

THE PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER'S

PERFECT STORM

**WHAT EVERY STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHER
NEEDS TO KNOW NOT ONLY TO
SURVIVE BUT ALSO GROW BOTTOM LINE
PROFITS IN DIFFICULT TIMES**

It will take you just a short time to read this booklet.
The information here could be lifesaving to your business.
It is very different from what you will normally hear or read elsewhere
and completely relevant to the issues you are facing today.
It's a "wake up" call. Unless you are independently wealthy and
not worried about tomorrow, you need to read this.
You can start putting this information to use right now.
Tomorrow may be too late.

BY HENRY J. OLES



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry J. Oles has forty years of experience in professional photography, having done nearly every kind of photography including portraits, weddings, commercial, schools and events. He was awarded the PPA degree of Photographic Craftsman. He also holds a PhD and was a professor of psychology at two Universities. He wrote the very first article and then the first book on virtual backgrounds. In 2005, he published a highly acclaimed 225 page book titled *Background Power!* He has spoken in nearly every state and many parts of the world and has published numerous articles including more than 100 “*Your Bottom Line*” columns for *The Professional Photographer*.

He was the founder of EPS Photographic which merged with another company he co-founded, Pixel Magic Imaging. He is currently the founder and President of Virtual Backgrounds, a company totally dedicated to the design and manufacture of virtual background systems which sell to photographers world wide. His wife, Marian Oles, operates Photography By Marian Oles.

PREFACE

Right now, professional photography is facing its greatest challenge ever. Photographers around the world are reporting significant drops in sales, often enough to drive them out of business or to make photography part time as they engage in other activities to make enough money to survive.

In many ways, professional photographers are facing a “perfect storm,” a confluence of a variety of major and minor events coming together at one time. The development of copy print stations was the first “hit.” Now, customers today are increasingly rejecting traditional professional photography. Many people never visit a professional studio after they leave their childhood years. Digital technology is enabling amateurs to take their own images and get them enlarged even up to 30 x 40 with stretcher canvas mounting at places like Sam’s Club. The digital revolution has taken away much of the “magic” that once brought people to the professional photographer. Teenagers, “soccer moms” and retirees alike all seem to know Photo Shop! There are more “moonlighters” than ever. I just heard an advertisement for an 8.2 megapixel camera with color printer for just \$259.00. If this isn’t bad enough, professional photographers are themselves contributing to their own decline. This trend must be reversed, at least by those who are serious about their profession and their future.

People today have an enormous variety of ways to spend their discretionary dollars and increasingly, professional photography is far down on the list. Many photographers like to claim that they are hurting simply because the economy is down, but the economy really isn’t down. The problem they see in their bank account is far more serious than that. It’s a problem that reaches to their very core.

What is a photographer to do? Lowering prices is definitely not the answer. You can never win that battle. Even the traditionally low priced department store studios such as Wal-Mart are learning that and finding it necessary to raise prices in an attempt to stay alive. Switching to digital or buying a new softbox for your new studio flash unit isn’t going to turn things around. Becoming a better photographer isn’t a “door buster” either. The public expects every studio photographer to be good and often don’t

recognize minor differences. They may even equate the department store photographer as producing work similar to the work of the independent with a Masters degree, and sometimes they may be correct in that assumption.

Fortunately, there are a number of things that the professional photographer can do that have the power to make a significant difference, but there is one factor that can be especially significant. Traditionally, photographers have spent scant attention to the background in a photograph, especially when working in the studio, but it is the background that can play an extraordinarily important role in professional photography. The background can enable the photographer to produce a whole new variety of images that can help seal contracts, bring in new customers, including those who might never have gone to a studio photographer, and significantly increasing sales averages. Most professional photographers do not understand how important the background can be in helping them produce new and more exciting products that today's consumers will respond to and, therefore, they completely ignore the background as a relevant factor. The background also is an extremely powerful marketing tool.

That is what this little booklet is about, the very real problems we face. The problems will, sooner or later, affect you. I never talk about problems without also suggesting solutions. Perhaps you are already thinking, "Oh no...this book is just that virtual background stuff." Stop! Tell your neurons to settle down. You are going to learn things that are not what you expect...even if you have a closed mind.

The story I will present is fascinating. The facts are powerful and uncontestable. The possibilities are unlimited. It will take you only a short time to read this booklet, but those minutes can be incredibly valuable because they can mean the difference between success and failure for your business. Remember that in the movie, *The Perfect Storm*, they had a number of opportunities to avoid catastrophe. Photographers also have the opportunity to avoid catastrophe.

Read on...and then you decide. It won't take long.

REALITY CHECK QUIZ

Is your business growing like you would hope it would?

Are your profits growing or shrinking?

Are you putting in more and more hours and earning less per hour?

Do you know where this studio industry is heading?

Do your customers often have the same or better cameras than you do?

Do you find yourself competing with your customers?

Are you having trouble getting customers to schedule appointments?

Are you having trouble getting your average sales up?

Are you finding and developing totally new markets?

Are you getting bored with the usual routine in the studio?

Are you effectively using backgrounds in your studio work?

Fortunately, there are ways to effectively grow your business even in tough times. You can keep on fighting using traditional methods just to stay alive, or you can spring forward with confidence and earn more than ever while still having fun doing what you love to do. The choice is yours. In order to have a better tomorrow, you have to have a clear understanding of today, an open minded plan for tomorrow and a willingness to be flexible. Doing nothing is not an option.

WHAT WE WILL DISCUSS...

How you can attract more customers, of all ages, including customers who might never have gone to any professional photographer.

How you can make your business distinctively different from your competition.

How you can clearly separate yourself from the amateurs.

How you can dramatically increase your creativity.

How you can do much more in much less time.

How you can work smarter, not harder.

How virtual backgrounds can save you money and also make you money.

How you can get customers to purchase from more proofs.

How you can get customers to purchase more prints.

How you can get customers to purchase larger prints.

How you can get customers to come back again and again.

How you can increase your creativity and personal satisfaction.

Each of these points is critical to the success of any professional photography business regardless of what kind of work you do.

So, with this “game plan” in place, let’s go.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTORY PERSPECTIVES

You can't keep doing what you have always done and expect a different result. You must do something different!

Like never before, portrait photographers everywhere are financially challenged. Many are even giving up their career in photography because they can't make a profit. Is professional portraiture coming to an end or are there new methods that portrait photographers can develop to bring in new business and bigger dollars?

Most importantly, don't give up a business you love. There are options. It is very important to note that not everyone is sinking. Some portrait studios are thriving with more business than they can handle. Is financial success just a "crap shoot" where winners and losers are chosen by chance alone or are the winners doing some things decidedly different from the losers? When business is down, it is critical that one looks around to analyze exactly what is happening. Your financial success or failure depends on it. There are some things you cannot control, but there are other things that you can and must control. Your future depends on it. Your future is in your hands. You are not helpless. *If you wish to continue in business, doing nothing different is not an option.*

When I write or speak, I am normally very direct and very frank. Sometimes I irritate people, but few things irritate me more than being told what I should say or not say because I might offend someone. I guess that goes back to my career as a university professor where I felt that academic freedom to discuss most anything openly and honestly was critically important to growth in thinking. However, when I was writing my book, ***Background Power!***, friends who read the manuscript along the way advised me to keep my words under control. "Don't be too strong. Don't be negative. Don't criticize anyone. Don't be too enthusiastic about virtual backgrounds." While I don't regret the content of ***Background Power!***, many photographers won't take the time to dig in to a 220-page hardbound book even if it has a lot of pictures. This is the reason I

am writing this short supplement to ***Background Power!*** At times, I might even be a little “politically incorrect” but my primary purpose for writing both books is to share with professional photographers everywhere my perceptions of the plethora of major problems that face our industry and also present proven solutions.

In this booklet, I call it as I see it, based on my dual careers in both photography and psychology. Don’t be offended. If you are looking for ways to turn your business once again into a profit making machine or keep it that way, then take a few minutes to read this booklet and then go on to read ***Background Power!*** There really *is* a road to success in portrait photography in the 21st century. You just have to know how to get on it and what to do once you are on it.

My Challenge To You:

Am I presenting here fact or a bunch of fiction? I will make some rather strong and perhaps unconventional claims. I am going to talk about many things that you don’t see in print or hear spoken from the platform. Things that you can and must do in order to grow your business including how backgrounds, the often forgotten 4th dimension of photography, can be one of the very best investments you can make for your business, no matter how large or small you are. At this point, it is very likely that you are highly skeptical. I challenge you to show me where my thinking is wrong. It is very likely that when you finish this little book, and especially my big book, ***Background Power!*** you’ll be saying, “I wish I had learned this sooner,” and you’ll be wanting to share the ideas presented with family and friends. It’s powerful stuff at a time when photographers need some new options.

However, don’t believe anything I say here just because I say it. Go get the empirical evidence. Do the research yourself. The results will be self evident. You can also do mental analysis...asking yourself, “Does this make good sense? Is it logical?”

If you don’t agree with what I present here, then show me a better plan to grow your business and expand your profits while still having time for other things in life.

Chapter 2

THE DIRTY LITTLE SECRET NO ONE WANTS TO TALK ABOUT

Ask the Professional Photographers of America how things are going for portrait photography and they will probably tell you that things are going just great. They will point to their growing membership count as clear evidence, which is now at an all time high of about 15,000. That's great, but ask most any typical *established* active photographer how things are going and they will probably tell you, if they are being honest, that business is down, perhaps even way down.

A few months ago a Texas woman who had been in business for many years described her situation very clearly, stating "Business sucks." Even the big department store portrait chains are suffering. Clearly, what has worked in the past is not working so well today.

Many photographers blame the downturn on the economy, but that is just an excuse. The US economy is going quite well. It's not the economy. The fact is, people just don't seem to be as interested in professional portraiture as they once were, and therefore, sales are declining for all kinds of photography.

What's my evidence? Look at how few main street studios still exist, not only in the US but even more so in Canada, Europe, Australia, and just about anywhere else. Even though their prices are rock bottom, Wal-Mart and K-Mart type studios are not as busy as they once were. Many photographers are retreating to working out of their homes, mostly to save on expenses. Look at how many studios disappear every year. Try this. Call 20 studios listed in any yellow page section during business hours and see how many of your calls are answered by an answering machine. It will be a sizable percentage, probably 50% or more, and a number of others will have a disconnected phone. It makes you wonder where they have all gone! This tells us a lot. PPA membership rolls may be growing, but that membership growth is mostly made up of part-timers, many of whom are brand new to photography.

Just today I saw another notice for "Studio Liquidation." A 30 year studio goes to auction. If it were a going operation, surely it could have been sold instead of auctioned. I'm sure you've seen these notices time and again. It's kind of like death notices on the obituary page.

While the most recent national PPA convention was packed, we see an erosion of attendance by photographers at some local conventions and training schools. The Rocky Mountain regional convention was nearly canceled because of poor advance registration. It went on but it was a small show. Many trade shows are shrinking. Even many week-long professional schools are showing declining attendance.

To make matters more difficult, there may actually be too many photographers. I recently looked in the yellow pages for a rural tri-community area in Pennsylvania farm country. I counted 68 portrait photographers! That didn't include the discount store studios, nor did it include the traveling school photographers, preschool photographers, and church directory photographers that come to town, grab the business, and leave. It most certainly didn't include a horde of amateurs who take pictures for a little bit of money...or just for fun.

"WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PERFECT STORM?"

It's no one and every one. No one can stop changing purchasing patterns. No one can stop the digital revolution. No one can stop the public from becoming more interested in doing their own photography. These things just happened. We can, however, look for solutions. We can't stop the rain but we can get under an umbrella and then find a way to sell rainwater.

Like many organizations, PPA almost never publishes anything negative about the profession nor do they do much market research. The magazine articles we read and the programs we attend talk in glowing terms of success, even when some of the writers or speakers might be on their own last legs. Those photographers whose business dies along the way are ignored. I take a different approach. Like the old TV series on the LA County Coroner, *Quincy*, I prefer to analyze failures in order to discover what went wrong, and hopefully determine how it can be avoided. If many studios are going out of business but some others are doing great, then is it critical to know what is the difference? If one capitalizes on those characteristics that are common with the winners and avoids those that are typical of the losers, then one is much more likely to be a winner. First, you have to know what makes up those characteristics. What factors make the difference not only between success and failure but also between mediocrity and significant profit?

Far beyond anything we have ever seen in the past, it is becoming very clear

that there will continue to be a horde of new photographers who will dabble in selling their photographic services. Many will come and go quickly while others will join our associations and work their way up the proficiency ladder. This booklet is being written as much for the newcomers as it is for the established photographer. It is just that the established photographer who is perhaps working full time has more at risk than the newbie just jumping in.

OK, I've said it several times now. Business is not good for many established professional photographers today. With that said, now what are the options? The last thing any photographer wants to do is shut the door. So, what do you do?

There are really three fundamental things you must do.

- 1. MAKE A DECISION**
- 2. MAKE A PLAN**
- 3. FOLLOW IT**

The very first thing to do is to make a decision whether or not you wish to continue in this business. Of course, you might say, if there is no hope, then why bother? But there is hope! I've said again and again in my presentations that *for some*, the best days ever in professional photography are now and in the foreseeable future. It is going to require work, often in new directions, to take advantage of the opportunities to be successful.

If you have decided you don't want to invest the effort to go forward, there is no reason for you to read beyond this sentence. For you, it is basically over. Pack it up or hang on as long as you can survive. If you choose to not make a decision at this time, the decision is most likely already made. Your business will slowly falter. However, if you choose to go forward, then it's time to make a plan. In order to make a plan, you have to understand where you are today and how you got there. You need to first set your goals and only then can you make a meaningful plan for reaching those goals. So, let's start by taking a look at what's going on.

THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO DIE

The crew of the Andrea Gail didn't have to die in the storm as depicted in the movie Perfect Storm.

They made a variety of decisions including ignoring warnings and they all were lost.

Chicago Tribune Editorial - May 23, 2006

...“Today, though, photography is an egalitarian art. New generations of technology have largely equalized the ability of professionals and talented amateurs to take compelling pictures – much as the development of fire arms long ago equalized the survival rates of strong and weak soldiers on the battlefield.”

OLD CHINESE PROVERB

“If you don’t change your direction, you will end up exactly where you are headed.”

Chapter 3

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR INDUSTRY?

What's going on? Broadly speaking, the fundamental reason for the changes we are seeing in the photographic industry is change itself. Change is the one thing that is a certainty. It is inevitable. Sometimes change is fast, sometimes it is slower. The aggressive entrepreneur changes with the times, even trying to stay ahead of the times. He is invigorated by change and knows that change can produce new opportunities for profit. Others are consumed by change.

The MSNBC stock market guru, Jim Cramer, tells us, “There is always a bull market somewhere.” It’s true. Actually, even in times of depression or war, someone is making money. You just have to have the right stuff at the right time and know how to market it.

Analysis shows that professional photography really hasn’t changed all that much over the past 50 years except perhaps for the change from black and white to color which occurred back in the 60s and now the change to digital cameras and digital tools like Photo Shop. Oh sure, we see some pretty exciting stuff at print competitions, but professional photographers have been able to survive up to now without major changes. We must always keep in mind that many of the images we see at print competitions are contrived just for competition and are not prints that actually sell to everyday customers. In fact, at the PPA convention I closely examined the Kodak Gallery Award prints on display. Very few of them would be sellable. There were almost no portraits.

Take a realistic look at the work that is being delivered by many photographers to regular customers. Much of it is “blah” and out of touch with today’s public. Much of it is archaic by contemporary standards. Even worse, the fundamental basics of portraiture, the posing, the lighting, the exposure, and the print quality all too often leaves much to be desired, and that’s the polite way of saying it. What amazes me is that the photographers producing the work expect the public to buy their product. Imagine for a moment how successful an orthodontist would be if he didn’t follow the rules and turned the teeth in all different directions? Today, the public is rejecting non-flattering, non-contemporary photography, and thus business for many photographers is sinking.

Major changes are going on right now. First, there was the introduction of copy print stations which suddenly made all of our products easily copyable at tens of thousands of retail stores. Today, many of our customers have their own scanning and printing equipment at home where they have total control with no one watching over them to ask them about copyright infringement. The copyright law has had some effect, but part of that effect is to drive clients away from the professional because they don't want to deal with copyright issues on prints that they feel they own. The attitude is, "It's my print, I paid for it, it's my face, how can you tell me I can't copy my print?" Next, the taste of the public who purchases our products has changed dramatically in the last few years, far more than at any time in the past. Our customers are far more choosy today than what they were just a few years ago in what they expect from a professional photographer. At the same time, they are more accepting of less than perfect results from themselves and their family. If the price is right, they will accept more candid type shots as "good enough." For the most part, the traditional head and shoulder portrait with standard canvas or muslin backgrounds that has been the professional photographer's "bread and butter" is no longer acceptable, because it is seen as too formal and too old fashioned...too out of touch.

"YOUR BOTTOM LINE" COLUMNS STILL AVAILABLE

For ten years, I was the author of a monthly column titled, "Your Bottom Line," appearing in The Professional Photographer magazine. The often controversial column covered a wide variety of issues affecting all studio owners. My predictions are turning out to be surprisingly accurate. You can read the columns by going to www.virtualbackgrounds.net.

What has also *really* changed is the public's propensity to do things themselves. Look at the success of stores like Home Depot and Lowe's that cater to the do-it-yourselfers. Every day people are becoming their own plumbers, electricians, carpenters and more. Now they are becoming their own do-it-yourself photographers too.

Technology now provides the public with the ability to produce their own photographs, according to their own tastes, and they do it for less and are darn proud of what they did. While the public is becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of cameras, the almost unbelievably fast revolution to digital has provided them with cameras that automatically produce excellent results.

They don't even have to look through a viewfinder. They set their camera on "program," compose their shots on the LCD monitor on the back of the camera and take better photographs than ever. The next time you are at a wedding, just look around at how many sophisticated digital cameras are being used by the guests who are right there, taking pictures of everything, and you'll know why professional wedding photographers are starting to cry the blues. Almost gone are the days of 8 x 10 wedding albums for nearly every bride. Amateurs often deliver hundreds of images, on a CD to the bride and groom the day they are married. What do professional wedding photographers do? Today's brides mostly get "snaps" which professionals call photojournalism which opens the door to rank amateurs because that is exactly what they also do. It's hard to tell the difference. Neither the amateur nor the professional pose people. They just shoot. If they are making only small prints, then slightly out of focus images are not noticed. Photo Shop enables the customer to correct all kinds of problems, turning semi-junk into suitable prints.

Photography isn't the only business that is directly affected by changing public taste and advancing technology. It affects most businesses. In fact, until very recently, professional photography was relatively immune to rapidly changing taste. That is how portrait operations were able to stay alive without changing on a regular basis. Think of the number of studios that survived quite well for years and years on one or two traditional canvas backgrounds and no significant changes of any kind. Those days are over.

ASK THE CUSTOMER

Heaven help us! Ask the customer what they prefer!

Most photographers don't ask or at least they don't give the customer a clear choice. They just shoot. Photographers should routinely conduct their own market research. Customers love being asked their opinion. Photographers would learn a great deal if they showed their customers a wide variety of prints and asked them to organize the array of photographs in order of preference. While no two customers will be exactly the same, when customers are given a choice, the choices they make should be a guiding force for the studio owner.

The proof is in the pudding.

Imagine what would happen to a clothing store if it carried primarily clothing styles that were 1 to 5 years old, let alone styles that were 20 to 50 years old, and at the same time offered only minimal variety? That store wouldn't last very long at all, would it? Would you shop there? I don't think so. That is exactly what is happening to many portrait photographers coupled with the customer's new

found ability to do it themselves with their new super duper digital cameras.

