prism Chromakey products are now available from Virtual Backgrounds.

The ideal way to create the green or blue

background for Chromakey or any other color is to use the new Colorizer projector from Virtual Backgrounds. It eliminates or cuts to a minimum some of the negative issues that are part of Chromakey. It minimizes the cut-out look and overall color shift from bouncing colored lights in the camera room.

Optical Virtual Backgrounds

There are two components to a virtual background system, the projector and the background screen. The principle manufacturer of both components is Virtual Backgrounds. Today, there are five different projectors available, all of which work with digital or film cameras.

The most flexible and adjustable projector is the Scene Machine Universal. It fits nearly any camera made and enables the photographer to do essentially anything that is possible with the virtual background process. For example, the Universal is designed to be aligned by the photographer. However, this also means that the Universal is more complicated to set up and use, which is a disadvantage for some situations. The Universal uses a 28 to 105mm zoom projection lens and a 7.5 to 250 watt/second power supply with digital read out and adjustments to 1/10th of an f-stop. It is also the largest of the 5 projectors offered by Virtual Backgrounds.

The Scene Machine Digital and the Spectravue 300 are both similar to the Scene Machine Universal in fundamental design, but they are engineered for use with smaller cameras such as Hasselblad and especially the new digital cameras. Both projectors can be easily carried to location shoots without disassembly. Once on location, these systems can be operational in a minute or two. They have fewer adjustments than the Universal and do not require alignment. The

Scene Machine Digital uses the same power supply and projection lens as the Scene Machine Universal. Spectravue 300 uses a more limited power supply and a 35 to 80 zoom lens. Both come with the "six shooter" slide carrier and the normal carrier.

The Spectravue 200 and 100 are designed for maximum simplicity and economy. There is little for the photographer to do besides insert and position the background slide. The base units simply attach to the front of the camera lens using a special adapter ring which makes it potentially possible to hand hold the camera and projector. However, hand holding the system is not recommended for most situations. Even though the 200 and 100 are very light, some of the newest very lightweight cameras and lenses do not react well to the weight of the 200 or 100. Therefore, many photographers order their Model 200 or 100 with the accessory Precision Camera Rotator (PCR) already attached. In that case, both the camera and the projector attach to the PCR and the PCR attaches to the camera stand.

The Spectravue 200 comes with a 35 to 80 zoom projection lens. The Spectravue 100 cannot use a zoom projection lens. It has a fixed focal length lens. The Spectravue 200 uses an external power supply with 1/4, 1/2 and full power settings. The aperture on the projection lens can also be adjusted. The Model 100 has a less powerful built-in flash assembly.

All five projectors produce equal results. That is, it is not possible to tell which machine was used just by looking at the resulting photographs. The difference is in the control and flexibility the photographer had when creating the image. The Spectravue series is generally the preferred units for location work and for volume photography such as school or church photography where the intention is simplicity of operation and lower cost.



SCENE MACHINE UNIVERSAL* represents the ultimate in virtual background projector design. The Universal adapts to most any camera, film or digital, and offers the photographer the greatest variety of adjustments and control. It includes a digital control power supply, with precise adjustment from 7.5 to 250 watt seconds and a remote control.



SPECTRAVUE 300* is similar to the Universal but designed for smaller cameras like most digital cameras. The camera mount is a fundamental component of the system. It comes with a "Six Shooter" for fast background changes. SPECTRAVUE 300 does not require alignment and may be transported without disassembly.



SPECTRAVUE 100 represents the ultimate in simplicity and affordability while producing quality results. The system can be set up and operating in minutes with no alignment or adjustments. All Spectravue projectors are ideal for location photography such as schools, proms, etc.



SPECTRAVUE 200 is similar to the Model 100 but includes a more powerful and adjustable power supply and a 35-80 mm zoom lens which enables the photographer to quickly adjust the background size to the subject. Both SPECTRAVUE 100 and 200 units have a variety of mounting systems available depending on your needs.

* *Scene Machine Digital is a hybrid of the Scene Machine Universal and the Spectravue 300.*

Virtual Backgrounds Projector Comparison Chart

	Scene Machine Universal Precision Camera Rotator Mount Extra	Scene Machine Digital Includes Precision Camera Rotator Mount	Spectravue 300 Includes Precision Camera Rotator Mount	Spectravue 200	Spectravue 200R Includes Precision Camera Rotator Mount	Spectravue 100
Power Supply Flash Output	250 watt/sec.	250 watt/sec.	approx. 150 watt/sec.	approx. 80 watt/sec.	approx. 80 watt/sec.	25 watt/sec.
Voltage Setting	110 or 220V	110 or 220V	110 or 220V	110 or 220V	110 or 220V	110 or 220V
Variable Output (Flash)	1/2 and 1/10 f-stops	1/2 and 1/10 f-stops	1/4, 1/2 and full power	1/4, 1/2 and full power	1/4, 1/2 and full power	No
Variable Output (Modeling Light)	1/2 and 1/10 f-stops	1/2 and 1/10 f-stops	No	No	No	No
Digital Power Readout	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Remote Control	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Can be triggered 4 different ways	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Projection lens	28-105mm zoom	28-105mm zoom	35-80mm zoom	35-80mm zoom	35-80mm zoom	50mm fixed
Camera Format	Digital SLR 35mm SLR Medium & Long Roll Format	Digital SLR 35mm SLR Most Medium Format	Digital SLR 35mm SLR Most Medium Format	Digital SLR 35mm SLR Most Medium Format	Digital SLR 35mm SLR Most Medium Format	Digital SLR 35mm SLR Most Medium Format
Background Slide Format	35mm, Superslide Med. Format	35mm, Superslide, Med. Format	35mm, Superslide	35mm, Superslide	35mm, Superslide	35mm, Superslide
Color Gel Holder	Built - in	Built - in	No	No	No	No
Alignment	Fully Adjustable	Fixed	Fixed	Fixed	Fixed	Fixed
Technical Adjustments	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Portability	Very Good	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
Weight	10 lbs/ Combination Metal & Molded ABS	12 lbs/Metal	12 lbs/Metal	4 lbs/Molded Material	8 lbs/w/ PCR Molded Material	4 lbs/Molded Material
Warranty	12 months	12 months	12 months	12 months	12 months	12 months
Warranty - flash & modeling lights only	6 months	6 months	6 months	6 months	6 months	6 months

Spectravue 200 attaches to the camera lens. Suitable for cameras like Mamiya RB & RZ.
Spectravue 200R is attached to the Precision Camera Rotator and the camera is mounted onto the PCR, therefore no weight is on the camera lens.

The Background Screen

The key factor in background projection screens is size. For basic head and shoulder photography of one or two people, a 4 x 6 foot screen is satisfactory. Naturally, as one gets into a larger screen, one can show more of the body and do group photography while also showing more background around the subject. The minimal size for full length photography is 7 x 8 or 8 x 8 feet. The largest size usually sold is 10 x 12 feet although larger background screens can be made.

There has been considerable technical advancements in background screen manufacturing in the past several years, primarily in special proprietary manufacturing methods. Older screens made it difficult to light the subject without also washing out the background image. Today's screens allow the photographer to use nearly any kind of subject lighting just as long as a light is not placed directly behind or very near the camera/projector. Most photographers do not have to modify their normal studio lighting, unless they want to.

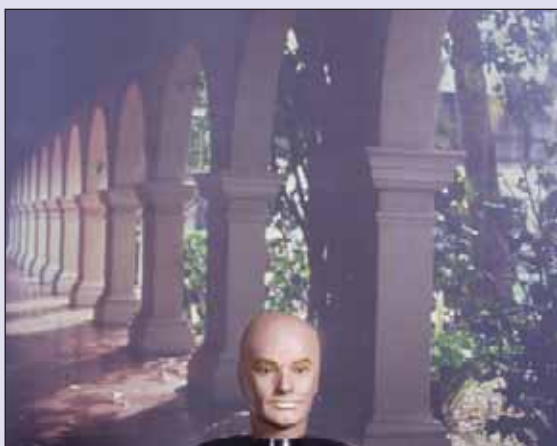
A key component of the background screen is the Blackscreen, a very fine net-like

material that is stretched in front of the reflective screen. The Blackscreen, also known as a light filtering material (LFM), is primarily used to eliminate background washout from studio subject lighting, but it also serves to protect the more delicate reflective surface from greasy inquisitive hands.