In many ways, photographers are facing a “perfect storm.” The first big hit on professional photography was the copy print stations that enabled our customers to copy our work, and thus purchase only the most minimal number of prints. At the same time, the public’s tastes for photography are changing. They are no longer content with mostly traditional photography. The newest and biggest hit of all is the result of the digital revolution. It has enabled the public to have the ability to create their own photographic products to suit their taste using their mostly automatic digital cameras and then take their files to places like Sam’s to print them. It seems that nearly everyone has a shiny new digital camera, and many of them know how to use it and how to get prints. Even camera phones are getting pretty good with built in flash and zoom lens! The digital revolution for the amateur only started a few years ago, and now it seems like everyone has a digital camera and nearly everyone sees themselves as a photographer...a do-it-yourselfer.

It’s not just traditional studio photographers who are feeling the pinch. School photographers are having problems, especially if they produce traditional school day photos. The Photo Marketing Association International tells us that the school photography market is growing much slower than it has in the past in part because of population trends. Population growth is declining. Plus, the percentage of school kids actually buying school photographs is going down. This is because parents can duplicate the prints they purchase and mostly because they can take their own photographs of their kids...as they like them. They no longer have to buy from the professional photographer in order to have photographic memories.

Even the big box studios such as Wal-Mart and K-Mart are now starting to feel the effects of the storm, as well as the largest portrait company in the world, Lifetouch. However, these major operators continue to pick up a sizable chunk of the business from local photographers.

Look at what has happened to Kodak, Fuji and Agfa. Kodak has dismissed tens of thousands of employees. Fuji just announced another round of dismissals. Kodak and Fuji both did and did not see the digital revolution. They saw it coming and in fact played major roles in its development, but the “wave” grew so big and moved so fast that it has washed over them. Few people could have predicted how quickly things changed once it got going. Agfa is gone. Konica Minolta is gone. Bronica is gone. Canon is now a leader among professionals.

As but one personal example, each year we hold a special Christmas function for more than one hundred kids across two weekends in December on board our antique train cars. It is called the North Pole Express. As each child visited

with Santa Claus, we took one or more quality digital photographs using our professional lighting, but the parents were also there with their digital cameras snapping away furiously. We placed all of our photographs on the internet and each parent knew where to look. We even had special very low prices for this event. Last year, we had one customer. One single buyer! This year, we again had the North Pole Express function, but we didn't bother to take photographs. The parents shot up a storm.

Go to Google and type in "cheap wedding photography" and watch what comes up. You'll be surprised.

I talk to many people in the industry who privately are very concerned about the state of the industry and what is to come. Unfortunately, most everyone is afraid to talk about their feelings publicly. That's the problem. Not talking about it doesn't make it go away. *It's not as pretty a picture for professional photography as we have known it.*

I must add that not everyone agrees with me. Just like the camera did not eliminate the hand artist, some leaders feel that digital cameras and other photo technology will create more interest in photography and that will in turn bring more business to the professional who can create a better product and, therefore, portrait photography will not die. This is true, but there would be a whole lot more artists if photography had not been invented. Look in your yellow pages for portrait artists. There aren't many. How many would there be if there were no cameras?

PMA SHRINKS

The Perfect Storm is not just affecting professional photographers. It is affecting every part of the photo world. PMA has been the largest photographic convention and trade show in the United States. This year's PMA was considerably smaller than last years because of the demise of major exhibitors such as Agfa, Konica, Minolta, Bronica and others. In addition, many other companies greatly downsized their exhibits or didn't attend at all. The Kodak exhibit was less than half its normal size. There was vacant exhibit space all over the trade show floor.

INFOTRENDS NEWS RELEASE

PREDICTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY

InFoTrends, one of the world's leading worldwide digital imaging and document solutions research and consulting firm, has just released a report titled, "North American Professional Photography Market." The study is primarily produced for major manufacturers who service the professional market. InFoTrends says there are 131,000 professional photographers in North America. 70% of all professional photos are now taken digitally and within 4 years, 90% will use digital full time.

Quoting Jeff Hays, Group Director at InfoTrends, "The transition to digital is changing the economics and profile of the professional photography industry. Digital technology is lowering the barriers to entry and increasing competition. Successful pro photographers in the future will have more automated workflows from capture through publishing, establish a strong Web presence, and diversify their offerings to include more post capture products and services." Hays also notes that, "Many photographers struggle with pulling all the pieces together to get the most out of digital technology, especially after taking the shot."

Info Trends interviewed 1,750 professional photographers in conducting their research.

THE DECLINE OF THE PRO LAB

Professional labs everywhere are having big problems.

Just when the labs had to heavily invest in new digital equipment, more and more of their pro photographer customers are doing their own printing. Because of the new digital technology, it is no longer necessary for a photographer to use a pro lab, as it once was. Many pro labs have closed. Others are hurting.

To be successful, pro labs will have to offer more and more services that the pro photographer can't do himself.

This is but one more example of how the Perfect Storm is not just affecting professional photographers.

Its effects are industry-wide.

Chapter 4

HOW DO PHOTOGRAPHERS CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR PROBLEM?

Our actions as professional photographers compound our problems. We don't have a clear vision of where we are and where we need to go. Consequently, we may even do the exact opposite of what we should be doing. For example, we are moving away from having a formal photographic studio in a commercial zone. We take more and more of our photographs in public parks, where amateurs can also work. Our studios, if we have such a thing, are increasingly located in converted garages or bedrooms in our private residence. In our attempt to keep things simple, our equipment isn't impressive to our customers like it once was. It looks simple. It is important that our customers feel that they are being photographed by a real professional in a real professional environment.

We seem to be forgetting the fundamental basics of proper posing, lighting and composition and instead opt for the natural unposed look. Many of us choose to hand hold our cameras and shoot away, just like the typical amateur shutterbug. We even brag about how our lights are “nailed down” which means we don't do any creative lighting at all. One setup is supposed to fit all. Our backgrounds are usually nothing more than a couple of traditional painted canvas backgrounds and muslins, possibly complemented by a couple of artificial Roman columns or other similar props.

The digital cameras that we use professionally are often exactly the same cameras that today's amateurs are using. The professional magazines that we read that once upheld high photographic standards for what they printed on the cover, instead often feature amateur type images. Many of the articles and the prints inside our professional magazines have little or nothing to do with the *business* of photography. Many of the photographs are essentially snapshots and the articles in our professional magazines are becoming more like those that you would expect in an amateur photography magazine like *Popular Photography* and all the other amateur photo magazines that we find on the newsstand. If indeed they

are serving the professional, I firmly believe that it is the role of our professional/association magazines to heavily feature the highest quality of saleable work.

Our print judging standards at competitions are seen to be changing and in some respects, going down. Prints submitted include fewer and fewer images that could be sold as portraits and more and more “non-portraits” that often would not sell at all.

Many photographers look sloppy in the way they dress, and they often act loose and unprofessional. Would you feel comfortable if your doctor or dentist looked or behaved the same way? ***I think not!***

We want our cameras to do all the work for us. We want auto focus, auto exposure, auto everything. We think that the letter “P” on the camera mode dial is for “Professional” when in fact the “P” should be replaced by a “D” for “Dummy.” We like extreme depth of field so we don’t have to worry about focus which means just about everything is in focus. We prefer to use the auto-flash on camera. ***If the camera does all this work automatically, why do we need a professional photographer operating it and not just a button pusher?***

RATIONALIZATION

A fundamental principle of Freudian psychology is rationalization, making excuses for one’s performance or lack thereof. Rationalization makes the individual feel better about themselves, but in reality, it does nothing to help solve the fundamental problem. In fact, it even covers up the problem so that no action is taken because the individual has all these excuses. If you are looking for a solution, stop rationalizing. Solve the problem.

We don’t want to buy new props because they are too expensive and take up too much space. We don’t want to get new backgrounds because we already have some or because we go outside and use what’s there. We don’t want to learn about new opportunities because we don’t have time nor do we have time for business operation courses. We don’t want to get creative with our lighting because it is too much trouble, and we don’t have time to adjust the lights for each subject. We don’t take time to seriously pose the body and all its parts because it isn’t “natural” and it also takes too much time and effort.

Then when it comes to making our prints, how often have you seen professional photographers standing shoulder to shoulder with amateurs at kiosks in Wal-Mart or Sam’s Wholesale Club printing their photographs while professional color labs

are suffering or closing? If everyone knows that a 4 x 6 print costs both the professional and the amateur 12 cents at Sam's, how can the professional claim their prints are so much better that they can sell them for \$5 or \$10 or even \$20 each? Then we tell our customers that we own the copyright and if they should dare copy one of our 12-cent prints, we'll put the law on them!

Instead of making proof prints, we place all of our images on the web so the customer can make their purchase decisions in the convenience of their own home. Even though we have been told many times that sales for most kinds of portraiture are dramatically higher when images are sold by competent sales people using digital projectors, we use the web because it is so simple.

When many photographers today do weddings, they emphasize a photo journalistic approach and try to avoid anything that takes any real effort like formally posed photographs or creatively posed photographs such as those promoted by Doug Gordon. We make sure we get out of the wedding reception long before the bride cuts the cake or throws the bouquet. Many wedding photographers even brag about not doing any posed portraits at a wedding and try to use that as a selling feature for their services. Most photographers don't even offer formal portraits of the bride taken before the wedding even though this is the most important day of her life, and she will probably be wearing the most expensive dress she will ever buy.

Pre-bridal formals were once significant cash generators and could only be well done in a properly equipped studio by a professional photographer. By operating this way, we have basically swung open the doors for the amateurs to do weddings. Weddings were once a pillar of cash for many studios. Attend a wedding today and notice how many LCD screens are lit up behind cameras held by so many of the guests. This is having a major effect on wedding album sales. A key British photographer reports that he has only one wedding booked this year, whereas in years past, he would have had at least 30 booked with an average ticket price of about \$5000.00. In his town, high school and college age kids are shooting weddings for a fraction of his price and delivering only a CD of all the images to the bride and groom. They promise at least 500 shots. What they offer is becoming "good enough." Good enough are words that we don't want to hear from our customers and we most certainly should not apply good enough to our own work. American photographers are beginning to report the same thing.

**PESSIMISTS INVENT PROBLEMS
OPTIMISTS INVENT SOLUTIONS**

DO PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE THEIR PRIORITIES REVERSED?

"How To" classes in Adobe Photo Shop and Corel Painter and how to print your own digital images are the hot items today in professional photography. Classes that purport to teach these methods are jammed with students while classes that emphasize basic and advanced methods of professional photography including lighting, and posing and courses that emphasize marketing and business management are often low in attendance. Isn't this kind of backwards?

A few years ago, photographers did not want to bother doing their own retouching or printing because their time was far more valuable if it was used in the studio capturing images and doing a better job of marketing. Now, photographers sit behind the computer and struggle for endless hours manipulating images and inserting backgrounds. Then they print their own work which often doesn't begin to measure up to the quality a professional lab could produce. Why are we doing this? Is it just to save money? My dad use to say, "Don't be penny wise and dollar foolish." While photographers spend enormous amounts of time trying to produce their own images, our former partners, the pro labs, are starving for work.

Maybe it's time to see if we have our priorities backwards. A professional photographer is doing professional photography when he or she is capturing images. But now, photographers spend a huge amount of time producing the final product which involves work that can be done far more efficiently by a professional lab and at a far lower cost if one considers all the hours that are being invested. Using Photo Shop and printing prints is not professional photography. In most cases, it's technician work.

The labs have been at fault themselves by not effectively promoting the digital services they can provide to free up the photographer. And, the labs have been charging too much for some digital services, causing photographers to try to do it on their own.

So, what are you? Are you a professional photographer or are you a lab tech or are you a computer jockey? Sooner or later you are going to have to decide where your time is best spent.

There are exceptions. If your digital work is highly creative and can only be done by you, then it's a different story. And, some studios may have a market for one hour or one day delivery of finished product. But for most studios, having the professional lab produce your work is the best choice.

I use the old expression, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind.” Because the public sees less and less quality professional photography on display and sees more and more amateur candid photographs, they start to see candid photos as acceptable, even for enlargements. Professional photographers react by moving more and more to a photojournalistic style which is similar in so many ways to amateur type work. When the amateur just happens to catch a really good shot, they can have enlargements made at Wal-Mart for ridiculously low cost and do not have to worry about copyright because they, as the photographer, own the copyright.

Always remember that the major difference between the amateur and the professional is the number of shots they have to take to get a good one.

That is, if the amateur takes enough shots, and digital makes this both easy and essentially free, they will sooner or later get some great ones.

Our professional organizations are not helping either. When was the last time you saw any promotion of professional portraiture sponsored by our organizations? There isn't much. Now with both Kodak and Fuji in trouble, we can't expect much promotional support from them. Other than our ads in the yellow pages, when was the last time you heard or saw a commercial for professional photography? When was the last time you heard a photographer on a talk radio show discussing the profession? Can you remember seeing a TV commercial on professional portraiture? How often do our associations conduct market research? How often do they sponsor business programs for photographers?

When was the last time you saw a platform program or pro magazine article on backgrounds and how to use backgrounds to sell foregrounds? One well known photography school that offers no formal training on backgrounds for their students has repeatedly turned down offers to present a totally sponsored short presentation for their students on backgrounds. They say that they are already too busy and, therefore, don't have time even for a hour or two evening seminar. They just don't understand. The virtual background process has been the subject of “old wives tales” and a general lack of understanding when in fact, reality is as simple as testing the concept. Perhaps the situation is starting to change. Sam Pelaia, Director of the Triangle Institute, scheduled Trevon Baker to conduct a week-long class on backgrounds. Numerous program directors are scheduling programs on backgrounds in general and virtual backgrounds in particular. In the years ahead, I predict you will be hearing much more about the role of the background in producing quality portraits.

Could it be that our organizations spend too much time on ribbons and social activities and not enough time on the real everyday problems that face all photographers? The social side of our associations is indeed important and I certainly value it, but at what cost? Print judging is also extremely valuable, but more and more prints have nothing to do with everyday work that is being produced for sale.

THE "JPEG PHOTOGRAPHERS"

What is a JPEG Photographer? It is one who shoots 300 pictures of a subject, then, picks out the best 10 and then works like heck with Photo Shop and other digital tools to make one print look pretty good! Another name for a JPEG photographer is "shutterbug".

Even our most sacred new magical tool, Photo Shop, has become a household commodity to the point where photographers experience having their customers suggest that they might want to try using it because they like it so much. Who would have believed just a few short years ago that things would have changed this much, this fast? This perfect storm begins to explain why business is going down for those who are not prepared to weather the storm. It is indeed a tumultuous and dangerous time for professional photography. And we all know what happened to the fishermen in the perfect storm. They could have avoided catastrophe.

And as a result, for these reasons and many more, there really is a blur between the amateur and the professional.

The professional is becoming more amateur-like while the amateur is becoming more professional.

Somehow, we seem puzzled by our drop in business. Duh!

MAKING AMATEUR DIGITAL CAMERAS MORE PROFESSIONAL

ABC News recently reported that digital camera manufacturers are now working to add many new features to their cameras so amateur users can capture better and more professional-looking images. Among the new features are special soft focus functions and even blemish removers! Now that most amateurs have digital cameras, the big push is to offer them opportunities to purchase new more sophisticated models.

I fully agree. This is a truck load of bad news. More than likely, you have already thought about all of this yourself, but it is more stunning when you see someone else daring to mention it in print or on the platform. It's almost sacrilegious. Sometimes the truth hurts but laying it all out on the table is the best way to move forward.

PS: If the perfect storm hasn't reached you yet, take note, it will.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH PHOTOJOURNALISM?

It's a two edged sword. Much depends on how extensively it is used and in what arena. The primary problem with photojournalism is that it comes closest to amateur candids. Professional photography, as we have known it, requires a thorough knowledge of lighting, posing, and capturing the best possible expression and integrating it all together. Photographers spend years learning how to be true professional photographers. The results are of such a nature that clients purchase enlargements for long term display.

Photojournalism, such as for weddings, is certainly a method that adds new variety to a wedding album. It is a mistake to place too much emphasis on candids, as they were once called, at the expense of delivering professional quality images that the amateur cannot also produce. The same is true for "candid" portraits. If we insist on promoting products that are easily copied by amateurs, we will soon be overrun by amateurs who can work for infinitely less money. The true artist, and some photojournalistic photographers are true artists, continually works to distinguish themselves from the crowd, producing products of true lasting value. Plain candids are momentary.

LOSS OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL PHOTOGRAPHER

Who is going to suffer the most in this storm? It won't be the high end photographer. They will continue to do pretty well. The low end and part time photographer will have a whole lot more competition but they will battle it out. It is the middle level photographer trying to make a living full time or near full time in photography who is going to get walloped. That's where the real problem is going to be. While all photographers have to strive to upgrade their offerings, the middle and lower end photographers are most in jeopardy.

ARE WE FIDDLING AROUND?

Most everyone has heard the story of Roman Emperor Nero who supposedly "fiddled around" while Rome was burning. Well, he wasn't really playing a fiddle which wasn't invented for more than a thousand years. He was actually not taking the problems that Rome was having seriously and as a result, the country was dying.

Can we say the same thing about professional photography? I think the answer is yes. We are spending a huge amount of our time and energy on things that won't make hardly any difference in the long term while we spend very little time on the very real problems that are plaguing us today...what I call The Perfect Storm.

Yes, there is a lot of energy at conventions, people are dashing to and fro, and there is a lot of politics going on as various people vie for positions of authority. But, it will all signify nothing, as Shakespeare once said, if much of our industry disappears.

Perhaps we see the same problem in Washington DC!

KODAK SELLS ALBUMS AND FRAMES

How does your former customer, "Mary Smith" get her wedding images and now her children's images into albums and frames? Kodak will do it for her via the internet. Check out the Kodak Easyshare web site. Kodak will print the images and even create book bound type albums. A 20 x 30 enlargement is just \$22.99. Actually Kodak is just one of many, many companies that provide these services.

Your customers have a "zillion" options available to them, nearly all of which leave you, the professional photographer, out of the picture...unless you offer them highly attractive options they cannot get anywhere else.

Chapter 5

THE NEWS ISN'T ALL BAD!

Is there any good news? Absolutely there is! I fundamentally believe that the 21st century brings photographers unprecedented opportunity. One just has to be clever in how one operates a business. One has to be a step or more ahead of our customers and one has to stay ahead. One has much more to learn than ever before.

The real losers are those who treat their business as business as usual. There are a growing number of winners out there, real profit makers, but many of them are marching to a different tune, one that is more in tune with the public they serve. It's very interesting that many of these winners are not even known to the losers. It's almost like photographers live in two different worlds. I've seen this many times. Many of the really financially successful photographers don't usually interact with the less successful or with the "artsy" group. The really successful are too busy making money. They don't have time to bother with non-profit making activities.

The 2006 Professional Photographers of America (PPA) national convention in Austin, Texas drew nearly 7,000 attendees. There was an extremely high level of enthusiasm present coupled with a thirst for learning. Many attendees were newbies to the business. Nearly everyone has gone to digital. Many have never used film, at least not professionally. The WPPI conventions reflect the same fervor. Everyone is looking for a way to "strike-it-rich" in photography. While this new level of enthusiasm is exciting, it also means more competition is getting armed with new methods.

There are tons of new photographers who are working in market segments that traditional photographers have ignored. For example, there are many photographers who concentrate on day care centers and preschools and others who specialize in sports team photography and event photography. Both are doing very well and are oblivious to problems in the more traditional market segments. Many of these photographers belong to franchise groups and produce some very innovative photography that sells quite well. There are many profitable niches out there including many that no one is yet developing, but the majority of all traditional photographers fight over the same old traditional markets. For example, the baby boomers are now hitting 60. Who is concentrating on ways to attract them to professional photography? Almost no one.