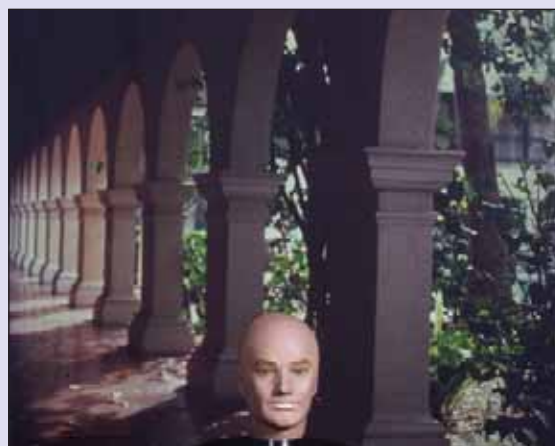
The reflective screen material is also available mounted on special floor panels that permit full length background projection. The image actually shows on the floor around and in front of the subject. When floor panels are used, the photographer usually removes the Blackscreen. Blackscreen cannot be used on the floor. Therefore, to have the same exposure on the floor and the background, the LFM cannot be used when floor panels are used.

In selecting a proper size background, consider what size canvas or paper background you need to do most of your work. If you work well with an 8 x 8 foot canvas background, then most likely you should order an 8 x 8 projection screen. Generally, you will place your subject 3 to 4 feet in front of the background screen.

BACKGROUND WASHOUT



NO WASHOUT



Blackscreen helps to prevent background washout. It enables the photographer to generally use their normal lighting with virtual backgrounds.

SELECTING THE PROPER SIZE BACKGROUND SCREEN

STANDARD SIZES

APPLICATION

4 x 6	Minimum size for head and shoulder photography
5 x 6	Better working size for head and shoulder work
6 x 6	Allows posing of one or two people with room for moderate background area
6 x 8	Full length but primarily only in 5 x 7 vertical format
7 x 8	Full length in 8 x 10 vertical format
8 x 8	Standard size for most applications. Generally, the largest size that is still portable is the 9 x 8.
10 x 8	Allows sufficient room for small groups
10 x 10	Ideal size for larger studio for small groups or when more background is involved
12 x 10	Generally the largest standard size for individuals and groups.

Floor panels are 1 foot wide and 8, 10 or 12 feet long. Most studios use 5 to 8 panels.

Note: All background screens and floor panels can be custom fabricated to your specific size requirements. It is also possible to have specific props covered with projection screen for special effects. For example, large numbers such as those that represent the year of graduation can be covered with reflective material. The photographer can then illuminate the numbers with any color or design imaginable.

The Colorizer

For those who want to add a unique kind of variety to their backgrounds, without getting into a full virtual background system, the new Colorizer from Virtual Backgrounds makes it simple. (See 2-15) There are two components to The Colorizer. First there is the very simple and inexpensive Colorizer projector that attaches directly to the camera lens. Second, there is the special reflective screen material that can be applied to a variety of different surfaces including props. The reflective material is sold by the square foot. The photographer simply inserts a color gel in The Colorizer and the reflective material glows with that color.

If the photographer is using Chromakey

(green or blue screen), the Colorizer can be used to illuminate a large screen behind the subject without having to use any auxiliary lights. Using the Colorizer with Chromakey also eliminates the problem of having colored light spilling around the camera room. It also enables the photographer to switch from green screen to blue screen, or any other color, in a few seconds. The Colorizer also, therefore, eliminates much of the need for purchasing solid color paper backgrounds.

The Colorizer is a product of Virtual Backgrounds. Further information can be found on the company website, www.virtualbackgrounds.net.

Recommended Lighting

Today, the professional photographer can use almost any kind of lighting including soft boxes, parabolic reflectors and many umbrellas. It is also possible to use the new fluorescent lighting systems as well as even natural window light.

What cannot be used is totally uncontrolled lighting such as bare flash tube lighting where light bounces everywhere around the camera room. This is not a problem because very few, if any, studio portrait photographers use uncontrolled light in their camera room. It is also impossible to use virtual backgrounds outdoors in the full daylight, but it can be used in a tent. A light source cannot be placed directly behind the camera. Here again, very few photographers would want to do this. Also, it may be a problem if you try to bounce light off the wall or ceiling behind the photographer.

Separation lighting is highly desirable. This includes what has commonly been called a "hair light" although today, most photographers use a fairly broad overhead light and not just a spot of light on the subject's hair. It can also be helpful in some situations to have some side lighting or back lighting on the subject. The power of the individual lights should be about what the photographer would have used if they did not have a virtual background system. Basically, the lighting equipment you now have and your current lighting methods are very likely to be highly compatible with the virtual background process.

No photographer should ever use lighting as a reason for not utilizing the benefits of virtual backgrounds. We have even had very acceptable results with using nothing more than a single frontal light, positioned several feet above the camera, much as is used by the "big box" studios. While it is highly desirable to move one's lights to help create more natural looking lighting that blends with the background, many highly successful users of virtual backgrounds have their lights literally "nailed down" so that they cannot

be moved or changed in any way. Where you go with your lighting is purely a function of your particular situation. The opportunities are unlimited. Even the new florescent lighting systems from WEB Photo Supply are compatible. **www.webphotosupply.com**

Availability Of Products

Virtual background products, including more than 1,000 stock slides, a full range of lighting equipment, lighting adapters, stands, and a variety of other accessories are available directly from Virtual Backgrounds, except in those countries where Virtual Backgrounds has international dealers.

Training Workshops

In the past, most virtual background users learned to use their system on their own. Today, an enormous amount of assistance is available. With every system sold by Virtual Backgrounds, the photographer is entitled to attend a 2 day workshop without additional cost. The main purpose of the workshop is to broaden the attendees' perspectives in terms of how many different ways the equipment can be used and promoted along with basic technical training in operating the equipment and creating background slides. Also available are training videotapes, CDs, books, and the traditional operating manual.

More Information On Studio Backgrounds And Props

Each year, *Studio Photography & Design* magazine prints an article that summarizes all the major suppliers of studio backgrounds and props. Also, be sure to check the ads. Besides regular display advertising, many suppliers of backgrounds and props run classified ads in the major professional photography magazines.

Once you get really sensitized to the real importance of backgrounds and props, you'll find an enormous variety of opportunities to add to your background and prop repertoire. You'll find your photography taking on a whole new look as you turn the key to more

business success. And, it's fun to be both more creative and different from every other photographer.

The Tools You DON'T Need

More is not necessarily better. Assuming you work in your studio at f-11, why would you want to buy a f 2.8 lens for \$500.00 more than an f-3.5 or f-4.5? Assuming you normally work in the studio within a zoom range of 80 to 120 mm with your digital camera, why would you want to buy a much more expensive, bigger and heavier zoom lens that goes from 35 to 200 mm that was strongly recommended by the sales person?

When it comes to lenses used with virtual backgrounds, the rule is, KIS...Keep It Simple. Whether or not you are using virtual backgrounds, don't buy more than you need to get the job done, but with virtual backgrounds, super big zoom lenses can even present some issues. Avoid very long (and fat) zoom lenses. Also, there are some advantages to lenses that have internal zoom and focus optics as well as through the lens auto-focus.

IN SUMMARY

Perhaps the major problem with virtual backgrounds is that it is so unlimited. The possibilities are infinite. In fact, the only real limitation is the imagination and creativity of the photographer. The virtual background process integrates with just about all of the other components of a portrait studio, regard-

less of its size. Rather than having to make a lot of other special purchases, the virtual background process enables the photographer to make far better use of the components they already have available.

It is critically important that with virtual backgrounds you select your preferred style or styles and then develop your abilities to achieve perfection. Just because the virtual backgrounds process opens so many doors, don't try to race through all of them. It is a ticket to failure. As reflected in their new book, the Simones were so instantly successful with virtual backgrounds because of their established style and they adapted the virtual backgrounds process to not only simplify what they had already been doing but also to expand their creative dimensions to a new level.

The tools are definitely available for you to capitalize on the many benefits that come with paying much more attention to the backgrounds in your everyday photography. Optically based virtual backgrounds will be a key component, but there will be special opportunities where digital green screen will be the best choice. And, of course, there will be situations where going on location is absolutely necessary. However, regardless of the methods you use to implement backgrounds, the general principles presented in this book apply. Most important, as stated previously, in most cases the background should be complementary to the subject. It should not dominate the subject. The background and the subject must be harmonious.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

After reading this far, a very logical question that you must have is this. "Why, if this virtual background process is so great, is not every studio portrait photographer using it?"