Plus, the big operators are vulnerable because they are limited by their size and conservative thinking. For them it is extremely difficult to do something different, especially if it involves any level of creativity on the part of the photographers. By their very nature, they have to be pretty much “plug and play” operations. This is where the independent photographer can run circles around them. Many of the big operators are still film based.

One of the very best things that our associations have done is establish an extensive short term educational system through their schools and convention programs and even the programs presented at monthly guild meetings. The opportunity to learn is certainly available to every photographer. However, all too often we attend classes, get excited, and then go back to our everyday operation and do the same old things we have always done. The big exception has been our learning how to use digital cameras, Photo Shop and similar tools, but again, our customers are right behind us. On the other hand, many classes that we take have little or nothing to do with making money!

There is definitely a future for professional photography, but if we expect to be part of that future, it is important to make a plan. If it is necessary to get from here to there, then look for the most sensible way to get there. If the road is blocked, look for alternate routes. Always be looking for an “angle.” an innovative way to make the journey no matter what. We continually have to seek out new markets, new opportunities that have not yet been recognized by the masses. Some of these are as simple as recognizing the need to produce quality images of products going up for sale on eBay and, therefore, there is a new market for this service. Others are much more complex.

MOUSETRAPS

Build a better mousetrap and you will catch more mice.

Technology is bringing us a ton of new opportunities but we have to think “outside the box.” Too many photographers continue going after the same old stuff and don’t take the time to discover and develop new opportunities. The opportunities are there that can enable you to rise to new heights if you have confidence in yourself and in the future.

The other good news for aggressive photographers who are seeking to adapt to changing times and conditions is that if the majority of photographers are weighed down with uncertainty and old methods of operation, then it is not nearly as hard to stand out and be recognized as being really exceptional and quickly rise to the top. Because so many of your competitors will be slow to adapt, you

may be able to keep your new-found “gold mine” all to yourself for longer than you think. Rick Harding, the well known San Antonio photographer who has been very highly successful in his prom photography using his 8 Scene Machine virtual background systems, used to worry about his competition copying his methods and taking some of his business. He has since stopped worrying. Harding does much more than proms. He is also a very successful school and senior photographer. He uses virtual backgrounds for about 90% of his work.

Basically, we as professional photographers have the exact same three problems every business person has. The economy is growing. The population is growing. People have more disposable income than ever before. They are also becoming more sensitive to family history, and therefore, they are more interested in photographs. People are involved in more activities than ever. All this spells more photography opportunities for the professional including a huge market for well done family and individual wall portraits.

First, how do we get more potential customers to take notice and actually come into our studio to be photographed?

Second, what can we do in the process of photographing customers that can cause them to purchase significantly more photographs including wall enlargements?

Third, what can we do to get people to come back again and again?

Every business owner needs to get people in the door, to buy more when they are there, and hopefully get them to come back again and again. The opportunities are just sitting there, waiting for the right person to pick them up. It's like fishing. There are plenty of fish, including big ones, in the lake. Just because poorly performing fishermen aren't catching much doesn't mean the fish aren't there! You just have to be smart enough to lure and catch them.

QUOTING WILL ROGERS:

**"If you find yourself in a hole,
the first thing to do is stop digging."**

SEARS SELLS ALL THE TOOLS BUT WE STILL GO TO MECHANICS

Although you can buy many tools at Sears to service an automobile, most of us still take our cars to mechanics for service. This is true, but we have to look at this in greater depth. Automobiles have been designed, especially over the last dozen years, where they almost have to be serviced by highly trained master mechanics who have advanced computer systems to check out components most people don't even know exist.

What's happened to the local mechanic in the garage behind the local filling station? He's almost completely gone. He didn't have the sophistication or the equipment to perform the diagnostics modern cars demand. His "Perfect Storm" has basically annulated him. But, a whole lot of money is still being made on automobile service but it is being made by specialized mechanics with specialized tools and equipment, and they can charge a handsome fee just to plug your engine in to their computer so they can figure out what's going on.

Photographers can learn a great deal from what has already happened to the corner mechanic. If he stayed up with technology and methods, he's probably doing quite well. If he tried to survive doing business as usual, he is probably out of business.

BOTTOM FEEDERS

At the PPOC show in Halifax, I heard rather disparaging talk about "bottom feeders." I even had to ask how they defined a bottom feeder? Basically, it's a photographer who works very hard doing "grunt work" such as school photography instead of creating artistic impressions. I find their disdain for the bottom feeders to be rather interesting since my experience has been that many bottom feeders can buy many of the top feeders! Go figure!

Chapter 6

ANALYZING THE PERFECT STORM SITUATION

There is little doubt that the perfect storm is not only brewing but it is now surging upon us. From looking at their often empty camera room or their declining sales average, most everyone who reads this already knows. The winds are blowing, the rain is falling, and we wonder how bad the storm will become. *But this storm is also different in that it will never go away.* Digital cameras will never go away. The public’s “do-it-yourself” attitude is, if anything, intensifying. Roger McManus has written one of many publications that instruct the amateur on how to save money replacing the professional photographer. His electronic publication is titled, *EZ Wedding Photography* and costs less than \$40.00.

Where are all these new photographers coming from? It’s everywhere. Many of the more serious ones are women. It wasn’t that many years ago that it was rare to see a woman photographer, but today, more than half of our profession are women, working full and part time. Many others are coming from the ranks of those who were pushed out of their previous careers because of company downsizing. Then there is the usual flock of young people who normally would seek a career in photography. The biggest factor is the general population now armed with their new digital cameras. They are able to take better photographs than ever before and now see their work as good enough to fulfill their photographic needs including those which would have been done by a professional photographer. It wasn’t that long ago that the yearly school photo was a family’s best photograph of their child. Not anymore.

So, what does one do? As I said previously, one answer is to flee photography totally and start off in a new business or go to work for someone else. That might be the right answer if this storm was known to be a “Category 5.” One thing we do know is that it isn’t a Cat 5. It’s a Cat 1 or Cat 2, and maybe a Cat 3. Certainly it can have devastating results, especially if it lasts forever and if you are not prepared to deal with it, but it isn’t total destruction. It isn’t “the end.” Therefore, running away is not the answer for most photographers who wish to continue in their profession, one way or another.

A second response is to hunker down and wait and see what happens. The problem is, this storm is not going to pass. This storm has been brewing for

a long time and it will be the way it is now and forever. There is no reason to believe it will ever be any other way. Hunkering down is not a solution. It only prolongs the inevitable.

The third option is to establish methods to effectively deal with the storm. We need to adapt and go forward with a new vision. Always keep in mind that even in a catastrophe, someone makes money.

THE STORM AFFECTS EVERYONE

There is no area of professional photography that is immune to the new trends. Some professionals think that our associations are going to save them. However, what they haven't thought about is that the changes that we are seeing in the industry are actually benefiting our association, at least at this point. The influx of the amateurs is actually increasing their membership numbers. PPA and WPPI are both bragging about their membership growth which means financial strength for the association.

One of the factors that is helping to push the public away from the professional photographer is copyright. Professional photographers went “bonkers” when Kodak first put out their Copy Print Station and the public started to copy their professionally made prints. The professional photographer’s response was to push for stronger copyright laws and to force vendors to make foreboding threats to anyone who dared to even think about copying the photographs of themselves and their families. Professional photographers, just like most everyone else, have always been copyright infringers when it came to music and video, but they became incensed when the public wanted to copy prints that they had produced. That was supposed to be different!

ARE WE “BLOWING AWAY” OPPORTUNITIES?

Definitely yes! Professional photographers create products that have extremely wide ranging appeal and immeasurable value. Our services should be sought after by just about every household. And yet, so many people go without professional photography for years and years. It all boils down to the nature of the product we create and how we market it. If we produce a style of product that has great appeal to the public, and if we market it right, sales should be automatic. It is important that we start seriously thinking outside the box.

While some photographers may think they are winning on the copyright issue, they are actually losing in the long term. I wrote a “Your Bottom Line” column for the Professional Photographer magazine 15 years ago titled, “The Copyright Boomerang.” in which I predicted that the public would respond negatively to professional photographers pushing copyright protection. It’s happening right now. Look at it from the customer’s point of view. They paid for the photograph. It’s their face. Why can’t they make a copy for their own use? So, they look at the alternative. When an amateur captures his own images, he owns the copyright. After all, the copyright act protects EVERY creator and that includes the amateur. There is no line between the professional and the amateur. Now, even some professional studios are giving the customer the right to duplicate their portraits.

The professional photographer may have won the copyright battle but they are losing in the copyright war if one takes a long term perspective. The copyright issue is actually just one more component of the *Perfect Storm*. It is a “no win” situation.

In a storm, especially a hurricane, there are bands of wind and heavy rain that affect different people in different ways. Our storm analogy works very well for what’s happening in professional photography.

Here is a summary of the latest events that are component parts of the quickly broadening and intensifying *Perfect Storm* and how they are affecting the different branches of professional photography.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHY: Not long ago, if a high school senior wanted to be in the high school yearbook, and just about every senior did, they absolutely positively had to go to the contract-holding senior photographer. That photographer made sure that everyone he photographed was photographed exactly the same with a very standard look. This had been the standard for generations. Then non-contract photographers fought for and often got the rights to submit senior photographs for the yearbook. That broke the tradition. Today, a growing number of schools are getting out of the picture business all together and allowing the students to take their own pictures including their own senior photograph for the yearbook. The yearbook publishes anything as long as it is reasonably tasteful. Many students and their parents say it’s fun and more creative to do their own senior photographs, and it certainly saves them a lot of money compared with going to a professional photographer. And once again we hear the words, “It is good enough.” In addition, a growing number of seniors don’t seem to care about the yearbook or having their senior photograph. If these trends continue, it will shut down a sizable portion of the senior trade for professional photographers. A trend like this can spread across the country very

quickly. The hurricane warning flags are up for senior photographers.

WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY: When I started writing *Perfect Storm*, it was based on my contacts with photographers in Europe, Australia and elsewhere, I was predicting that wedding photography was going to be seriously affected. Now, I am finding a large number of wedding photographers who report that the problem is already becoming a serious issue here in the US. A rapidly increasing number of weddings are being shot totally by the amateur photographer guests and the files are given to the bride. What is really growing rapidly is the number of weddings being shot by some really aggressive youngsters who brag about taking thousands of images and then presenting them all to the bride on a disk.

There are no prints and no album. Some of these new age photographers may create a slide show of all the images. This is a major threat for wedding photographers, album manufacturers, and others. Here again, brides report that a thousand images or more on a disk is “good enough.” In fact, a growing number of brides see a disk as the more trendy way compared with an “old fashioned album.” In addition, the vast majority of all wedding photographers don’t bother with doing formal bridal studio photographs before the wedding, so that business is lost. It is, however, still out there to be cultivated by those who wish to go after it.

OUR FIRST ALL DIGITAL DVD WEDDING

A 30 plus year customer of Marian Oles Photography called a few days ago to talk about photography for their son’s wedding. She said, “Can you just take a variety of pictures and put them on a DVD. The kids don’t really have any interest in an album.” Money was not a factor in this decision. They just didn’t want an album.

CHURCH DIRECTORY PHOTOGRAPHY: It’s been reported from several sources that church directory photography is starting to be affected in ways that were pretty much unexpected. A growing number of smaller churches are starting to create their own directories. Amateur photographers within the congregation set up to take all of the photographs of the church members. It is usually a quickie point and shoot series of shots using the on-camera flash, but with digital, they can shoot until they feel that they have something that will work. There is usually no attempt to sell additional prints. The sole purpose is to get a photo of the church members so it can be published in the directory. The digital files of all the families are handled by a computer wiz in the congregation and turned into a CD. Then a church member handy with computers lays the book out in digital form. The files are then taken to places like Kinko’s to make color copies. The resulting book may not look like a professionally done book, but it is “good enough.” It is, in fact done as they want it and not as dictated

by the normal church directory company. In addition, the congregation didn't have to worry about being pressured to buy extra prints, and they are proud to have made it an in-house church project. It seems that everyone besides the traditional church directory photographer is happy with this approach. Unless they find ways to counter this movement, if this trend continues, it will mean serious problems for the major church directory companies such as Olan Mills and Lifetouch. In order to survive, a new product look is going to have to be created, one that is especially attractive to the congregation and more difficult for the amateurs to produce. The same-old same-old techniques of the past are not going to continue to work.

Another new alternative is for the church to publish their directory on the internet. Then there is no cost for printing anything, and the directory can be frequently updated without additional cost by the designated church photographer. With the majority of the population now being internet savvy, this may well be the church directory of the future...even the near future. This concept really leaves the professional photographer out in the cold.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOOKING PROFESSIONAL

At a recent wedding, I was using my old Hasselblad for some shots instead of my 10D. A young girl was watching me work and finally walked up to me and asked, "Sir, what kind of camera is that?" I said, "It's a professional camera." She was obviously impressed. I doubt very much if she would have made a comment if I were using a 35 mm slr type digital camera. When people are paying for a professional, they expect their professional to look like a professional and to use professional looking equipment. They associate these factors with professionalism and a better product. Too often we look just like another amateur.

DAY CARE PHOTOGRAPHY: A growing amount of day care photography is being done by parents who choose to take all the photographs themselves, making prints at stores like Wal-Mart or turning the files over to each child's parents to make their own prints and enlargements as they see fit. They do this to save money and because they simply enjoy doing photography. Plus, they take the photographs as they want them taken when they want them and they consider the results "good enough."

There are now several national franchise groups that specialize in day care photography. By banding together through a franchise, these groups are able to acquire more contracts. They are also developing new styles of photography that

cannot be readily done by the amateurs. The franchise day care photographers are mostly made up of women who had no previous experience or training in professional photography, but who were looking for a way to be independent and work part time. The franchise management team provides the franchisees with training and also assistance with marketing.

SCHOOL PHOTOGRAPHY: The Photo Marketing Association reports that for a number of years, school photographers have been showing a slow but progressive decline in sales. That decline may now be accelerating. At one time, the yearly school photo was the only decent photo many families had of their child for the year. So, it was natural for them to buy the “package” to share images with other members of the family. Today, everyone has their own cameras. Digital cameras have become so cheap that economically- challenged families also have their own digital cameras. There no longer is anything really special about the yearly school photograph. In some countries, school photography is done once every several years or not at all. While there is a traditional “look” to the typical school photograph that probably must be maintained for tradition, more and more school photographers are adding contemporary looks as well to provide the parents with more reasons to purchase. To be successful in school photography today and tomorrow, professional photographers must come up with new looks in addition to the traditional look. Providing variety and choice is critical.

SEARS PORTRAIT STUDIOS SUCCESSFULLY FIGHT THE STORM

CPI Corp, (Sears Portrait Studios) has just announced that their net income for the first quarter of 2006 increased to 1.8 million from a net loss of \$2.1 million in 2005. Net sales increased \$3.9 million to \$59.7 million from the \$55.8 million reported in the first quarter of 2005. They had a 41% increase in average sale per customer which offset a 24% decrease in customer sittings. The 24% decrease in sittings is reflective of the Perfect Storm. The 41% increase in sales averages came from going digital in late 2005 which enabled them to sell a wide variety of new products and added value up sell. Basically, sittings were way down, but new methods and products enabled the company to significantly grow profits. It can be done and Sears Portraits is a perfect example.

CHILDREN’S PHOTOGRAPHY: The major photographers of children, Wal-Mart Portrait Studios, Olan Mills, The Picture People, and others don’t

share their sales figures but there is consistent reports that a decline is taking place. In fact, more than one of these major companies are reported to be in some economic trouble. PCA, the concessionaire that does the Wal-Mart Portrait Studios, has raised their base advertised package price from a low of \$4.88 to \$8.98. They were obviously losing money on their promotional special and too often this was all the customer ordered. At the higher price, they at least have more base revenue. Sears Portrait Studios, operated by CPI corporation of St. Louis, recently converted the entire chain of more than 2,000 studios to digital and has developed a wide variety of new products based on digital technology. The largest chain of free standing shopping mall studios for children is The Picture People. They are still film based and relatively traditional in the product they produce, but they deliver the finished product in an hour or less. The picture people are currently switching to digital. To stay alive and well in children's portraiture, it is becoming more and more critical that the photographers offer new concepts.

COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY: Commercial photographers are not immune to the *Perfect Storm*. Their business is being chipped away in chunks. For example, not long ago, realtors hired a photographer to photograph all the properties they were listing. Not any more. Nearly all realtor photographs are taken by the realtor with their little digital camera. That business is just about totally gone. Insurance agents and adjustors carry their own digital cameras with them. Tons of commercial photography that use to be done by a professional is now being done by amateurs. Only the higher and highest levels of commercial photography is going to the commercial photographer. Here again, "good enough" leaves out the professional photographer.

COLOR LABS NOW STARTING TO COMPETE WITH THEIR OWN CUSTOMERS: PMA reported in a recent article that a growing number of pro- labs are now also actively seeking photography contracts. The lab business has deteriorated to the point where the lab feels it must get directly involved in photographing people, usually school children, to help feed the lab. In the business world, this is called vertical integration. They shoot the photographs and they produce them. While the labs may try to avoid directly competing with their own customers, such competition is inevitable. The attitude is, "if my lab customers aren't producing enough to keep the lab going, then we are just going to have to do it ourselves." The lab business, both professional and amateur, has been decimated by digital. However, some labs are starting to work with their customers hand in hand in developing promotions and training programs that will benefit both the photographer and the lab.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS COMING

The “bomb shells” haven’t stopped falling yet. Far from it. I know of other changes that are coming to the industry including how photographs are marketed that will continue to shake the professional photographer. Confidentiality agreements prevent me from discussing them but they are real and they will continue to bump up the strength of *The Perfect Storm*.

There are those who tell me, “I like exactly what I do and I am not going to change a thing.” In America, it is our right to operate our business for the most part exactly as we please even if it means destroying it. Some of those who won’t alter their methods will succeed but many others will not. Actual success or failure depends on many factors. Again, it’s like a hurricane. The hurricane is inevitable. Surviving it is another matter. Those who adapt will have a much better chance of survival and perhaps even prospering from it. Some will already be in such a situation that they won’t need to adapt nearly as much as others. As the storm moves in, photographers have to ask themselves, “How far above sea level is my place? How strong is my building? Am I really prepared?”

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE IMPOSES FEES ON PHOTOGRAPHERS

Beginning June 15, 2006, the National Park Service now requires photographers to apply for a \$50.00 permit to use a park for a day for photographs. But that’s not all. If you are photographing a group from 1 to 10 people, its another \$50.00. If the group has more than 10, it’s \$100.00. And, you have to pay this fee for EACH group you photograph even though you have also paid the day permit. These fees could add up to thousands of dollars for some photographers. They make virtual backgrounds a far more economical way to use park backgrounds.

I cannot repeat enough the necessity for all professional photographers to find ways to make their photography more unique, more pleasing to the public, and more on a level that the public cannot also do on their own. Shooting photojournalistic snapshots is not the answer. It makes professional work look too much like amateur work.

Our associations, on the local, state and national level are going to have to make a heavy commitment to finding ways to promote professional photographic

services to the public in general. There has to be more joint promotion. Too often our associations have feared that if they promoted portraiture that a non-member might also profit. The Storm makes it necessary to not worry about helping non-members. We have to think more globally because members and non-members are feeling the pain.

THE ULTIMATE TEST...

DO "SNAPSHOTS" ACTUALLY SELL?

The June '06 cover of Professional Photographer is a classic example of what concerns me about our future. The cover is a snapshot, pure and simple, that could have been captured by just about any shutterbug. It is highly unlikely that this image of a young girl standing in cold water would sell beyond the snapshot level. If the photographer is able to make a living with this type of work, good for him, but if professional photographers everywhere move in this direction, as has been happening, the Storm will be fatal for many of them. When this type of photography is featured and even rewarded, it is natural for others to try and emulate this work.

Photography let's us dabble with this and that including various levels of artistic expression, but the real acid test is the numbers that get submitted to IRS which are often radically different from what you are led to believe.

We also should not sheepishly follow trends. At this point, the trends are leaving out the professional photographer. We need to set trends by developing new products and promoting those products until they become wanted by the public. We need to set trends that can be done by the professional and not by most amateurs.

Look at the fashion industry. They set trends from the width of men's ties to the bagginess of their pants. The current trend for men and women is to wear low cut hip hugging pants and short tops. This is not attractive, but it is fashionable. Any women with the least bit of extra weight has a ring of blubber hanging out between her top and her bottom. This is considered fashionable and the public dutifully follows along buying the latest style. The fashion people have really learned how to set trends and rake in the money that results. Photographers by contrast traditionally slowly react to trends. We don't even try to create trends.

If the trend in photography is to get sloppy and just do snapshots and lots of them, why shouldn't we also promote the highest quality products and encourage our customers to move up, not down.

Sometimes business is like a card game. You are dealt a hand and it's not a very good one, but, you are in the game. Then the advice of country, western singer, Kenny Rogers, is very good. "You have to know when to hold them and you have to know when to fold them." Unless you want to quit the game, you have to play your hand as best you can. That's what makes a winner.

IF A HOUSE IS ON FIRE AND THE OCCUPANTS ARE ALL SAFE BUT HAVE JUST TWO MINUTES TO DASH IN AND SAVE SOMETHING, WHAT WOULD THEY GRAB?

In almost every case, they will dash into the house to try to save the photographs. If photographs are that important to a family, then why are professional photographers facing the Perfect Storm? It seems to me to be the result of a major marketing problem. Once people have photographs, they treasure them. Today, however, many families are not purchasing professional photographs. This means that photography is not being sold. The public is not being motivated to purchase photographs. And, they are being allowed to accept amateur photographs as "good enough." Here again, this is a marketing problem, and a customer education problem. Our customers need it, we can provide it...we are just not connecting the dots. What a shame. We have an extremely strong product to sell, but without good marketing, customers won't buy it.

WHAT CAN WE DO NEXT TO FIGHT THE STORM?

So, where do we go from this moment and forward? Well, it all depends on many factors, but most certainly, something has to be done to hold off the enemy and grow our business. In one respect, the business has been ours to lose. We are losing it because we have been lackadaisical about our photography, about our sales methods, and about our promotion. We basically are giving the business away. Once lost, it will be very hard to get it back. No one can predict totally what will happen because professional photographers still have the power to slow down the bleeding. It will take major changes

in our methods of operation and in the products we create. At least there are options.

Ed Alexander of San Antonio, Texas, came up with a really unique idea. He asked himself a very fundamental question. “If the public is doing a lot of their own photography, such as their own wedding work, then what is the most important ingredient they are missing?” The key element that they need and that professional photographers should have is the ability to coordinate and pose the photographs. Therefore, Ed proposed that one consideration for a professional wedding photographer is to sell their services for coordinating and posing all photographs. The professional could charge, let’s say \$500.00, to organize the photographs and make sure the subjects are posed as good as possible. Then the amateurs can shoot to their hearts content and the bride and groom will wind up with much better photographs than if it was all haphazardly done. Five hundred dollars may not sound like much but there is essentially no cost involved other than your time. There is no album to put together. There is no Photoshop work. Many photographers complain that they hate weddings and many won’t even do them. Here is a way to still make money on weddings but with minimal work.

I would consider creating a several tier approach to weddings.

1. Provide only the formal studio photographs of the bride and perhaps also the groom, taken before or after the wedding in the studio. This can be a big revenue generator that the amateurs can’t really do. Formal bridal photographs require studio space, professional lighting, and photographic skill and experience on the part of the photographer.
2. Provide studio photographs of the bride and groom and the wedding party taken in the studio on the day of the wedding, just as was done more than 40 years ago. Or, if the wedding was too quick, this service could be provided at wedding. If the photographer brought in extra lighting, the quality would be better and the additional lighting would confuse the amateur cameras causing over-exposure. In addition, wedding guests would notice the sophistication of the set up and possibly contact that photographer about doing work for them.
3. Provide a photo coordination and posing service and let the amateurs do all the shots as per Ed Alexander’s suggestion but then also offer the bride a service to digitally clean up the photos and perhaps turn them into a DVD with music, etc. In today’s world, you could find a high school age computer junkie who can handle this work for you.
4. Provide normal full professional wedding service including the most up to date looks and products. I would ardently look for new ideas, anything that would help make my product look distinctively different not only

from the products produced by other professional photographers but, most importantly, distinctively different from anything amateurs could produce.

5. If all else fails, hire and train a snap shooter to go out and cover the wedding with 1000 or more candids. It's still money but you might want to have a different studio name for this level of service.

I would definitely look into offering a high end DVD with a wide variety of special effects and music such as is offered by eMotion Media of Tulsa, Oklahoma. I would show a sample DVD at the very beginning of a sales presentation which just might impress a client so much that they hire you to do the whole wedding.

Some photographers might say, "Well, I am just not going to lower myself to that level." My thinking is, it's still money and it helps to pay the bills! Take it or leave it. I always believed that I would do whatever is needed to be done to be successful. Plus once I had a client contracted, there is always a chance to get them to upgrade to a higher level of service. Something is better than nothing.

ARTIST vs. PRACTITIONER

We often hear about the rising level of "photographic artist" as though it is something we should all aspire to do. Being a photographic artist means all our work does not have to sell. It is just to please other artists. Dollars are not a matter of concern. I remember my experience with a true artist... a professor of art. One day he was hand carving on an ugly piece of old leather. I asked him what he was doing. He said, "I'm creating art." I asked him who would buy it? He said, "You wouldn't understand... money isn't the point." He went on to explain that the work of most artists does not get famous and valuable until about 100 years after they are dead!

If I were starting a portrait studio all over again, I would begin by spending a great deal of time getting educated by the public I intended to serve. I believe that we spend too much time dabbling around trying to win award points, at the expense of not producing products specifically tailored to our paying customers. However, I do also believe that merit awards can be a great marketing advantage. Very often, people want to go to a top rated photographer and are willing to pay more to do so, but they have to know how to choose the right photographer. Most people don't know anything about certification or the PPA degree programs. We are not educating them.

I would opt for a main street studio which could mean a strip center studio or a mall based studio. I would want people to see me as a legitimate business, right in

with the other businesses they frequent. If I were home based, I would make sure that the areas of the home the client sees are extremely well decorated, especially photographically. I would make absolutely certain that my camera room looked like a real professional camera room and not just a place where snaps are taken. Virtual Backgrounds would be one of my most important tools in the camera room and as a means to market my products because it would enable me to provide infinitely more variety to my clients. Variety sells photographs! A photographer might take 30 to 40 previews, but it is boring to have them all be nearly the same. I would also consider renting out my studio to other professionals and to amateurs in order to maximize traffic flow through my facility.

I would show customers all of my previews on a projection system. I would almost never send a client home with paper proofs or just place the previews on the internet for them to just look at on their own. I would plug my proofs into a template such as that offered by ProShow Gold or have the previews or a group of selected images put into a DVD created by a company like eMotion Media which could be sold for a very nice additional profit.

Nulab, the major pro lab in Australia is teaming up with their customers and with a major national organization known as the Bonnie Babes Foundation. This non-profit organization provides special services to grieving parents who have lost a child. It provides special neonatal equipment to hospitals. However, like any organization, it must generate funds. On the other hand, Nulab wants to help generate sittings for its professional photographer/customers which leads to work for the lab. Photographs are a universal medium. All that was necessary was for Michael Warshall's Nulab to bring it all together as a national fund raiser for Bonnie Babes and as a source of potential revenue for photographers across Australia.

Here's how it works. Nulab and the Bonnie Babes Foundation have developed a program known as "The Pride Of The Nation." Several large sponsors such as Target and Kodak have also gotten involved. Families have the opportunity to make a \$50.00 contribution to the Bonnie Babes Foundation. In return, the family gets to have a free portrait sitting at a select studio, and the resultant photograph will be published in a "coffee table" type book which can be purchased separately. The photographers, all customers of Nulab, are screened to insure that they are able to do the highest quality work. As contributions come in, the contributor is assigned to a photographer in their area. It is then up to the photographer to schedule and conduct the sitting. This gives the contributor a reason to go to the studio. It is the individual studios opportunity to sell the family additional prints.

It's a near perfect system. Everyone wins. Bonnie Babes Foundation gets notoriety and significant donations. The family gets their child's professionally taken photograph done and published and has the opportunity to buy more prints and to buy the book. The photographer has sittings and the opportunity to sell. The average sitting so far is in excess of \$1000.

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY IS NOT A NEW IDEA

Retired Colorado photographer, Don Feltner, sent me a book from his library that is loaded with a huge number of really good money making ideas of all types. What especially caught my eye was the author's strong suggestions for doing new and different things. One section of the book is titled, "Breaking Away from Precedent."

"It is entirely possible that one of the things wrong with photography today is the archaic idea still held in most studios that photographs should be sold by the dozen, each print like every other – all as alike as twelve peas. Photographs are supposed to have some pretensions to artistry, and things which are truly artistic are not turned out in quantities – all alike. ...After all, pleasing the patron and getting her to tell others about the unusual things your studio does, is the principal thing you are after. Advertising like this you cannot buy, but to get it, your photographs must be just a little different from those produced by your competitors."

This book, MONEY MAKING IDEAS FOR PORTRAIT STUDIOS, was copyrighted in 1933! Almost everything still applies today, 73 years later! Only today, the suggestions are even more important because of the Perfect Storm.

Nulab regularly conducts a variety of seminars across Australia and New Zealand with special emphasis on marketing. Nulab also conducts a lavish 7 day business workshop in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Essentially, Nulab insures that their machines will keep running by making sure that their photographer customers are successful. Labs that just sit and wait for the business may not be around very long.

Along similar lines, Marathon Press continues to expand their learning opportunities for professional photographers. They are sponsoring, in cooperation with Chris Wunder, additional multi-day "boot camps" to help independent photographers get into church directory and school photography. Marathon Press is also sponsoring business marketing seminars that will happen in key cities across the US. These are no-frills fact-packed learning opportunities for those who want to grow their business, storm or no storm. The only problem is that it is typical for photographers to attend business and marketing seminars, get all excited, and then return home and do the same things they have always done. Then they wonder why nothing changes. Change has to happen from within. Remember the old expression, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Marathon Press also offers an ever increasing variety of preprinted promotional pieces that the local photographer can just add their name to. With this plan, even the smallest studio can have excellent quality promotional material.

WHAT'S A USED STUDIO WORTH?

We can learn a lot about our industry by checking what existing studios sell for when it is time for the owner to retire. All too often, the selling price of an existing studio is so close to zero that the owner usually chooses to just pack up or auction off their equipment. Why does this happen? Normally, a strong profitable business can usually be sold for considerably more than the value of the inventory and the facility. Weak businesses just disappear because there is nothing of value to sell. A thriving, profitable studio business should have considerable value to the buyer who does not want to spend years building a new business.

KEY FACTORS OF DIGITAL

What makes digital such a major threat to professional photographers? It's really a variety of things. The first is digital viewing. It is much easier for the photographer to compose a good image when they can see it live on the LCD screen as opposed to trying to see it in a little viewfinder. As a result, amateurs compose much better shots. Digital cameras are auto focus, auto exposure and even auto ISO. In addition, because they use such a wide angle lens, everything is in focus. Because of instant knowledge of results, the photographer can retake shots that don't look good the first time. Finally, the public is getting very comfortable with viewing their photographs on a monitor thus reducing or even almost eliminating the need for prints. This is what is killing photo labs. It is also what is now affecting professional photographers. Many people are perfectly happy with viewing digital files, including portraits and even their wedding photographs. They are "good enough."

MAXIMIZE EVERY OPPORTUNITY

Cincinnati Master Photographer, Russ McLaughlin, always seeks to maximize his sales opportunities. He says, "If you don't create a lot of variety in a sitting, you will minimize your opportunity to maximize your sale. I like to pack my sittings with a huge amount of variety including traditional and contemporary images taken on location and in the studio so that I have the greatest possible opportunity for my customers to expand their sales. I provide them with maximum sales opportunities. This is the reason I recently got into using virtual backgrounds."

Montana photographer, Trevon Baker, places special emphasis on the importance of making every sitting an "experience." Trevon states, "Even if the photographer is doing volume photography, he should still try to maximize the total experience from the initial meeting to the completion of the sale. People don't just come to me to buy images on paper. Professional portrait photography can be so much more than that." Trevon often takes 30 exposures on a senior with 10 to 15 different backgrounds, He edits them down to perhaps 25 and then makes his presentation. Because he has included so much variety, it is not unusual for his clients to want them all. As a result, his final sales figures are considerably higher than what the customer initially thought they would spend.

It's true. The more variety you provide a customer, the more likely they will buy more. If you owned a necktie store and if all of your ties were very similar, a customer may buy one tie, if they even stopped to look at all. But, if you have a huge amount of variety, not only will they be more likely to stop but they will also be more likely to buy several ties. And if you also sell shirts and suits, they might buy them as well! This is exactly what we recommend that a photographer do with a virtual background system. Provide the customer with so much variety in a short time, and an overall positive experience, and they will be highly likely to buy more and possibly larger prints and they will tell others about their experience. It's as simple as that.

Chapter 7

What Are The Successful Photographers Doing Differently?

It is not being the biggest studio. It's not luck. It's not being in the right town at the right time. It's not even being a better photographer. It's not only one or two things. It's a whole variety of things that interact together. Basically, there are 10 fundamental factors for success that are more or less universal to photography as well as to most any other business.

10 Things Successful Studios Do

1. Promote their products and services through innovative strong marketing.
2. Continuously monitor the likes and dislikes of the people they serve.
3. Adapt to changes as customer tastes change.
4. Move into new specialized products and services.
5. Take calculated chances with new ideas.
6. Rely on the basic time honored principles of quality professional portraiture.
7. Provide products at a reasonable price for the market segment they serve.
8. Continually attend advanced training and conduct their own market research.
9. Utilize their time efficiently.
10. Treat their customers with the utmost professionalism.

Now, let's look at each of these 10 points in a bit more detail realizing that books could be written about each one.

1. Nothing happens if you don't promote. Promotion is fundamental to the success of any product. Promotion does not have to be expensive. In fact, some of the most successful promotions can be very inexpensive. It is important to use one's creative intelligence to develop the most cost effective promotions. However, in order to promote, you must have something to promote...something innovative...something different. If the product you create is similar to that of any other photographer, getting people to buy your product as opposed to the others will be difficult. It's much worse if your product can be duplicated by the amateurs. If you don't have something really special to offer, about the only tool you have in that tool case is to sell what you have for less which comes

right out of your profits. Innovative and cost effective promotion is discussed in detail in ***Background Power!*** There are so many possibilities, including the overall promotion of professional photography through our associations. Our associations spend far too much time and money on promoting social interaction and awards and far too little time on promoting professional photography to the public. Awards mean nothing if there is no business.

2. Successful photographers continually study what their customers want in their photography.

They don't just try to push their own favorite style on their customers or always attempt to make life as easy as possible for themselves. Some photographers say, "I'm going to educate my clientele to like what I like." That doesn't usually work very well. There is one fundamental characteristic that is always there, people nearly always want something different, maybe not too different but definitely different. I still remember the initial planning meeting for my high school yearbook. The theme of that meeting was, "How are we going to do something different?" We didn't want our yearbook to be like every other previous yearbook. We made many changes. You know what? Every group that sits down to plan their high school yearbook starts out thinking, "How can we be different?" The photographer who understands that and reacts accordingly, helping their clients get an especially exciting product, will win the business. Producing a unique customized product is going to reap the benefits.

3. Styles change. "Looks" change. People want to keep up with the current trends.

Right now, young people are wearing hip hugging pants that openly displays their belly button and even rolls of tummy fat. They buy this style because it is "in," at least for the moment. It may be gone by the time you read this but when it was in, mega millions of dollars were made by those who provided this type of product, even if the providers of the product didn't like it.

Why should photography be any different? The really successful photographer combines current trendy methods with some traditionalism in order to provide the subject with maximum selection.

My father was a dentist for 50 years. He always tried to be a step ahead of other dentists. He was one of the first to have high speed drills. He was one of the few who offered nitrous oxide and hypnosis to minimize discomfort. As a result, he had a very successful career. People want to know that the professionals they visit are up to date, unless perhaps they are visiting an old time studio, and even then, they don't want to wait for their prints. Having the latest and the greatest is ok as long as one doesn't overspend. For example, a photographer can very easily go overboard on equipment expenditure. If the public cannot tell the difference between the results from a \$2000 digital camera compared with a \$20,000 digital camera, then there isn't a whole lot of justification for spending the extra \$18,000. However, you

don't want to use equipment that the public knows is no different from what they use themselves. Imagine if your dentist, working out of his garage, came up to you with his Black and Decker drill! Would you have second thoughts?

There actually is some advantage to consider working with your old RB or RZ or Hasselblad and explaining to the customer that you prefer to use a negative and then scan it for digital manipulation because it provides so much more detail, which is probably true. True or not, at least the professional's camera then doesn't look just like the ones the customer has at home. Philip Charis, the world class photographer in California, still uses an 8 x 10 view camera with a 5 x 7 film back. The negatives are then scanned. One can just about guarantee that no amateur around owns let alone uses a 8 x 10 view camera. In *Crocodile Dundee* terminology, "Now that's a camera!" Charis has had a highly successful career not only because he is an outstanding photographer but also because of the persona he projects. This includes his appearance, his manner in dealing with people, his promotion and marketing, and his facility and location. Would Charis have been as successful if he looked and acted unprofessional, worked out of his garage in Muncie, Indiana, and used a 35 mm camera? Probably not.

4. Move into new specialized products and services. Nothing stays the same. Digital certainly reflected a huge change that we all had to make. Digital isn't the end of the line. There will always be new products, and new tools, to help the professional photographer grow and better serve their customers. These new products take time to learn to use, but is there really another choice? Being the first to offer new products has decided advantages. We must always be on the alert for new concepts, new ideas, new methods. We must attend trade shows to look at everything and continually ask, "How could I use this product to enhance my business?"

Our whole reason for getting into virtual backgrounds many years ago was our desire to be distinctively different from other competing photographers and at the same time have a tool that generated more income. Back then, I was a wedding photographer. Not only did I want to impress all prospective clients with unique images, but even more importantly, when it rained or snowed during the winter in Ohio, there were a whole lot of photographs we couldn't take. What we couldn't take, we couldn't sell. These two things are what first turned me on to the concept of virtual backgrounds because I knew that the equipment would very quickly pay for itself. And when we competed for sorority and fraternity composite contracts, our use of virtual backgrounds coupled with good service resulted in contracts. We had something that made our work distinctively different from every competitor.

5. Sometimes it is necessary to take a chance. It's been said that the person who leads the platoon also gets all the arrows. That is true, but

it is a whole lot more exciting to be up front than to be picking up the rear. The photographer must be leading the way, but he must also use some common sense. The way through a problem is usually fairly clear, but when we are in the midst of it, we just don't see it. However, one should not take chances unless one has a pretty good idea of the odds of being successful. Whenever possible, it is best to analyze the potential value of a product before purchasing it. This can include meeting with others who already may use the product and who know what they are talking about. It is even better if you can "test drive" the product before you commit yourself. To often are so nailed to their current procedures and fearful of anything new that anything new is avoided without even a closer look at the possibilities. When I purchased our first virtual background system, there was no one to talk to. There were no samples. It was a brand new concept for photographers. I purchased one of the first systems made on a "wing and a prayer" coupled with hope and it paid off. If it didn't work at all, I felt that even if it were a total bust, we could afford the loss. Fortunately, we were successful from day one. Today a single big prom or two could pay for even the most expensive system. We must be willing to move beyond the box.