Actually, there is a combination of reasons. Maybe the time just wasn't right. Backgrounds were just not seen by photographers as important. Paradigm paralysis has most certainly been involved. Remember the story about the discovery of penicillin? Many scientists saw that mold killed bacteria. They considered mold to be a nuisance because it messed up their experiments. Finally, a man by the name of Alexander Fleming realized that just maybe this strange bacteria killing power of mold could be useful as a medicine. Or to put it another way, it is sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees.

Other reasons include the fact that when the virtual background process is properly used, no one knows it was involved and, therefore, it never gets credit. But, when it is badly used, it is often obvious that some artificial process was used. Therefore, the process only gets recognized when it is badly used and not when it is properly used. In its early days, the virtual background process was much more difficult to use than it is today, however, it has always been possible to create great images with it. Although the process works equally well with digital and film cameras, digital cameras make the process much easier to master because of instant knowledge of results and, therefore, the ability to make instant adjustments.

In addition, some photographers who used the virtual background process and found it to be a huge advantage and major profit maker, kept their use of the process "secret" from their colleagues. Worse yet, because

some highly successful virtual background users wanted to be sure to keep the process for themselves, they would tell their colleagues that the virtual background process didn't work very well. Other photographers were just a little too busy and sometimes even afraid to try it. Remember the first time you wanted to jump off the diving board into a swimming pool but were afraid to do it...at least until you saw enough others doing it and having fun? Remember how much fun it was when you finally did it? Remember the first time that you shot digital instead of film?

Fundamentally, the problem is just a matter of lack of factual information. I've read a number of "photographer's web forums" or "chat rooms." Very often, it is the uninformed leading the uninformed. One person asks, "What do you all think of virtual backgrounds"? A respondent says, "I saw some prints made with virtual backgrounds and I didn't like them." Another person writes, "You're right, I had a friend who had one and his pictures were all out of focus and kind of orange." A third person states, "The big problem is, you have to use special lighting and the lights have to be 90 degrees to the subject." It's all nonsense information being passed around as fact.

The chat room discussions often remind me about another story I used to tell my psychology classes when I introduced the importance of using the scientific method of investigation. The story goes something like this. Back in the middle ages, a group of philosophers were interested in knowing how many teeth there are in a horse's mouth. High level discussions about the issue were held. The discussion went on and on for days. They even initiated an investigation into what previous philosophers had written about the issue but they could find nothing. The

amazing thing is that no one ever went outside and opened a horse's mouth and actually looked in and counted the teeth! The facts about virtual backgrounds are out there to be viewed. One just has to make the effort to learn and even experience the facts and not just trade gossip.

Finally and fundamentally, most photographers just haven't understood or appreciated the power of the background, all kinds of backgrounds, in everyday portrait photography. This is the fundamental reason for writing this book.

Penicillin is not the answer to every disease. Virtual backgrounds are not the "cure-all" for every portrait photographer. It is one mighty powerful tool with a great ROI that must be combined with good portrait technique, good marketing, and generally good business practices.

Now it's time to summarize the ten fundamental "secrets" of virtual backgrounds.

SECRET #1: The virtual background process, while being one of the best kept secrets in professional photography, holds the power to complement and even transform your entire method of studio operation, enabling you to become both infinitely more creative and efficient as a photographer while you also enjoy new opportunities for significantly increased profits by tailoring your product to your customer's wants and needs. Virtual backgrounds will give you that competitive edge that sets you apart from the competition and brings clients to your door and money to your bank account. Virtual backgrounds will set you free, enabling you to rise to a new level, a level that in many ways is superior to working in the real environment. The implementation of virtual backgrounds represents a clear example of primal entrepreneurship... producing a better product with less effort, for less money and with more bottom line profit.

SECRET # 2: Photographers have many different ways to incorporate backgrounds in their portrait photography, including using tangible components such as poly-foam props and sets, real room sets, scenic painted drops, and mini-parks as well as actual location photography. Regardless of how they are created, the proper implementation of appropriate backgrounds in portraiture enhances the results, creating a higher level of customer satisfaction with a resulting increase in revenue. Both non-virtual and virtual backgrounds offer certain advantages and disadvantages. It is up to the photographer to choose the approach, usually a combination of both virtual and non-virtual components, that best serve the specific requirements of the job.