6. No matter what, there are basic time honored principles for taking a professional portrait. They should not be ignored. Too often today, inexperienced, untrained, and overzealous shutterbugs shoot up a storm, caring less about the time proven basic principles of lighting, posing, expression, and background. They get a lot of pictures, but how many of them are valuable? Today, we often see a portrait photographer hand holding their camera, clicking away, as if they were doing a New York model shoot. In a normal studio the photographer needs to be free to adjust lighting and properly pose the subject to get the very best looks, and for that, the camera needs to be on a stand. He can't just click away. Contemporary imaging does NOT mean that a simple-on camera flash is enough. Photography is light...painting with light...not splashing with light.

Take a lesson from world acclaimed photographers, Joseph and Louise Simone of Montreal, Canada. When they work with a subject, they usually take a dozen or less exposures, but they are all really good. Their shooting is very highly controlled. They don't expect to make exposures that are not up to par, hoping that maybe one will be good. The Simones strongly encourage photographers attending their workshops to develop their skills to a level where they are far above most other photographers and in a position where their services are sought after by the public. They see this as the only way to avoid economic disaster.

7. What is reasonable pricing? It depends on many factors. Most photographers aspire to be high priced and to have their work be in high demand. The only problem is only a very few photographers ever get themselves into

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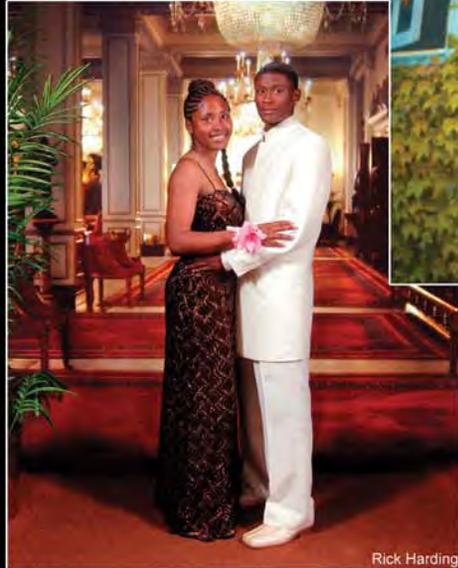
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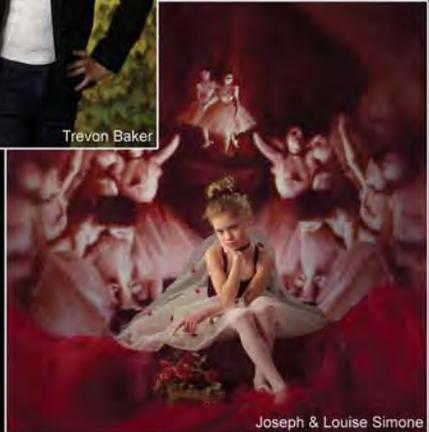
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a position where they can charge astronomical prices and get them. Most of those who charge really high prices sit on their hands much of the time and may even find themselves in financial trouble. Reasonable pricing is pricing that works for your particular community and for the segment of your community you primarily work in. Generally speaking, when times get tough, it is the high end photographer who takes the biggest plunge. Raising prices without a major overhaul of product and service is a ticket to abject failure.

8. If one is to stay out front, advanced training is always a necessity. Things do change. Technology changes. While one can learn to use Photo Shop entirely on their own, it is so much faster and more efficient to enroll in Photo Shop courses. In the same way, one should always be willing to attend training programs. It is the much faster way to learn. When all else fails, it is important to read the manuals. Too many of us just want to learn to use new equipment using our intuition. Not smart! As we move through life, we tend to get comfortable with the status quo, but sooner or later, not learning about and implementing the latest will bite you. I made a great deal of money by being the first or one of the first in my community to do color, to use electronic flash, to do outdoor wedding candids, and to use the virtual backgrounds process.

9. Time is money. It is your investment of your time and talent that people pay you for. Too many photographers take on assignments that consume much too much time and effort for the dollars they generate. In everything you do, time and workflow are critical. Therefore, in every operation you do, it is critical that you analyze the time that is involved and charge accordingly. A big problem for photographers today is that going to digital actually eats up a whole lot more time than when they used film. You don't want to work more for less or even the same income if you can help it. We all need to incorporate methods that provide the best possible product and in a reasonable amount of effort or time. We call it workflow. We call it efficiency. We call it time management. We need to let our professional labs do more of our time consuming work or hire employees who specialize in handling this part of our operation for us so we can spend more time photographing subjects and developing our business.

10. Treat customers with utmost professionalism. We call ourselves professional photographers and, therefore, it behooves us to be professional in every way possible from the way we dress to the way we talk to customers, to how we operate within our studio and how we make our sales, and the overall quality we put into every product we sell. It is not professional to have one's phone answered by a cheap answering machine, to have kids crying in the background when we talk with customers, and to not return calls. If you are not available to answer calls, consider hiring an answering service with real live pleasant sounding and intelligent personnel who answer your calls just as if they were sitting in your office. Everyone wants to be special. Make your customers special in every way you can.

These 10 points are all standard concepts for most any business anywhere. Fulfilling each of these is more or less a basic requirement to stay in business. None of them provide by themselves the extra special “umph” to really drive a business forward. They must all work together. The real trick is to find and emphasize something extra special that makes the end product such a great deal that the public cannot resist buying it for their own, coming back for more, and telling their friends and family about it.

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM...JOIN THEM

The Colorado Springs Gazette reported that Lenda Jay Messina, owner of LJM Studio in Colorado Springs, has opened her portrait studio to the public under the name Photography by You. After 25 years as a studio photographer, she decided to rent her studio to amateur shutterbugs who wanted to create their own portraits. She rents the studio for \$79 for 20 minutes or \$100 for 40 minutes. If they use the studio's costumes, it costs another \$15 and there is a charge of \$25 for each additional background change after the first.

The customer uses their own camera and can take as many images as they wish. Help with using the studio is available if they need it. The customer than has a variety of places where they can have their prints made.

The article reports that Messina wanted to combat the digital revolution and boost her studio profits as well as “share her love of studio photography with amateur shutterbugs.” Al Hopper, Director of Membership, Copyright, and Government Affairs for the Professional Photographers of America is quoted as saying, “The digital revolution is of deep concern to professional photographers.” Tom Crawford, a spokesperson for the Photo Marketing Association says that he hasn't heard of any other studio in the country doing this. Is this to become a trend for the future? It's very possible. It certainly is an innovative way to deal with the Perfect Storm.

A RUDE AWAKENING

A few days after Christmas, we were scheduled to take family photographs on site in a beautiful ranch home just a few miles from our place. We chose to travel light, taking with us our Canon 10D digital camera and a large umbrella flash unit.

When we arrived, first we noticed that the family had two grown sons, one an engineer in San Diego and one a stock market trader in New York. As I carried the equipment into the house, I immediately noticed a tripod with a Canon 20D set up. Just to the left of it was another tripod with a Nikon 1DX on it. I am sure that as they looked at my 10D, they smirked more than a little. Then, the father asked if we would mind if the sons took a few shots along with the ones we were about to take! The only reasonable response was to say "OK." The other options would have been to say "no" or choose to walk out. Neither of those options were good ones at this point.

How I wished I had my RB 67 or my Hasselblad. Then I could have talked about the many advantages of film over digital and how we scanned the negative to produce a massive digital file for the maximum quality and clarity. But, there we were, with our 10D.

Will we sell many photographs? Probably not. The kids actually took more exposures than we did. Fortunately, we charged a respectable fee for coming to do the photographs. Most important, this experience certainly drove home the point of what is happening to professional photographers today. Our customers may have better equipment than we do, they know how to use it, and they know how to get prints made.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

A Key Factor For Studio Success

Professional photographers have generally been very slow to pick up on the importance of providing customers with instant gratification. Most photographers were very resistant to adopting video proofing and very few photographers had an in-house lab that enabled them to quickly deliver paper proofs.. Photographers have often told me that the public valued their work much more if they had to wait for it. The next time you need new eye glasses, will you look for the one hour shop or would you be willing to wait for a couple of weeks? Enough said!

Digital makes it easy to provide customers with instant gratification. Some photographers even show their client the results immediately after each exposure is made. Prom photographers often show their results instantly so those still standing in line build up their enthusiasm. For many types of work, video proofs or projections should be available immediately after the session, when the customer is most enthusiastic. Mitch Graf of Oregon creates an unveiling of projected retouched proofs, complete with music and glasses of wine or other beverage. As more and more photographers move to video and projected proofs, traditional paper proofs take on more new value because they are becoming different. Paper proofs can now be printed in seconds with inexpensive printers. Making customers wait for days simply isn't a viable option in today's world

The optically projected virtual backgrounds process has a decided advantage over green screen and Photo Shop type backgrounds because the background process is complete when the photographer presses the shutter. There is no need for tedious laborious work on the computer on each proof before it is shown to the client.

Whatever method you choose, make it special...make it as elegant as possible. Avoid just putting images up on the internet. The more effort you put into making the "showing" something special, the greater will be your return. A little extra effort can produce a whole lot more profit.

Chapter 8

MORE OPTIONS – MORE OPPORTUNITIES

The only reasonable thing to do when faced with such gigantic challenges is to take an objective view of the options that are available. There are things that can be changed and there are things that cannot be changed. There are always options, some better than others. It is my personal philosophy to always remain optimistic. A pessimistic approach solves nothing.

In my office I have a sign that says:

**Pessimists see problems in their opportunities.
Optimists see opportunities in their problems.**

Much can be learned from how the military handles combat. Sometimes, it makes no sense to surge forward no matter what. Sometimes the best solution is to retreat and then reconfigure for the next move after all things are re-evaluated. In some cases, it might be necessary to not fight some battles if there is no way you can win. Sometimes it is appropriate to come back and fight again, but this time you use new methods, perhaps new equipment that places you in a better position to win.

We as professional photographers must reconfigure for the next move. To do so, we must know as much as possible about our problem so we can more effectively deal with it. With that in mind, what are our most fundamental core problems that we have to deal with in order to survive the perfect storm? We come back to the same fundamentals that have been stated earlier.

1. Digital has enabled the amateur photographer, the public in general, to satisfy many of their own photographic needs that were once handled only by the professional.
2. Our customers are for the most part not impressed with the style of photography delivered by most professionals.

These are really parts of one problem. Our customers wanted more and the digital revolution gave them the power to create their own product. The only answer is for professional photographers to expand their offering to not only again impress the customer but also to operate on a level that is well beyond what the digital amateur can match. That is, if you like what I can produce for you, you have to come to me to get it. You can't do it yourself.

Notice, I have not mentioned competition from other big or small studios. They are pretty much inconsequential compared to issues #1 and #2. If you effectively deal with these two issues, competition will be a non-issue, especially as you rise above the competition. Everyone, big and small, has to deal with these two basic issues. But it is easier for the smaller operator to make changes. Elephants don't move very fast. If you are worried about surviving with competitors like Wal-Mart Studios, be sure to read the book, *Up Against The Wal-Marts*. The small company can indeed win.

As a studio owner, you must plan out your goals. You can't do it all. You have to be selective and realistic. Perhaps you have made money doing wedding photography, but you have seen that business go down because of the amateurs with their digital cameras. You can either abandon weddings all together or come up with an approach that you can sell. This means you must identify what it is that you can do as a professional photographer that the amateurs cannot do, or at least not do very well. Amateurs can certainly take photojournalistic candid, perhaps almost as good as you can, and maybe even better than you can. However, amateurs may not be very good at quickly and efficiently posing people so they look their best in photographs. The amateur may not play any role in helping to guide the wedding and does not have the maturity and experience of the professional who has worked hundreds or thousands of weddings.

The amateur most certainly cannot do formal bridal portraits of the bride before the wedding which are ideally done in a large studio where each exposure is carefully posed to create the most elegant and timeless portraits possible. This makes everything else look like amateur snapshots. If you can sell these special features, then why mess with the plain candid? Let the amateurs have them... especially if you have other options with the real bucks. The bridal formals can be much more profitable, especially if one looks at the profits per hour invested.

Most photographers aspire to be like the great artists of the past. Did the great artists paint candid? I don't think so. We need to develop opportunities where we can promote artistic work, and certainly the bridal formal is one of those opportunities. Unfortunately, most photographers ignore opportunities like this.

To get the customers to come back, the studio photographer has relatively few general options that he can exercise in order to attract customers and sell those customers a maximum number of images.

Besides the normal principles of improving one's basic business practices that I have already mentioned, including better advertising, improved customer care, etc. What are the most fundamental things a photographer can do to attract more business and generate more dollars?

HIGHLIGHTS OF A LETTER FROM DON FELTNER

A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL COLORADO PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE LEADING MARKETING LECTURER IN THE 80s

Henry:

"Perfect Storm" is a great expose on what has always been needed in wedding and portrait photography...advertising. In February 2006, I made my annual visitation to key studios in Metro Denver. I have visited yearly those within about 25 miles of Denver for the past 25 years. Only one has made it back to pre 911 profit levels. Others are down as much as 75%...some by design, some by changing market conditions. Those who are still struggling are baffled as to what to do to correct the income slide. I motor home across America five months a year so I visit with photographers everywhere and everywhere, it is the same.

Digital has killed a lot of the market. A new large Denver Metro high school yearbook advisor got tired of fighting parents and students. He now allows "anything" in the yearbook. So students provide digital prints of whatever they want. Perhaps it is a senior guy besides a truck pose, overexposed poses by a local creek, etc. The nearest photographer, whose daughter was a senior there, went from 200 seniors down to 75 in 2005. Parents now scan the photographer's perfect poses or make their own family portraits with their digital camera and printer. Everyone loses.

Attitudes have changed. A quick self-made digital print is good enough for many. Maybe they are spending their professional portrait money on gas or new digital sound equipment but it isn't going to professional photography.

Backgrounds help sell. New marketing campaigns boost sales. Finding out what YOUR clients want helps the bottom line. Photographers had better begin their own search for what ails them. What is working for other photographers? What excites YOU? It takes 18 months to make a marketing plan work. Remember. If you do what you have always done, you get what you have always got! Find a plan that excites you and your customer base and then make a plan and go for it. It isn't easy but it is better than starving.

Don

In the end, the four most fundamental things the photographer can do are as follows:

- 1. Reduce prices.**
- 2. Improve product quality and service.**
- 3. Create new products that capture customer interest.**
- 4. Engage in the most effective promotion possible.**

Option #1—Reduce Prices. This is what that typical business person thinks of doing whenever business is slow. Shop keepers, large and small, immediately resort to a clearance sale when business is slow. Reducing prices is obviously a viable option and one that is so simple to do, but the consequences can be catastrophic. You can sell a million dollars a year in product but if you are losing money with each sale, you certainly are not going to make it up on volume, no matter how great the volume.

Normal shop keepers need to do a sale to reduce their expensive inventory. Photographers are different. We carry very little inventory. We sell our time and talent. However, our customers place only so much value in photographs. If what you are asking for your product is beyond what the customer perceives as reasonable, they won't buy. You will either have to change the product to make it have more perceived value or you will have to adjust your pricing accordingly. When we moved from Ohio to Texas, the prices we could charge for our wedding work dropped in half. We produced the same level of work but our customers had a very different perception of what wedding photography should cost. At least part of the problem was a slew of college students in our town who offered dirt cheap prices.

There are those who claim that the solution to slow sales is to significantly raise prices. While this might work for some photographers in some situations, raising prices can be a first class ticket to nowhere but extinction, especially if there is no corresponding change in product offering. Raise prices, work less, and make more money sounds enticing but it is generally not a sound formula. This approach is indeed too good to be true, at least for professional photographers.

Option #2—Improve product quality and service. Obviously this makes good sense but in order for it to result in actual change, the public is going to have to clearly see a difference. That is what makes this option so difficult to achieve and turn into serious growth. Attending workshops and classes to learn new methods is important, but if the changes are more or less subtle, you can't expect the public to react as strongly as you might think they would. Most every businessperson has to learn the lesson that even though they may think they have a dynamite product that their customers are going to fight over, reality eventually teaches them a harsh lesson. Little changes that may excite the photographer will probably go unnoticed and/or unappreciated by the public. Remember, many

people are not aware enough to appreciate the difference between a discount store studio portrait and one made by a master photographer. All too often, there isn't any obvious difference. Of course, what one can do is experiment with other aspects of photography such as getting into church or school photography, doing day care centers, dance schools, etc., but here again, to be successful, one must have a unique product and be priced appropriately.

Option #3—Create new products that capture customer interest. If the products that you are currently offering are not selling, then the only real alternative is to change those products into something that does sell and sell well. Very often, this means buying new equipment to facilitate the creation of the new product. There are a million different ways for a photographer to spend money on new equipment, but the fundamental rule is that any new equipment purchased must bring in more than enough NEW money to quickly pay for itself. If the customer can't recognize the difference, then why do it?

THE FEAR FACTOR

There is a certain amount of complacency in all of us. It is this complacency that causes many of us to avoid making changes, even when changes are necessary. Fear plays a role. We may be content to keep the status quo because we are afraid to venture forth. Perhaps we don't trust ourselves technically. Perhaps we don't trust ourselves artistically. If we seem to be doing reasonably well, then we strive to maintain that level and not rock the boat.

Remember watching a child first learning how to ride a two wheeler without training wheels or diving into a pool for the first time? There is usually a great deal of hesitancy and then a whole lot of exuberance when the event occurs. That is, in part, what happens with virtual backgrounds. Most every photographer realizes that backgrounds can play an important role and that a virtual background system is the best way to create those backgrounds. But, we still fear taking the plunge. This is one of the primary reasons why photographers "toy" with the idea of using virtual backgrounds, sometimes for several years.

If new equipment is going to be a consideration, then it is important to have a plan that clearly shows how the new equipment will pay for itself with *new* dollars generated *because* of that equipment, unless plenty of excess cash is

available and profit isn't important. If the equipment doesn't pay for itself with new dollars generated solely because of the new equipment, it probably should not have been purchased.

Because the amateurs are our biggest problem today, this new equipment has to enable you to provide a product that the amateurs can't provide. This is the key to handling a major part of the perfect storm. However, it must be noted that many amateurs are learning to use Photo Shop and Painter and, therefore, photographers will see more and more work enhanced with various software packages. Keep in mind that software developers have many more amateurs to sell to than there are professionals.

THE GOLD HILL HOTEL

Four years ago, we stumbled upon the Gold Hill Hotel in Gold Hill, Nevada, just a few miles from Virginia City. Ever since then, we get at least 3 very interesting newsletters a year from the little hotel, about special events, special speakers, special plays, dinners, banquets and more. All are designed to get former guests to come back again. The Gold Hill Hotel is not a Marriott or a Hilton. It is just a little historic hotel on a lonely desert road, mostly surrounded by rocks, hills, foundations from long gone buildings, and abandoned mine shafts. Sooner or later, Henry and Marian Oles will return to the Gold Hill Hotel. It is far more likely that we will return because of their promotional pieces that keep reminding us that they are there.

There is an important lesson here for photographers. Make the most of what you have and constantly promote it to prospective clients in interesting ways. If it is well done, it will pay off.

Option #4—Promote the business and the products you sell. The yellow page ad you run is not nearly enough. There are an enormous number of creative ways to promote your studio, many of which are not expensive at all. In fact some of the best promotions are essentially free. It just takes good creative thinking. Even better is for an association of studios to get together and do combined promotions. Some really forward thinking professional color labs are recognizing that if their customers don't do well, they themselves don't do well, and therefore, they are coming up with special promotions for their clients who wish to participate. A prime example of such lab/photographer cooperative promotion is Michael Warshall's Nulab in Melbourne, Australia. Nulab is the largest prolab serving Australia and New Zealand as well as photographers in many other parts of the world including

the US. Warshall is continually coming up with new ways to help his customers be successful including sponsoring speaker tours, training workshops, an informative newsletter, private consultation and more. Nulab also imports specialized equipment such as the Scene Machine virtual background system for their customers. In 2005, Joseph and Louise Simone of Montreal, Canada, and Trevon Baker of Montana did a five city tour bringing their photographic techniques and virtual backgrounds with the Scene Machine to Australians and New Zealanders. Cooperative activity such as this pays dividends for everyone.

Marathon Press is another company that is devoted to helping professional photographers develop their business providing mailers and a wide variety of custom and stock promotional tools. They also sponsor workshops and seminars. It's a company that is not just all about themselves. The success of Marathon Press is directly tied to the success of their professional photographer customers. If they help their customers grow, they also grow.

There are a number of really good business operation classes such as Greg Stangl's *The Business Class with Attitude*, Mitche Graf's *Power Marketing 101*, and John Hartman's *Marketing Bootcamp*, that help photographers improve their marketing and general operational skills. It is so easy to say one doesn't have time to attend such a class, but in reality, a good business class for photographers can be one of the more important things you can do to grow your business. Remember, photography IS a business. We should be attending as many business operation classes as we attend photography classes. Until very recently, even our national conventions didn't offer business operation presentations, and many of the traveling business classes that were available were gimmicky.

The Professional Photographers of America could help by promoting the concepts of the Certified Professional Photographer, the Craftsman, and Masters degrees. Most members of the public barely realize that there is a degree and certification system in place. This is especially important since there is no licensing of photographers and no minimal standards as we have in medicine and other areas. Individual degree holding photographers could do their own promotion by various means of informing the public of the meaning of the process. Local and regional associations should also devote more of their attention to raising the public's image of professional photography. One way or another, professional wall portraits should be part of every "Homerama." We must work to promote a trend toward the value of having professional wall portraits in every modern home.

Fortunately, there are many options available for the professional photographic industry to help battle the storm and raise the image of professional photographers. It's just a matter of implementing them. It's a matter of throwing off pessimism and fear and working toward a brighter future.

EUREKA!

Too often we photographers think that the way to success is to work harder for longer hours and either raise or reduce our prices. In reality, the best chance for success comes with creative strategic and innovative thinking and planning, carried out individually and in association with other photographers. Ideally, we should take time to step away from the grind of routine work and free up the brain to come up with truly creative thoughts. We must always look for new ideas to make our products more attractive in today's market place.

NEW MONEY VS OLD MONEY

New equipment should be paid for with "new" money. New money is money that you were able to get solely because of the new equipment. New equipment should not be paid for with old money. Old money is money you would have had whether or not you got the new equipment. New money is what makes a virtual background system such an excellent investment. It enables the photographer to bring in business that would not have otherwise come in and it also causes customers to order more than they would otherwise have ordered.

PROSPERING IN THE STORM

Professional photographers who offer highly attractive innovative products are likely to barely feel the Perfect Storm. Joseph and Louise Simon have developed their own particular style of lighting, posing, and the use of creative virtual backgrounds to produce masterpiece portraits that will always be in demand. Greg Stangl of the Chicago area is using his Scene Machine to develop his own unique style. Deborah and Rick Ferro of Florida are developing still another highly creative approach, again using their virtual background system. Larry Peters is combining virtual backgrounds with his props to create dynamite new products that are attracting his high school seniors and causing them to buy more.

The list goes on and on. The common element is that each photographer is working to develop their own unique style of photographing their subjects with the background as an important component. Their work cannot be duplicated by amateur photographers. Photographers who are able to create these unique products are flying above the storm. There will always be a demand for their products, especially if they continue to change as their customers change.

STUFFED TEDDY BEARS

Pessimists are likely to say, "It's over for professional photography...we're finished...there's no way we can survive."

We can take an important lesson from the Vermont Teddy Bear Company. Whoever would have believed that an American company could make stuffed teddy bears in America and be successful? Up until now, it's been almost impossible to find any stuffed animal that wasn't made in China and they have been cheap cheap. With a quality product and a highly creative advertising program, The Vermont Teddy Bear Company is highly successful selling stuffed bears for \$70.00! It just took some very creative thinking and action. They didn't achieve success just using standard business practices. This is not your average bear company!

Vermont Teddy Bears are for adults. Build a Bear quickly became a multimillion dollar nationwide business for children. Children pick out various components and watch their bear get stuffed and then they get to dress it. The locations I've seen have been jammed packed.

The success of the Vermont Teddy Bear Company and Build A Bear are great examples for pessimistic photographers. Remember the expression..."Build It And They Will Come." Perhaps a more accurate way to say it is "Build It Right And Run It Right And They Will Come." Imagine what it would be like if photographers could come up with a variety of great promotions? If it works for stuffed bears, why not for portraits?

Chapter 9

THE FOURTH DIMENSION –

MAGIC MEDICINE TO FIGHT THE PERFECT STORM

There are fundamentally four dimensions to portrait photography that the photographer has control over which define the product he produces. First, there is the lighting. Second, there is the posing. Third, there is the expression. And fourth, there is the background, the mostly forgotten dimension. To create the best possible product, the photographer must work with each of the four dimensions and be certain that he achieves proper integration.

If the four dimensions are not properly integrated, the end product can flop. Most every photographer works with the lighting, the posing and the expression, but it is the background that is so often neglected along with the proper integration of the background with the other factors.

Every portrait has a background even if it is just solid white or black. The photographer has infinite control over the background, but most photographers seldom pay much attention to the background unless, of course, when they go on location to shoot. Is the background really all that important? Think about it. The primary reason for going on location is to place the subject in various backgrounds where the backgrounds help to complement the subject. It is the background that helps to set the stage for the rest of the portrait. It is variation in the background that gives the photographer the opportunity to make more changes in the lighting, posing and expression. The background is, in fact, the “key” to producing greater variety. If the photographer keeps the lighting, posing and expression exactly the same and varies only the background for each pose, the poses actually look different! It is this variety that increases sales.

One very prominent photographer who is well known on the lecture circuit, recently told one of my associates, “I don’t believe in all that background crap. I’m interested in expression.”

So, why don’t photographers pay more attention to the background in the studio? The primary reason is because they haven’t done it in the past and because they have been taught to use simple traditional canvas backgrounds. In some respects, we have a culture of fear in photography, fear of doing something new and different, fear that our clients may not like the results, fear that one might not be able to make it work. It is fear that is the enemy of creative expression.

It is the primary reason we are afraid to try something new. Fear traps us in our own little box. The perfect storm makes it even more important than ever that we break loose with new ideas.

Many photographers don't use special backgrounds because they work outdoors in the park, but even the park is limiting in that there are only so many "special spots" available without going to another location. Even then, there are only so many tree and bush backgrounds. But, when working in the park, the real problem is that every professional and every amateur can work in the same park with the same trees, the same rocks and the same lake. Neither the photographer nor the subject wants to drive a great distance for a portrait, so one is limited to the local environment. When working in the park, the typical professional photographer doesn't have anything distinctively special to offer besides his claim that he can do it better. The same is true when the photographer works at any public location.

The key to surviving the perfect storm is to offer the client a distinctively unique variety of products that the competition and especially the amateur competition CAN'T offer. The product has to be so different, in desirable ways, that the public can't help but notice and want it, bringing in customers who might never have gone to a professional photographer. The more variety that is packed in, the better, because more variety means greater opportunity to not only satisfy the client but to also sell more.

Since every amateur can shoot candid in the park, professional photographers need to place special emphasis on offering a vast array of other looks that blow the amateur away. They still have to operate in a fast and efficient manner that enables them to charge competitive prices and still have time to have a life beyond photography.

Now, let's analyze this further. Once again, what are the key elements of the perfect storm that are killing us?

- 1. The amateur photographer with his digital camera.**
- 2. The public's lack of enthusiasm for traditional studio portraiture.**
- 3. Competition from other studios including the chain studios.**

Let's look at how things have changed in the professional studio since digital. Before digital, if the photographer used an RB67 or RZ67, the typical sitting consisted of 10 shots...one roll of film. If the photographer used a Hasselblad, the typical sitting consisted of 12 shots...one roll of film. If he used a 645, then a sitting was 8 or 16 shots, half a roll or a full roll of film. Every time he pressed the trigger, he thought about cost...cost of the film, cost of processing, the cost of making the proof. With digital, there is essentially no cost, especially if the proofs are shown electronically. As a result, the average photographer shoots many more shots, 20, 30, maybe even 50.

Digital now gives the photographer a huge opportunity to provide the customer with more variety to choose from at very minimal cost. Too often, the photographer simply makes more exposures with minimal changes in posing, lighting or background. The background will usually be a traditional canvas, perhaps a muslin, and perhaps something with some props. The variation is minimal compared to what it could be, even if the photographer can't go outside for part of the sitting. As a result, the images are so similar that the selection process involves picking the one or two best shots among a whole array of very similar looking photographs. I've seen proof books of as many as 60 exposures with no change in background or lighting and even minimal change in posing and expression. Just one exposure after another, all looking almost exactly the same. So, what is a client to do besides pick the best one. There is no real incentive to choose more.

DOES VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS ELIMINATE THE USE OF PROPS?

No! In fact, props are more important than ever when virtual backgrounds are used. The photographer cannot simply stand a subject up against a background. The total image has to be created. One primary way to do this is for the photographer to incorporate props into a photograph. Props add realism and depth and can be critical to the success of a photograph.

Photographers often blast away simply because they don't know enough about lighting, posing, and backgrounds. They feel that if they just shoot and shoot that sooner or later, something is going to come out ok.

By contrast, what happens when the photographer introduces maximum background variety? Now, the subject has real choice. She may have some formal traditional poses with several different canvas or muslin backgrounds. Then she has a few poses with high key white backgrounds. Then there are a wide variety of other formal and informal type exposures with various backgrounds ranging from a cozy living room fireplace scene to outdoor backgrounds to various composite backgrounds and perhaps some customized backgrounds made especially for her school or special interests. The sitting may also include some real outdoor shots. Now, she and her family really have real choices, and a real dilemma. They will want some of this, and some of that, which means buying more photographs from more poses.

So, what backgrounds should be part of a typical sitting?

- 1. TRADITIONAL CANVAS AND MUSLIN.** When canvas is all that the photographer offers, then there is a problem. On the other hand, it is a mistake to not include it at all. Traditional canvas with a standard head and shoulder pose has been the cornerstone of studio photography for generations. It still has applications today, if for no other reason than it adds to the breath of the variety the photographer offers as part of his sitting. However, traditional canvas and muslin has a new value today. Because most amateurs don't have a canvas setup, it becomes one more way to distinguish the professional from the amateur. Therefore, nearly every sitting should offer a few shots with various canvas or muslin backgrounds. Sometimes there are situations that are best served by using a traditional canvas or muslin.
- 2. HIGH KEY WHITE.** White backgrounds can produce striking portraits whether they are close up, three quarters, or full length poses. But more importantly, it's a rare amateur that uses high key white, not only because they don't have the facility to do so but especially because lighting a white background requires several professional level lights and some skill. Flash on camera just won't cut it. Therefore, high key white should be a part of many of your sittings.
- 3. COLORS.** The professional photographer has the option of selecting a wide range of color backgrounds to help create mood and to harmonize with the subject. As with high key white, most amateurs have no way to use solid colors. Colors generally require having a studio set up and multiple lights. Chris Wunder, a well known studio consultant, ran market research a few years ago that clearly showed that in school photography, offering a choice of colors for backgrounds made a significant improvement in sales averages. More choices correlated with high sales. Variety can be added to these backgrounds by using an inexpensive projection spot device that fits over an electronic

WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE PHOTOGRAPHERS MAKE WITH BACKGROUNDS?
Mistakes occur with the inappropriate choice of the background and inappropriate integration of the background with the other components. The photographer often simply makes the background too bright and too sharp. The background is supposed to be the background. It should be complementary, not dominating. I always state that the photographer is supposed to be taking photographs of people with backgrounds and not photographs of backgrounds with people.

Wal-Mart GETS IT

Wal-Mart Studios discovered several years ago the power of backgrounds to enhance their offering, but they have to keep it extremely simple. Therefore, they use inkjet printed panels that the photographer merely places behind the subject. Every month, they feature new backgrounds in their promotion. Backgrounds are usually season or holiday related. In January, they featured solid white and solid black backgrounds. The whole purpose is to cause customers to come in more often and buy more. The method is very simplistic and leaves a lot to be desired but it does generate business and sales. It pulls people in because of the backgrounds available.

Wal-Mart's success is probably one of the reasons independent professionals are being routinely asked by prospective clients, "How many background choices do you have?" I expect other nationwide studios to try to copy Wal-Mart soon.

flash and enables the photographer to project patterns on the background.

- 4. REAL OUTDOORS.** The world is a beautiful place, but the real world has many obstacles for the professional photographer including getting there and back, setting up equipment, dealing with the weather, lacking privacy and getting back to the office. Also, any amateur photographer can work in the same real environment. The professional photographer has no special claim on trees, leaves or rocks. Consequently, when using the real environment, the professional photographer is putting himself in a position where clients can have similar photographs taken by friends and other amateurs. The professional photographer needs to place special emphasis on his studio where he has all his equipment, but he cannot let the studio limit his flexibility.
- 5. PROPS AND ARTIFICIAL SETS.** Many photographers do not realize how helpful props and artificial sets can be to enhance their portraiture both in the studio and outdoors. Several companies, including Off The Wall and Denny Backgrounds, offer a wide variety of props and even entire background sets. Here again, props and artificial sets provide the professional photographer with tools that clearly differentiate him from the amateur who is highly unlikely to invest in such items. They also provide the photographer with more innovative ways to pose the subject as they build an overall image. Unfortunately, many props are painted in such a way that they look fake. It is critical to choose the right ones. Props and sets can be very expensive.

6. VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS. The universal solution! The virtual background process, which includes both projected optical backgrounds and digitally manipulated backgrounds, offers the photographer the greatest opportunity for unlimited background variety without leaving the convenience of the studio. In fact, there is no other way for the photographer to offer the client so much variety in so little time. The virtual background process clearly leaves most amateurs in the dust. There are advantages and disadvantages to every method that will be

In summary, there is no other tool that enables the professional photographer to more clearly distinguish himself from the amateur than the background. The use of a wide variety of different backgrounds as part of a sitting provides the customer with more “looks” from which they choose their portfolio of prints and enlargements. Focusing on backgrounds and the resultant array of images satisfies many different needs for the client and their family. If the photographer properly plans his approach, the client can be offered this array without the photographer or subject having to invest excessive time and effort. Those photographers who have learned to use the virtual backgrounds process would not want to operate without it. They have become inventive. They have changed their business model and found that it works.

Never forget that it is the background that helps to set the stage for the entire portrait. It is the background that can help to complement the subject. It is the background that enables the photographer to capture the subject in such a way that more of their body shows in the image which in turn makes the subject’s face smaller. It has been found that the primary reason customers do not order large prints is because they don’t want their face to be big on the print. So, if the photographer photographs more of the subject in a complementary background, the subject has to buy a larger than expected print in order to have their face be an acceptable size. At the same time, the background can complement the subject making the overall impression of the photograph higher than if the image were just a typical close up of the subject’s face with a plain studio background. **Ideally, it is the background that helps to complete the statement being made by a photograph. It is the background that enables the photographer to be so much more creative and offer so much more variety...and that leads to more profit.**

THE WOW FACTOR!

With the arrival of the Perfect Storm, the **WOW FACTOR** is infinitely more important to the photographer than ever before. What, you ask, is the **WOW FACTOR**?

The **WOW FACTOR** is exactly what customers say when they experience your entire photographic operation from the way you talk to them in your gallery in advance of a sitting, to their total experience in the camera room, to the way they feel when they view their previews, to the reaction they have when they receive their finished prints. That's the **WOW factor**.

If the professional photographer doesn't do anything special, there is no **WOW FACTOR**. It's just regular photography. Often, the client can get more from images created by an amateur. If the professional photographer reaches out and goes above and beyond, then the **WOW** occurs. Without a doubt, the use of virtual backgrounds is one of the most important components of the **WOW FACTOR**. The results from using PhotoShop and Painter type programs also creates the **WOW FACTOR**. New ideas and innovations are all part of it. Providing the subject with so much more, so quickly, with so little extra effort is all part of the **WOW FACTOR**.

Studios without a **WOW FACTOR** will have a very difficult time surviving from this point forward.

FULL LENGTH VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS

Full length images are easy with virtual backgrounds. There are three different methods: Reflect a Floor; Project a Floor; Create a Floor.

When combined with appropriate props, the photographer can create stunning full length images with an infinite variety of backgrounds. Full length work is ideally suited for proms but there are numerous other applications such as bridal formals and even families. Full length definitely brings out the **WOW FACTOR**.

OUT-FOXING THE AMATEUR FREE LOADERS. THE ULTIMATE WAY TO DERAIL THE AMATEURS.

How many times have you wished that you had a method so that when amateurs shot their own photos over your shoulder their images would not turn out and, therefore, there would be no need to make them mad by saying, "No one can take these setups with their cameras."

The great news is that this method of controlling the amateurs already exists. When the photographer is using virtually projected backgrounds, the amateurs can shoot away and not only do they not get a background, but the subject is blown out as well! They get nothing while the professional photographer gets beautiful images.

Because the amateur almost always uses the on-camera flash, without knowing it, they totally blow out the background and the subject because the special screen used with virtual backgrounds is about 1,500 times more reflective than ordinary white backgrounds. Their images are ruined but your images are beautiful!

If I were actively doing wedding photography today, I would probably take a portable projection system to the reception and set up a little studio in some out of the way place. I would then shoot all the family and friends photographs in front of this background screen with complementary backgrounds. Not only would I have more interesting results, but once again, all the amateurs shooting over my shoulder would get nothing. That would push my sales up and I would laugh to myself as the amateurs look bewildered.

Chapter 10

The Truly Universal Background System— Virtual Backgrounds

Virtual backgrounds provide a methodology that enables the photographer to create an infinite variety of backgrounds for the customer without ever leaving a single camera room. The photographer has instant total control over all the elements. The power of virtual backgrounds is the best kept “secret” in the industry.

Fundamentally, there are two methods to create virtual backgrounds, the digital method and the optically projected method. The digital method comes in two forms. The photographer can use tools like Photo Shop to hand cut out a subject from whatever background the subject is in and paste the subject into another background. More commonly, the subject is placed in front of a green screen and the subject is semi-automatically cut out by the computer and a new background is then pasted in. This method is commonly known as Chromakey where a green or blue screen is commonly used. The computer removes all the green or blue, and replaces it with a pre-selected background.

The optically projected virtual background process uses a combination of a special projector that attaches to any camera and a special incredibly reflective projection screen. The backgrounds are created from anything that influences the passage of light. Normally, a transparency is the basis for the system, but it could also be gobos, color gels, or even a piece of bubble wrap normally used for packing. The most popular optical virtual background system has been the Scene Machine. While the process has been around for some time, there have been major innovations in both the projector and the screen in the past few years that have moved the process forward and made it more compact and much easier to use. There are now five different projectors available, depending on the particular application.