SECRET #3: Photographers today have the choice of both optical and digital methods of creating virtual backgrounds plus the hybrid method that makes use of a combination of both technologies. Each of these methods has its own unique advantages and disadvantages. No one method is the best for all applications. However, generally speaking, the typical portrait photographer is best served by the optical method of creating virtual scenes, with green screen often being the preferred method for some event and fun photography. The most exotic images are often created with manual digital subject cut out. Hybrid approaches can take the final product to an even higher level of artistic perfection. Digital processes such as Photoshop and Painter are completely compatible with using virtual backgrounds.

SECRET #4: Technically speaking, the use of any of the optically based virtual background methods is not difficult, assuming that the user studies the manuals, thoroughly understands the process, and makes the appropriate effort to practice the approach until it becomes second nature. The so-called "problems" that photogra-

phers have attributed to the use of virtual backgrounds are either essentially non-existent or they reside in the user. The user must also be willing to ask for help if he experiences what he thinks is a problem during the learning process. Support services, including training workshops, are available. Therefore, there really are no excuses for failure.

SECRET #5: The artistic components of using virtual backgrounds are limited only by the photographer's imagination and willingness to be creative. Virtual backgrounds open the door to new levels of creativity in every dimension, lighting, posing, even expression. The use of props takes on new meaning, significantly enhancing the total overall effect. The public is demanding more variety in their photographs, ranging from the traditional to contemporary to artsy looks. The public will buy more if they have more to choose from and if they like what they see. The financially successful professional photographer must produce products that the customer will want to buy. But, the photographer must always remember the most fundamental rule...take pictures of people with backgrounds, not pictures of backgrounds with people.

SECRET #6: The world is full of backgrounds for your virtual background system. Your only limits are your imagination and your creative talents for finding appropriate backgrounds, capturing them and then successfully using them in the studio. Capturing backgrounds for yourself is both fun and profitable and easy to do once you know the "tricks," and the associated expenses can be tax deductible. In addition, there is an infinite variety of abstract backgrounds that can easily be created with the computer or through the use of the Designer Disks series. As the benefits of virtual backgrounds become better known, photographers will shift from traditional canvas and polystyrene sets to virtual.

Polystyrene manufacturers will begin to produce products specifically designed to work with virtual backgrounds such as those developed by April Helsel, as shown on pages 9-21 and 9-22.

SECRET #7 Virtual backgrounds are as much a promotional and marketing tool as it is a photography tool. The studio using virtual background technology can make their new and varied styles of studio photography a fundamental part of their entire promotional package. Customers will come to you because of the variety you are able to create through your use of creative background technology. They will come to you because of the backgrounds you offer. It doesn't matter why they come...just so they come. Properly marketed, virtual backgrounds serve as the magnet to draw customers in and they help to sell more and larger images.

SECRET #8 In most every endeavor, mediocrity is the general rule. This makes it relatively easy for the individual who makes just a little extra effort to rise above mediocrity and clearly stand apart from the crowd. The use of virtual backgrounds to create a more exciting array of products can play a major role in making your business model clearly stand out against the competition, whether that competition is the studio down the street or any other business that is vying for the public's money. If you provide the customer with an attractive product that they want, and market it properly, they will come and they will buy and you will reap the profits.

SECRET #9 Virtual backgrounds can be both theme and season related. People generally need a reason to go to a professional photographer. The background can become the basis for encouraging people to have a portrait studio experience. For example, snowy seasonal backgrounds for

Christmas, work related backgrounds for adult portraits, and exotic locations for proms. There is only one reasonable and cost effective way to accomplish this... through the use of virtual background technology. A virtual background system minimizes the need for other expensive alternative backgrounds but it does increase the need to acquire props.

SECRET #10 Virtual backgrounds are a well proven, highly effective studio tool, just like a quality camera. If one photographer can make virtual backgrounds work, then any photographer with similar skills can also make virtual backgrounds work for them. It's just a matter of the photographer developing the appropriate technical and artistic skills. Because there are so many photographers who are "stuck in their ways," virtual backgrounds are a way for more aggressive and innovative photographers to dramatically distinguish themselves from their less flexible competitors. It's a prime tool to grab new business away from sleepy competitors.