The digital or green screen approach is generally best suited for what can be called “fun photography,” although in the proper hands and with enough time, some really phenomenal work can be produced with this method. Fun photography can be generally defined as special event photography where the objective is to create outlandish images such as having a great white shark attacking a subject positioned on an inner tube floating in the ocean. In ***Background Power!*** I show a green screen situation where a subject is placed on a non-existent horse. Something like this cannot be done with the optical background projection process.

However, the digital process has some decided negative factors including the following:

1. The photographer does not see the background “live” in the camera’s viewfinder as he poses the subject, and therefore, the subject has to be posed rather generically so the background can be pasted in later.
2. It takes time to paste in every background. Ideally each proof should be shown to a subject with a background in place, and therefore, a background needs to be pasted into every exposure which takes time.
3. Because the backgrounds are pasted in after the sitting, the photographer is unable to show the subject the results immediately.
4. Unless considerable care is taken, the subject has a definite cut out or pasted in look, especially in the hair. The hair looks clipped as if the subject were cut out of the original photograph with a pair of scissors. This can be minimized under the most ideal conditions and if a blur tool is used.
5. It is very difficult to use props such as plants or trees because of the difficulty involved in cutting them out from the background.
6. If the subject happens to be wearing a color that is similar to the color of the background being cut out, that part of the clothing will also be cut out and replaced with background.
7. The green background ideally needs to be very evenly lit which means additional lighting must be in place just for the background. The subject is normally placed 8 feet or more from the background to minimize shadows on the background which requires a larger studio area.
8. Amateurs are learning Photo Shop and are starting to use this technique to change backgrounds which also removes some of its uniqueness.

The optically projected virtual background system, such as the Scene Machine and Spectravue systems, has the advantage of enabling the photographer to see both the background and the subject in the viewfinder or on the monitor, live, as the image is being composed. This enables the photographer to adjust the subject to the background and the background to the subject. This also means that both the subject and the photographer can see the composite image immediately after it is taken. There is no wait for post processing. The photographer can instantly make adjustments to improve the photograph before it is taken. There is no post processing. An incredible amount of time and effort can be saved with the virtual backgrounds process.

The negative factors of the green screen digital method are a much more serious concern for professional portraiture and less serious for high volume operations where there is minimum variability and where the images are not enlarged to a great extent that would show the cut out look. However, photographer time is an

especially serious consideration. With digital backgrounds, the amount of extra time needed to paste in backgrounds is considerable.

HOW DO YOU GET BACKGROUNDS FOR A VIRTUAL BACKGROUND SYSTEM?

Answer...anywhere and everywhere. Besides the more than 1,000 backgrounds available from Virtual Backgrounds which can be seen on the company website, most system users capture their own backgrounds anytime they see something that could be interesting. They use their digital camera and have the files converted into transparencies. Most photographers today use Photo Shop to enhance their images, making them better than real. Little things can be made big and big things can be made little. In Background Power!, I show how a small piece of toilet tissue can create interesting backgrounds especially when combined with colored gels. Imagine being able to capture a world of backgrounds.

At one time, the optical projected virtual background photographer had to be extremely careful in the lighting of the subject in order to avoid washing out the background screen. That is no longer the case. Huge improvements have been made in screen technology. There also once was a problem with the subject having an edge shadow. When the photographer has the projector set up properly for the camera lens that is being used, and when he uses proper lighting, this problem is taken care of.

The major disadvantage to the projected optical virtual background is that you cannot easily create what I have more or less called fun photographs, such as ones where the subject is placed in a carnival type ride or something of that nature. This is what makes green screen an option for fun photography, but projected optical virtual backgrounds are the decidedly better choice for professional portraiture.

We have worked extensively with both virtual processes and once offered a green screen process with our own software for our event imaging system. However, we found the optical virtual background process to be a far superior system for professional portrait photography, and therefore, the event imaging system and software was sold to Express Digital.

With the optical virtual background system, the photographer has instant and total control over the background with the ability to choose the background itself, move the background in all directions behind the subject, adjust the proportional size of the background to the subject, change the focus and brightness of the

background, and even change the color tone of the background without affecting the subject. With green screen, this is all done after the fact and it can be very time consuming.

When asked which method is best, my basic response is to say that it all depends on the specific job to be done. There are some things that can only be done with green screen and there are some things that can only be done with optical projected virtual backgrounds.

LARRY PETERS DISCOVERS A TOTALLY NEW CONCEPT

Larry Peters of Ohio is widely acclaimed as one of the most creative photographers of high school seniors. How far will Larry go to achieve something different for his clients? In 2005, he even did underwater photographs of several of his high school seniors! This is exactly why Larry is so successful and such a leader in the industry. He does what needs to be done to be ahead and stay ahead.

In 2006, Larry started using the Scene Machine virtual background system in each of his three studios but with his own Larry Peters twist. He is applying strips of the same retro-reflective material used in virtual background screens to some of his props which results in a very innovative product that no one else in the world is offering at this time. It creates a totally new look for high school seniors who are always looking for something different. It's another Peters' first that is likely to spread rapidly to other photographers across the country. It's exciting to witness the beginning of a new concept. You can see samples of Larry's new concept at www.virtualbackgrounds.net.

With either method of achieving virtual backgrounds, the subject is not only inclined to purchase from more previews, but they are also more likely to purchase larger prints. Purchasing from more previews is easy to understand because the array of previews incorporate a variety of different backgrounds resulting in very different “looks.” Purchasing larger prints is another factor. When virtual backgrounds are used, as stated in the previous chapter, the photographer moves away from a tight head and shoulder shot. Instead the subject is smaller in relation to the background. Therefore, in order to better view their face, they have to enlarge the overall portrait. Larger portraits bring more dollars. It's just common sense.

Our company, Virtual Backgrounds, has available over 1000 stock background images of all kinds. These include background images created by Joseph and Louise Simone, Trevon Baker, Marian Oles, and Jen LaGrange. However, system users can also capture their own backgrounds on transparency film or digitally. Digital files can readily be turned into transparencies. Virtual Backgrounds uses a digital film recorder to create transparencies that have quality which essentially matches the original. However, nearly every background has had varying degrees of digital enhancement making them better than the original scene.

There are several additional and unnecessary issues when photographers use virtual backgrounds. Very often, because they can do just about anything, they do some very silly things. For example, I've frequently seen images where the photographer tries to capture the subject picking fruit from a virtual tree. It can be done but it is very difficult to make it look real. Who would want to buy such an image anyway? When they begin using virtual backgrounds, too many photographers totally forget about the basic rules of what makes up a good portrait. It isn't the fault of the virtual backgrounds process when this happens, no more than it is a gun's fault when the holder turns the gun on himself. Good sense must prevail.

Another problem is too often virtual background photographers limit their use of the system to create outdoor backgrounds. They think the only purpose for the system is to replace going outside. In reality, the majority of the backgrounds used should be of a more general variety including indoor scenes such as elegant rooms, burning fireplaces, window scenes, and abstract backgrounds that are not clearly identifiable but which provide texture and harmony.

In summary, virtual backgrounds provide the photographer with an exceptionally powerful technique that greatly enhances creativity and in many ways simplifies operations and enhances workflow. It is a tool that all photographers should consider, especially today, when the public is looking for much more variety in their professional photography and at the same time want to keep costs down and not invest an excessive amount of time. You can do it.

OFFER MORE FOR LESS

How can you offer my customers more variety in less time and for less money? The key is to use virtual backgrounds. There is no other way a professional photographer can pack more variety into fewer minutes and with less trouble for both the photographer and the client.

DON'T NIT PICK – MAKE MONEY

Some photographers are perfectionists. They take a product and almost beat it to death with their testing and identifying issues that are irrelevant to the public they serve. Testing and being nit picky is fine until it interferes with using a product to make money.

MORE POSES—MORE BACKGROUNDS— MORE SALES!

It's a simple formula. Most photographers think that if they take many shots of a subject in their studio that they will sell more images. This is only partly true. If the individual exposures are very similar with only subtle changes in expression or body position, the subject will search out the ONE best image and place their order. If the photographer varies the backgrounds and also distinctively varies the poses, including perhaps the subject's dress, the customer will be much more inclined to choose from several different exposures as they place their order. The resultant order is likely to be significantly larger, and the customer will have a more positive overall experience and level of satisfaction.

Chapter 11

USING BACKGROUNDS AS A KEY PROMOTIONAL AND MARKETING TOOL

One of the biggest problems with many professional photographers is that they get far too involved in the nuts and bolts of their equipment and do not think nearly enough in terms of marketing, promotion, and overall business operation. To me, the most fundamental thing to think about, even before buying equipment, is to ask how one is going to promote this product to make money, hopefully a lot of money.

Or an even better way to look at it is to ask whether or not this product will help me grow my entire operation while also making my life easier. We often use the term “workflow.”

In any business, the key factor to success is promotion. As I say in an earlier chapter, in order to promote, you have to have something to promote, and the more innovative and special that something is, the easier it is to promote and the more successful one will be.

I like to monitor what dentists are doing to promote their dental services. Why don't people go to the dentist? The primary reasons are fear of pain and not perceiving a clearly desirable outcome other than drilling out cavities to prevent their teeth from having to be removed years later. So what have dentists centered on for their promotion?

1. A little pill that you take that causes you to go into “la la land” while your entire dental procedure is completed with no pain.
2. Acquiring a beautiful smile that will clearly make you more happy and successful.

You come to a dentist for a drug-induced “trip” and you leave with a great smile. As a result, most dentists today make more money than most physicians.

This is exactly the approach professional photographers should be taking in promoting their services and products. It's not just taking a picture of someone. Their work should be presented as a production, an overall process that results in a beautiful and personal product. If you haven't seen it yet, check out the DVD that Joseph and Louise Simone made of what it is like to be photographed by them in their studio.

Some of our not so successful virtual background system owners get all bogged down in “testing” and looking for issues. They don’t get around to the really important stuff, making money. More often they simply install the equipment and then sit back and wait for something to happen. It won’t happen. At least not much will happen without good promotion. Most people learn the mechanics of a virtual background system within a few hours or less. Using the system creatively takes more effort. Beyond that, one has to promote.

Backgrounds in general and virtual backgrounds in particular can become a key component of your studio to differentiate you from other professional competition. More importantly, in today’s world, the use of background variety to create a wide variety of different images without having to leave your studio should clearly differentiate you from the amateurs with their new digital cameras. It would be even better if the products that can now be created with virtual backgrounds are so attractive that they get people to come to your studio who would not have gone to any studio. As a result of what you create for them, they buy more, perhaps much more, than what they intended to buy. Anything that would make all that happen is a winner! This is what can and will happen when a photographer properly uses and promotes virtual backgrounds.

VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS ON BOARD CRUISE SHIPS

The role a virtual background system can play on board a cruise ship also applies to many other studio applications. Even though cruise ship photography is based on speculation, the biggest problem cruise photographers have is getting passengers to agree to be photographed. With virtual backgrounds, they can use cruise related backgrounds as part of their approach to get passengers to at least agree to be photographed. Then, once in front of the camera, the photographer quickly photographs the passengers with several different backgrounds without even reposing. In this way, there is a greater chance the passenger will buy more than one image. In addition, because so many passengers are shooting their own photographs with their digital cameras, when they try to shoot over the cruise photographers shoulder, they get nothing when virtual backgrounds is being used. Even the subjects are washed out by their on-camera flash hitting the projection screen. Yes, even cruise ship photography is being affected by the amateur digital revolution.

In dealing with the stormy situation we face today, the photographer's work has to be dramatically different and attractive to pull in customers. Remember, if you don't get them in front of the camera, you have no chance of selling them anything. Then, once they are in front of the camera, you want to take maximum advantage of the opportunity to very quickly provide them with a wide range of choices that will cause them to go "Wow!" and then buy more. The most powerful tool that a photographer has to accomplish this is a virtual background system. It is interesting, though, that many photographers find every reason under the sun to fight using virtual backgrounds. They don't take the time or make the effort to even show their customers the possibilities that come with virtual backgrounds. It has been our experience that customers are universally enthusiastic about the virtual backgrounds process and the variety it makes possible so quickly and easily. It is some photographers who are skeptical and reserved. I've heard many say, "I'm not sure if my clients would like this."

With virtual backgrounds, the photographer has an unlimited range of samples that entice the potential client. He can offer the client varying degrees of customized portraiture including the opportunity to do everything from casual to formal, traditional to contemporary, full length poses or groups. All of this can occur within a very short period of time, with minimal effort, at a reasonable but very profitable price, while still being able to show the results instantly. The photographer never has to leave his studio where he is the boss, where he has all

THEATRE ADVERTISING

One of the most common questions I am asked is how does a photographer effectively advertise the benefits of his using virtual backgrounds? Obviously, one cannot just say they have a virtual background system. It is critical that the photographer SHOWS the results. An ideal way to do this is to buy time at the local movie theatre to be part of the preshow advertising. Think for a moment, how much variety you could show in a 15 second commercial. In 15 seconds, you could easily show 10, 20 even 30 different shots of the same subject in completely different looks with text or voice over explaining how technology and artistic talent makes this possible at your studio. This commercial could be changed several times a year and would easily drive home the concept that your studio is way above and beyond any other studio and totally incomparable with anything the amateur photographer may produce.

of his tools that enable him to be maximally effective, and where he can produce an array of images that amateurs or low level semi-pro can't do. Frankly, I can think of no more perfect tool to help battle the perfect storm. That is why many system owners thank backgrounds for their success.

In ***Background Power!*** I go into considerable detail on the advantages of actually using special customized backgrounds as the key reason to get subjects to agree to be photographed. Recently Texas won the national football championship. What UT student would not want the burnt orange UT tower with the big "1" on it to be a background for their portrait? Your customers will respond to the opportunity to have their photograph made with a background that reflects what is important in their life, along with a variety of other more generic backgrounds. The key is getting people in front of your camera. You can't sell what you didn't take.

Let me repeat, *the* key is getting people in front of your camera. Trevon Baker was recently approached by the Kalispell, Montana Medical Center about doing quality images of all personnel in the medical center, from the administrators and surgeons to the custodial staff. One way to do this would be to take snap shots on location. This is what is so often done. A second choice would be to bring professional lighting equipment to the medical center and do quality images, but this is very time consuming and disruptive. Trevon chose the third choice. He photographed appropriate backgrounds throughout the hospital and prepared them for use in his virtual background system in his studio in town. Here are the advantages of this approach.

- 1. It is much easier to do quality work in the studio while using virtual backgrounds. This also avoids any disruption at the medical center.**
- 2. The medical center personnel all have to come to the studio so they now know where the studio is, and while there, they see the overall facility including sample images on display and they get to meet the staff.**
- 3. While in front of the camera, the photographer not only uses medical center backgrounds but also does a more comprehensive sitting with various clothing changes and background changes. This turns the situation into one that could result in very significant sales.**
- 4. The situation could also be turned into an opportunity to do a full family sitting.**
- 5. The resulting images can be projected in a formal sales presentation.**

How totally different this is from doing snap shots at the hospital!

WHY DON'T MORE PHOTOGRAPHERS USE VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS?

It's true, only a minority of photographers today use virtual backgrounds. So, what's wrong with the majority? Why haven't they caught on? There are many factors involved. The psychological term for what keeps people from changing is paradigm paralysis. A paradigm is your standard way of doing things. We all tend to let our paradigms dictate how we perform. We don't change because we never did it differently in the past.

Traditionally, photographers have always used simple canvas and muslin backgrounds when working in the studio. This has been the norm. There are few programs or articles written on backgrounds so you don't hear about new background concepts very often.

Some photographers do a poor job in using virtual backgrounds so they produce a bad example. Some photographers who own systems talk negatively about their equipment to keep their competition from also buying it.

Backgrounds are almost never a topic covered at conventions. There are very few articles in our magazines on backgrounds. Even our schools of photography place minimal or zero emphasis on backgrounds.

In the end, there is only one way to determine the true value of virtual backgrounds and that is to put it to the test. What we need is a paradigm shift, a shift to new innovative ways of thinking.

I can go on and on with similar examples. In every case, the photographer is using the background as a key component to not only get people in front of the camera but then to sell them more than expected. Always be thinking in terms of backgrounds that are important to the customer. This means school type backgrounds for school kids, special Rotary type backgrounds for Rotarians, Lions Club backgrounds for Lions Club members, band backgrounds for the high school band, teacher backgrounds for teachers and on and on. Use your imagination. The possibilities are endless. Remember that your customers will be attracted by images of themselves in which the total image, including the background, reflects elements of what is important to them in their lives.

Be sure you don't stop with just one background. You may use the Rotary background to sign up the Rotary Club, but portraits with the Rotary background won't sell very well. Once you have the subject in front of the camera, do the Rotary background shot and then immediately do a half dozen other shots with various complementary backgrounds ranging from the bookshelves to the fireplace to an old masters canvas. That's where you will make your money.

DO NOT try to sell your services by advertising that you have a Scene Machine or a virtual background system. That doesn't work well. You need to promote the results. You need to SHOW results and explain to prospective customers how you can use this technology coupled with your skill to create special customized images for them or their groups. That will catch their attention. That will work! You will now be doing images that are not likely to be done by any amateur.

Still skeptical? Sometimes you have to take a calculated chance in order to move forward. One of my more frustrating things is those situations where the decision maker refuses to test an opportunity. Let's look at the church directory business. Your profit depends on selling enough to each family to pay for the cost of creating the directory and contribute to overall profit. Let's say that you average \$60.00 per family gross sales using traditional methods, and this makes you happy. Maybe you should be very sad though. Maybe you left a lot of money on the table. What if that gross sale could have been \$120.00 per family IF you had provided each family with more variety and better looking photographs? Your major expense, making the directory, would remain exactly the same which means that the vast majority of the extra \$60.00 would be pure profit. Think of it. Just a few extra minutes and using virtual backgrounds can perhaps double sales averages which might very well quadruple profits. Isn't that potential worth some serious research?

POWERFUL MARKETING THAT COSTS NOTHING

There are many ways to promote your studio business that don't need to cost much, if anything at all. I cover many such ideas in the book, Background Power! For example, consider giving talks about photography in general and professional photography for various club groups such as Lions and Kiwanis. Why can't you give talks to school children about business operation and photography? Have you ever considered inviting groups to visit your studio for a tour and demonstration? Think of how impressive it would be if you demonstrated your magical use of a virtual background system, perhaps even producing sample images while they watched. The results you can get from this kind of marketing can be absolutely awesome. And they cost you nothing!

Intuitive thought would seem to indicate that this is possible, but there is only one way to find out for sure and that is to research it. Try the new procedures on real families. The downside is near zero. The upside is huge. It's amazing how many photographers in this position are satisfied to just continue along with their same old methods and not conduct actual research which answers the question once and for all. In addition, if one's photographs were that much more desirable, it would help to close more church contracts as well. I have a hard time understanding those who will not explore options, especially when the cost of doing so is so minimal. They know not what they miss.

Now you know better what I mean when I say that backgrounds in general and virtual backgrounds in particular can be the most powerful marketing tool a studio has available. It will help you bring in more business and earn more from each customer without investing extraordinary amounts of time and energy. I asked in the beginning of this booklet, can you think of any tool other than virtual backgrounds that you can add to your operation that has more overall potential to grow your business and your profits? I can't.

HANDS-ON COURSE

Virtual Backgrounds routinely conducts workshops which involve hands-on experience. Somehow, it is always different when you do it yourself instead of watching someone else. It's like actually riding a two wheeler for the first time. No amount of contemplation matches the actual experience. The virtual backgrounds course spans 3 days and is offered once a month. It provides attendees with an enormous amount of information about virtual backgrounds, including both the technical and the artistic components. It also includes information on how to use virtual backgrounds as a powerful marketing tool to promote the studio.