Knowledge is power. Knowledge is the key to success. If you know the facts, you can make intelligent and rational decisions. You can get the facts through research.

Considering all the options, virtual backgrounds are fundamental tools for the contemporary studio. Even if you don't have a lot of artistic talent, you can "copy" the poses and the looks of other photographers. If you have questions, get them answered. The beauty of the professional photography industry is that we are in many ways like one big family, willing to help each other become more successful.

I hope this book has helped you understand the enormous power of backgrounds in both the artistic context as well as and in the marketing and promotional contexts. You won't fully appreciate the power of backgrounds, all kinds of backgrounds, until you start to implement some of these ideas and then see yourself actually making more

money and having more fun because of your new approach. There is a special excitement in finding and capturing your own unique backgrounds and then using them in your studio. It's fun. It's creative. It's profitable. You'll just have to try it. Then, very quickly you will wonder how you existed this long without fully implementing the power of backgrounds in your business.

Profiting with background technology is for anyone and everyone who is involved with professional portraiture, whether they work in a big elaborate studio, in their garage, or even if they take their entire system to the client's house. Background technology can be used by the traveling school or church directory photographer, or it can even be used by the chain store photographer. Photographers can choose how simple or complex they want it to be. Backgrounds are as much a part of photography as is a camera. Always remember, every photograph has a background.

One of the most rewarding activities any of us can do in life is to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Promoting the importance of the background has been one of my missions in life. It is something that I want to share with other photographers. Initially, I was motivated by our own success in our studio that stemmed from our emphasis on backgrounds. As a result, I wrote my first book on virtual backgrounds, *Successful Projected Background Photography*. Then many other photographers began reporting their success with virtual backgrounds. It is certainly a rewarding experience when a photographer approaches me and reports that without virtual backgrounds, they would not have been able to continue in business, let alone prosper as they have. It is also rewarding when I see on display national award winning prints that were created with the help of a virtual background system, sometimes using a background slide that I captured.

There is nothing written in this book that is an exaggeration. If anything, I've been

conservative. However, it is critical that the reader understand that backgrounds must be looked at as a comprehensive entity that is related to everything else the photographer does. Backgrounds are not an isolated component of a portrait. The background must smoothly interact with other components forming a total composite image. Once you decide to get serious about backgrounds, it will take a little time for your efforts to become almost "second nature." Remember how painful it was when you first tried to learn how to type? With practice, typing became easier and soon became preferable to writing. Virtual backgrounds are exactly the same.

There are many different levels at which a photographer can use virtual backgrounds. At the department store or school photography level, it isn't any more complicated than dropping in a pre-selected slide and shooting. The independent, more artistically inclined photographer, however, can manipulate the variables to his heart's content...just like when using a camera. Virtual backgrounds can be as simple or as complex as you want it to be. The one thing I can't promise you is individual personal success. Although anyone can buy a camera, not everyone can learn to use it successfully. Anyone can buy a background system but not everyone can learn to use it, at least not without at least a little bit of effort on their part. It isn't automatic and that is good because, therefore, the results achieved are a reflection of the talent and effort of the photographer. Not everyone reads manuals or is willing to learn new things. But, it's doing it the hard way when one does not take advantage of the help that is available.

In the years ahead, most all photographers will get more serious about backgrounds, but right now, while many photographers are quite satisfied with their traditional old way of doing things in the studio, the incorporation of background technology is an especially huge advantage for a background conscious photographer to stand way out from the crowd and, therefore, get maximum attention

and results.

Obviously, this book has placed special emphasis on optically projected virtual backgrounds. It is the most universal tool, but certainly it is not the only tool. Underlying this entire book is the fact that backgrounds of all kinds can play an important role in portraiture. As a professional portrait photographer, you should make use of all types of backgrounds depending on your specific needs for particular clients.

I invite you to visit our web site at **www.virtualbackgrounds.net** and sign up for our free quarterly electronic newsletter, *The Backgrounder*. You can visit our facility in San Marcos, Texas, just a quarter mile off Interstate 35. Feel free to call for a personal consultation. You are also welcome to call or e-mail me directly. My address is henry@virtualbackgrounds.net.