Implementing virtual backgrounds absolutely does not mean that you forget everything else you know about photography, because that would be a huge mistake. You still must maintain the fundamental basics of good portrait photography. You still work with props. You still work with Photo Shop. You still look for and use techniques like Corel Painter to enhance your images. You still may use the computer to add special touches such as printing the subject's name on the prints, creating various composites, etc. You still do retouching. And, you never stop looking for new ideas of all kinds that you can bring into your studio. Virtual backgrounds is simply another powerful weapon for your arsenal. It could be your most powerful weapon.

The Simones certainly discovered how the virtual background process could not only make their photography easier to do by creating their backgrounds from transparencies but they also discovered how much more variety they could offer. Because they have their own distinct style, they created their own background images that reflect that style.

Don Blair discovered that even though he was physically limited in his last few years and unable to get to his special environmental spots, the virtual background process enabled him to do so much right in the camera room. I'll never forget his saying, "I love it...I love it...I really love it!" Big Daddy Blair understood and immediately "got it."

WHAT DOES A VIRTUAL BACKGROUND SYSTEM COST?

Cost is really not an issue in that a professional photographer can get into a virtual background system for just over \$3,000. The higher end system with a fairly large screen is just over \$8,000. Compared with buying other kinds of backgrounds, it is really inexpensive because once a photographer owns a system, additional backgrounds cost almost nothing. The backgrounds are inexpensive slides. They cost only a few dollars. A virtual background system is one of those big tools that should quickly pay for itself and then continue paying dividends for years to come.

At Virtual Backgrounds, we have tried to deal with most every concern that a photographer might have about the virtual backgrounds process. We invite every photographer to come look at the products and the sample images created by various photographers from around the world. Even better, we suggest that photographers "test drive" the virtual backgrounds process for themselves. They can do this at convention trade shows, at professional schools, or they can come to Texas and have a private opportunity to use the equipment for themselves with their own camera. Likewise, we conduct intensive training workshops on a regular basis. There are many ways to learn.

I wrote the book, ***Background Power!*** to present in detail the whole background story and how to creatively use backgrounds to grow the studio operation. Our workshops are conducted in San Marcos, Texas. San Marcos is exceptionally easy to get to, located halfway between Austin and San Antonio. The workshops are free of charge to new virtual background system owners. The workshops are also available at a reasonable fee if one just wants to find out what virtual backgrounds is all about with the fee being totally refundable if the attendee

purchases a system within 90 days. The workshops are intensive and packed with valuable information, but they are also fun. The first day often runs from 9 a.m. until late in the evening. The second day can be just as long, depending on what the participants want to learn. It's exciting for us to help our customers discover new ways that can help them be more creative and financially successful. The third day is devoted to well known photographers/teachers who use our equipment and want to share their knowledge and experience with others.

Virtual Backgrounds also publishes a monthly electronic newsletter titled, *The Backgrounder*. Each issue spotlights the world of a particular photographer and it provides a variety of news items related to backgrounds.

We support our customers with an array of training materials and unlimited free technical support. With digital, it is so simple to send files in for analysis and suggestions. In just seconds, we can be looking at a file from a system owner just down the street or down under in Australia. We want every one of our customers to be maximally successful. We invite anyone who has not been successful to communicate with us.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

In today's world we can send a virtual background system to just about anywhere in the world in a day or two by Federal Express or UPS or similar air freight companies. The internet collapses the world to the point where we can service a customer in Australia just as well as a customer in Los Angeles. If you need more information or if you are in a country without a designated certified dealer for Virtual Backgrounds, contact us directly via telephone or the internet. Technical support is also handled via the internet. Images can be sent over the internet for evaluation. It is indeed a small world.

MAKE SURE YOUR CUSTOMERS HAVE A REASON TO BUY

The key to success in any business is to make sure the customers have powerful reasons to purchase your products or services. In photography, this is more true than ever before. Many years ago, if someone wanted a photograph, they absolutely had to go to a photographer. Technology has made it easier and easier for everyone to take and make good photographs. So, why visit the professional photographer?

That's the problem! If the professional offers little or nothing beyond what the customer can do for themselves, there is no reason to go to a professional. The only option for the professional is to offer products and services the amateur can't do on their own.

The professional must offer more variety, more options, more powerful images that motivate the public. This is where virtual backgrounds is so important. How else can the public get more variety, in less time, and with less effort? There is no other way. Virtual backgrounds should seldom be used to try to duplicate the outdoors. Instead, it should be used to produce images beyond what the amateur can do. The Larry Peters new look with illuminated props is one powerful example. Look at the work of Joseph and Louise Simone, Rick Harding, Trevon Baker, David Filler and many others who are producing products that grab the public's attention. In many cases, it is the special backgrounds that are used to attract the customers.

The old adage, "build it and they will come" is still true but only if you build the right products and sell them for the right price for today's consumers.

GIVING CUSTOMERS POWERFUL REASONS

How do you provide potential customers with motivation to schedule an appointment and then to buy a lot of photographs? Most photographers think of having discount prices or spending more money on advertising. Very seldom does the professional photographer think about motivating customers through the background. Perhaps this is because photographers have traditionally paid so little attention to the background.

Customized backgrounds, however, are an extremely powerful force, if properly integrated with every other aspect of studio operation. Backgrounds should be selected that enhance the overall photographs and the use of more backgrounds as part of a single sitting generates more variety for the client from which to select. But, the background can be an even more powerful influence if it is directly related to what is really important in the client's life.

The formula is fairly simple. If you want to photograph Boy Scouts, come up with a variety of Boy Scout backgrounds. If you wish to photograph members of the Rotary Club, come up with Rotary related backgrounds. Generalizing, come up with doctor backgrounds for doctors, fire related backgrounds for firemen, construction related backgrounds for construction personnel, school backgrounds for photographing school children. The possibilities are infinite.

Yes, it may take some time and effort to photograph each school that you wish to work with but students and everyone related with the school are generally proud of their institution, and making it part of at least some photographs is a powerful motivator. Not only can this concept be used to secure elusive contracts, but the backgrounds are also a powerful force to cause the client to purchase more. Carried to the extreme, the school photographer could even photograph every student with their own classroom and teacher in their background. Carried still further, the subject themselves could be a major component of their background.

The virtual backgrounds process makes it all possible. It's up to each individual photographer to commit themselves to producing highly enticing products that the client cannot do on their own. Try it...you'll be surprised.

PERSONALITY PORTRAITS

When photographers have their own portrait made, they normally are photographed holding their favorite camera and it is very likely that their studio is the background. The total image, including the background, clearly reflects the photographer's world. Why don't we take this same approach with our regular subjects? Why don't we create very personalized images that clearly reflect the subject's interests and life? I call this style of photography personality portraiture. The background can play a very key role in helping to create this type of image.

I know of no professional photographer who does a better job at this than William S. McIntosh of Virginia Beach. In fact, he has published two books that show his approach, *Location Portraiture, The Story Behind The Art and Classic Portrait Photography, Techniques and Images From A Master Photographer.*

McIntosh creates one of a kind portraits of such famous people as Colin Powell, Mary Kay, Pat Robertson, Yousuf Karsh, Arnold Newman, Larry King and many others. However, the same concept that McIntosh used to photograph these famous and important individuals could be applied to the public in general if the same overall style is used and if the background is created with a virtual background system. In every one of McIntosh's portraits, the background definitely helps make a powerful statement about the subject. The background is highly complementary.. The possibilities are absolutely endless. Professional photographers could be creating individual personality portraits that would very likely lead to very significant sales, including wall enlargements. People in every walk of life, young and old alike, would relish a McIntosh style personality portrait of themselves. In fact, the McIntosh style coupled with virtual backgrounds could be a real winner for professional studios and a product that amateurs can't do.

To get a better idea of the McIntosh style, go to portraitsbymcintosh.com . Better yet, order both of Bill McIntosh's books. You can reach him at wsmfoto@aol.com. They are just full of ideas you can turn into significant new profits. There really are opportunities, big opportunities, for portrait photographers, in spite of the storm, as long as they are willing to explore new ideas.

Chapter 12

Concluding Thoughts

The storm is arriving and it is predicted to be worse than first thought. Colorado photographer, Rick Avalos, begins his programs with a line spoken by Dorothy to her dog Toto in the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. The tornado has just carried them off. Dorothy says, “Toto, I don’t think we are in Kansas any more.” That line definitely applies to professional photographers. We are not where we were just a short while ago.

Yes, this is a difficult time for professional photographers but change is always difficult. Change also breeds opportunity. It opens doors for those who are prepared. Fortunately, there are ways each of us can battle the perfect storm and come out stronger than ever. This isn’t always the case. In the one hour photo lab business, not many years ago, there were over 14,000 independent lab owners. That number is now down to just over 1,000 and shrinking fast. Some businesses have very limited alternatives when their perfect storm overtakes them. Professional photographers are indeed fortunate. There are alternatives. First, you have to believe it to see it. You have to have faith in yourself and in your ability to do new and different things that will bring you new success. You must believe in your dreams and develop them to fruition to fulfill your destiny. Some people call it “possibility thinking.”

On the other hand, even though technology provides the photographer with the means to do wildly different things, you must be careful to not overdo it. A common mistake when using real backgrounds or polystyrene backgrounds or even virtual backgrounds is to place too much emphasis on the background. A common mistake when using Photo Shop or Painter is to overdo it. In some cases, that may be ok. Larry Peters’ new approach using virtual backgrounds in conjunction with his props certainly pushes the limit but it isn’t a problem if it isn’t the only type of photography he does.

When the wild new and different is just one component, it adds variety. Variety is the key, but even variety has to be intelligently used depending on the nature of the subject. My wife always insists, "Moderation in all things." This is why I recommend including a traditional canvas background in a few shots for most every sitting. It gives the customer choice. People love choice. Regardless of what they actually buy, the photographer still profits.

JOSEPH AND LOUISE SIMONE'S TIMELESS IMAGES

Two of best known photographers and teachers in the world today are Joseph and Louise Simone of Montreal, Canada.. Their images are spectacular. They are timeless. As a result, they have achieved the highest awards a professional photographer can receive. Their world famous book, The Portrait, Mirror of the Soul is a "coffee table" book purchased by professional photographers and also by the general public because of its beautiful images. Their classes end with standing ovations from their students.

Listen to a presentation by the Simones. They implore photographers to significantly raise their quality of work to a level that clearly combines both art and photography. Quoting Louise Simone, "Producing higher quality images does not necessarily take much more time. A timeless image begins with a consultation in which the photographer connects with the subject. The photographer then works to create a merging of the perfect pose, the perfect background, highly complementary lighting and the perfect expression, resulting in a portrait treasure which can be further enhanced with digital tools such as Photo Shop and Painter."

For the past four years, the Simones have made extensive use of the virtual backgrounds process in creating their timeless portraits to help add to the creativity and feeling of each individual image. The background is a very important component of a Simone portrait.

Visit the Simone website at www.simoneportrait.com. You can also learn where they are scheduled to present future programs and classes.

In summary, my philosophy behind this book is that yes, we have a very serious problem to deal with, but it isn't a fatal problem for all. If we are aware of the problem and if we take certain actions in how we operate our business, we can survive quite well. Paying special attention to the backgrounds used in our photographs is the long overlooked factor that stands out not only as a preventative device but also as a factor that can significantly help drive a studio to new levels of success. We have to move from a keep it simple (KIS) way of thinking to providing our clients with maximum variety and creativity in our products while including customization whenever it is feasible. This plan not only places the professional photographer on a level decidedly above the hordes of amateurs and newbie professionals, but it also enables us to deliver a product that will lead us to overall success.

Why, you might ask, did I write this booklet? It's no secret that Virtual Backgrounds manufactures virtual background machines. Backgrounds in general and virtual backgrounds in particular have been a very big part of my life for a good while now, and it is indeed a concept that can be an important profit-making component in most studios, large and small. I see the incorporation of backgrounds of all kinds into your everyday photography to be an important component to enable you to produce products that help you successfully fight the storm. It has worked for us in our studio. I see it working for many others. It can work for you too. It can be a turning point in your life.

If I have caught your attention, even just a little bit, I would like to invite you to consider reading my big book, **Background Power!** It has an enormous amount of information about backgrounds of all kinds and how to use backgrounds to help drive the business. You can also schedule to attend one of our workshops and try out virtual backgrounds for yourself. You need to touch it, work with it, to really start to "get it." You can also attend one of the many programs we sponsor. You can review our web site at **www.virtualbackgrounds.net** and you can read current and back issues of our electronic newsletter, *The Backgrounder*.

This is not the only reason why I chose to write this. There are also altruistic reasons. I have very much enjoyed my career to this point in many different aspects of the photographic industry. The next generation of my family is already deeply involved in the industry. I do indeed see big

problems for all photographers, but the sooner we realistically recognize those problems and start taking corrective action, the better the chance we have of succeeding. It is fortunate that the product my company makes can play such an important role in the solution.

While I view the virtual background concept as extremely important for most every professional photographer, I will not say that it, by itself, is a cure for all that ails our industry. It is a very powerful medicine but not a total cure. That medicine, however, can be made even more powerful if it is properly integrated with all the other important dimensions of portrait photography, the lighting, the posing, the expression, and all the other special techniques that are available to enhance the products we create. The incorporation of all of these techniques will make our customers happy and desire to purchase more. This in turn will make you extremely happy as well! However, we cannot for a minute forget the importance of recognizing the need for strong business management. That is always the critical factor.

I categorically feel that the implementation of virtual backgrounds is the most powerful tool that a photographer can add to his arsenal, along with a positive attitude and, of course, good photographic technique. Virtual backgrounds can play a big role in bringing the “magic” back. If you can think of something more powerful, more comprehensive, more exciting, and more profit generating, let me know.

Montana photographer, Trevon Baker, sums it up best in his presentations when he talks about the “Four Dimensions of Portrait Photography” and how important it is for the photographer to successfully weave all four dimensions together. When we do weave them together, it is so satisfying to produce a more creative product that pleases customers and makes money....a product that is far beyond, “good enough.” That’s the bottom line.

Your future depends on choices you make now. You can sit and see what happens or you can take definite action. What choices are you going to make?

**Remember,
"Survival is Optional!"**

Thank you for taking the time to read *Perfect Storm*. If you want to challenge my thinking or just discuss anything about professional portrait photography including virtual backgrounds, studio management, and marketing, call me at 512 805 4844 or e-mail me at henry@virtualbackgrounds.net.

The Professional Photographers of America have requested that I state that this book is not endorsed by them.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Besides ordering your copy of Background Power!, be sure to explore our internet site, www.virtualbackgrounds.net. Pay special attention to the expanded FAQ section where just about every question we are ever asked about virtual backgrounds is answered.

Be sure to register to receive our free monthly electronic newsletter, The Backgrounder. It includes all the latest information on backgrounds and how to use them to generate new profits. To sign up, go to info@virtualbackgrounds.net. You can also read past editions of The Backgrounder on our web site.

You can see virtual backgrounds equipment at any of the trade shows where we exhibit or you can attend a presentation or class by Joseph and Louise Simone, Larry Peters, Terry Deglau, Trevon Baker, Deborah and Rick Ferro, Rick Avalos, Rick Harding, Shirlee Robinson, Greg Stangl, Darrell Moll and others. You can talk with one of our consultants about specific applications for your studios. We can also send you sample photographs created with virtual backgrounds as well as our DVD.

Your very best option is to sign up to attend one of our monthly 3-day workshops devoted entirely to virtual backgrounds.

Just telephone us at 512-805-4844 or 1-800-831-0474 or go to the web site.

VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS WORKSHOPS

- **Get the facts.**
- **Get the information**
- **Try it yourself.**
- **See the results!**

**Three days devoted entirely to backgrounds and
how to turn them into new profits.**

Enrollment is limited...register now!

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THE BACKGROUNDER

**Our monthly e-Newsletter devoted
entirely to virtual backgrounds and how
to turn backgrounds into new profits.**

**To start receiving THE BACKGROUNDER,
go to info@virtualbackgrounds.net
or call 512-805-4844.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

info@virtualbackgrounds.net

For specific information on the virtual background process,
to order your copy of the book, BACKGROUNDPOWER! or
to register to start receiving your monthly copy of
the e-Newsletter, THE BACKGROUNDER

www.virtualbackgrounds.net

General information about virtual backgrounds

info@simoneportrait.com

To order THE PORTRAIT...MIRROR OF THE SOUL
by Joseph and Louise Simone

wsmfoto@aol.com

To order Bill McIntosh's books, LOCATION PORTRAITURE and
CLASSIC PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

chrisw@marathonpress.net

To reach Chris Wunder with Marathon Press

www.simoneportrait.com

Website for Joseph and Louise Simone

www.ferrophotographyschool.com

Website for Deborah and Rick Ferro's photography school

www.prospeak1.com

Website for Greg Stangl, marketing strategist and speaker

www.powermarketing101.com

Website for Mitche Graf's "POWER MARKETING 101"

www.jhartman.com

Website for John Hartman's "MARKETING BOOTCAMP"

www.hardingstudio.com

Website for Rick Harding

www.marianoles.com

Website for Marian Oles Photography

ABOUT OUR COMPANY

Virtual Backgrounds began when Henry and Marian Oles, both holders of the Cr.Photog. PPA degree, discovered the very important and profitable role backgrounds played when brought into their portrait studio. They purchased one of the very early optical background projection systems and had so much success with it that they decided to share their knowledge and experience with other photographers through articles, lectures, and classes. They created the very popular Scene Machine background system and have engineered many refinements in both projectors and screens that make today's products far superior to anything made in the past.

Customer education and customer service have always been critical components of the company, with a special focus on their highly acclaimed monthly three day workshops for both system owners as well as photographers who are just curious about background technology. The company's web site, www.virtualbackgrounds.net, is packed with information.

Virtual Backgrounds is located in San Marcos, Texas, a beautiful university town of about 50,000, just south of Austin. The company is located in part of a historical site known as The Old Mill which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Old Mill was restored by the Oles. Workshops are held in a dedicated area with some activities on board the company's private railroad cars which are parked along side the main building. A fundamental tenant of company founder, Dr. Henry Oles, is the importance of being different.

Photographers from all corners of the world come to San Marcos to attend the workshops or to just visit and "test drive" the systems for themselves. Virtual Backgrounds always "leaves the light on" for visitors who might be in the area.

PRAISE FOR PERFECT STORM...

Finally...the truth! PERFECT STORM is a frank and honest account of what we all know to be true but rarely see acknowledged. Everything is changing. Henry Oles has not only recognized our problems but also analyzed their causes and effects and identified realistic solutions.

– Russ & Nancy Hanson, M.Photog. Certified
Moorhead, Minnesota

PERFECT STORM nails the problem right on the nose. Studio owners have got to wake up and face reality. These are tough times for traditional studios but great times for enterprising, imaginative photographers who can blow away the competition including the amateur shutterbugs.

– John Owen, M.Photog.Certified
Past President, Michigan PPA.

PERFECT STORM really explains how things are and where we are going. It is a must read for any studio. It's a roadmap for those who want to be successful.

– Don Hileman
New Visions Photography, Boardman, Ohio

It's happening all over... but no one wants to talk about it. Studios are running out of business because digital cameras enable the amateurs to do so much.

Henry Oles is the only one who tells it like it is and what can be done.

Ignore reading PERFECT STORM at your own risk..

– P.J. Stanhope, York, England

The most valuable book I have ever read for my business. It will help me save my business.

It explains a lot and has great recommendations.

– Brian Angelo, Los Angeles, California

PERFECT STORM is an insightful, honest view of what challenges professional photographers are facing today. If you are a professional photographer and are experiencing "the storm" or want to learn how to avoid it hitting your studio, you must read this book.

– Liz Vickers, Publisher, Studio Photography, New York



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