Good luck to you in your adventure into the exciting and profitable world of backgrounds. It is my hope that the concepts presented in this book become a fundamental component of your daily operation and play a major role in your future growth and success in this wonderful profession that we all share. To use an old cliché, "Give backgrounds a chance." Even if my argument for backgrounds is just 25% right, you'll make more money and have more fun doing it. However, do not think for a moment that the implementation of backgrounds, including even the more advanced methods of creating backgrounds, will just automatically generate cash. Creativity, effort and practice along with good marketing are fundamental to achieving success.

I'll conclude with a thought that has been fundamental to my business philosophy.

**"Pessimists see difficulties in
their opportunities.**

**Optimists see opportunity in
their difficulties."**

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts with you.

IN MEMORIAM

DON BLAIR, 1924 – 2004

Professional photography experienced a huge loss with the passing of Don Blair just as this book went to press. Affectionately known as “Big Daddy” and “The Great One,” Don was truly an “icon,” known world wide not only for his fine quality photography but especially for his teaching and his love of photography and photographers. When Don was around there was always a special spark of enthusiasm.

Don became a very special friend to me, especially over the past several years. Handicapped from a broken hip, Don really discovered the concept of virtual backgrounds. Without leaving the studio, he could bring a whole world of backgrounds to his fingertips and combine the backgrounds with his highly creative and exquisite posing, creating images that could not always be done on location. He made virtual backgrounds a key component of his teaching and we at Virtual Backgrounds were proud to sponsor his presentations, including a major presentation for WPPI in 2004. Don made sure an entire chapter in his new book, *The Art of Seeing Light*, was devoted to virtual backgrounds. He allowed me to write an article on his use of virtual backgrounds which was

titled, “An Old Dog Learns New Tricks.” Don may have been 80, but he was younger in spirit than most of us.

Don enthusiastically taught his classes right up to the end. He was always excited about doing something new and different. Just a

few weeks ago, he even went on a “background safari” to his special spots in Salt Lake City with Trevon Baker pushing his wheelchair into places some people would not walk! He never lost his enthusiasm.

Yes, Don will be missed, but there are many thousands of photographers who will prosper every day

by using the methods they learned from Don Blair. Through his books, his videos and his students, many photographers who never knew Don personally will learn his methods. Two of his most famous students are world famous photographers and teachers, Joseph and Louise Simone of Montreal.

It was certainly our pleasure to have known and worked with Don Blair, to have had him as a leading proponent of the virtual backgrounds concept and to have been his friend. We will miss him.



"It's wonderful to say to clients that we can do anything...and mean it! It's so simple to create one's own backgrounds. I have never been stuck for new ideas."
Dean McDonald – England



"Virtual backgrounds has challenged my creativity and built my photographic reputation. Over 90% of my business is done with projected backgrounds. I can truthfully say that I would not still be in business without my Scene Machines."

Rick Harding – Texas

"Dr. Henry Oles is a visionary...one of professional photography's most significant product innovator and marketer. I owe my professional and financial success to his marketing concepts and virtual background system."

Gary Jentoft – Washington

"Virtual backgrounds mean unlimited versatility...unique and exciting ways to enhance your images ten fold."

Terry Deglau – Florida

"What can I say...it's fabulous? It's really fabulous. I really love it. Virtual backgrounds let me be so creative without leaving the studio."

Don Blair - Utah

"There are few things in life that are easy and can rejuvenate you. Virtual backgrounds has done it for my studio, not only for our creativity, but most importantly, for our bottom line."

Doug Gordon - New York

"Integrating virtual backgrounds into our work enabled us to expand our creativity to a world of limitless possibilities. All you need is a little imagination and you will create images beyond any expectation."

Louise and Joseph Simone - Canada



APRIL HEISEL



JOSEPH & LOUISE SIMONE



MARIAN OLES



DON BLAIR



TREVON BAKER



DON BLAIR



MARIAN OLES



RICK HARDING



MARIAN OLES



SHIRLEY ROBINSON



MICHAEL CAMPBELL



JOSEPH & LOUISE SIMONE



DON BLAIR



APRIL HEISEL