

The Total Image
Robert A. Howard, PPA Certified, M.Photos., Cr.
Howard Studios, Lebanon, PA.

August 8, 2008

The Total Image

Experience the Difference. For more than two decades, we have marketed our studio using this slogan. Initially, I intended this slogan to be an indication of the quality of our work as compared to the work of our competition. However, throughout the past twenty years, I have come to realize that we are not just marketing superior photography; we are marketing the superiority, or difference, in the “total experience.” The business of photography involves more than just selling an outstanding photograph to someone; it involves selling the photographer himself firsthand. To truly be successful in today’s complex field which encompasses the imaging arts, a photographer or image maker, as we are now called, must not only market and advertise his printed image, he must simultaneously promote and market his personal or business image throughout his community as well: the “total experience”.

Beginning a career in the imaging arts is no longer just about taking a picture and then selling it. I began honing my photographic skills while still in high school, but it wasn’t until my college years that I truly understood the importance of making the sale. I used my photographic skills to help pay for most of my college tuition by first freelancing for my college newspaper and then by forming a small LLC to market my photographs to various local newspapers in the surrounding communities. While majoring in engineering, I realized I had a calling in photography. After two very frustrating years of study, I ultimately changed my enrollment to the New York Institute of Photography. The months that followed allowed me to learn and grow, constantly reaching to expand the limits of my new found creative outlet. However, during my work as an apprentice, I realized the importance of marketing the image of the photographer,

not just his work. After reading Donald Trump's The Art of the Deal, I was convinced that marketing my name to the public was just as important as getting my work shown to the public. I began conceptualizing the "total experience."

Many strategic businessmen believe that customers are the most important goal for a business.¹ But the question arises as to how to attract customers in the first place. With a small, privately-owned business, there are probably no connections and the only people who initially know about the photographer's work are family and close friends. To acquire clients, advertising should not only be about the product, but also provide an incentive to go to that specific photographer: something that says more than this man takes good photos. This is where the importance of marketing the image of the photographer becomes a vital key.

Marketing and advertising, while working together, are two completely different components. Marketing is a process, encompassing many different tactics to create, distribute, and promote services and ideas to essentially push a product. Advertising simply involves buying space in a newspaper, magazine, on the radio, etc., to promote a business.² Both are necessary in selling yourself.

One major strategy for marketing the image of a photographer is to participate or engage in activities that ultimately generate publicity within the community. This can be accomplished with minimum effort. A popular option has been to establish relationships with the local public school system. While many public schools may be contracted, most states have laws requiring a bidding process or other method by which a photographer

¹ Peters and Austin 39

² Amoyt Your Definition of Marketing; Applegate 164

may get a proverbial foot in the door. Establishing a relationship with public school administrators can ultimately lead to an opportunity to provide images to the school's publications such as the yearbook, which could then encourage that school to hire the photographer to photograph other school events. The efforts put forth by the photographer to please the school may lead the board of school directors to endorse the photographer among the students and their parents. A well motivated photographer has endless opportunities to promote his image in the educational system of his community.³

A photographer could donate time and/or products to a local organization, such as a volunteer fire company, service club, or business networking group. Community service can also be a key factor in acquiring publicity. Anywhere a photographer can provide for a sponsorship or contribute a monetary or product donation will enhance his name, as well as the name of his business, and both will become associated with a positive image. The more often he can get his name mentioned, the more likely a potential customer is to remember it.⁴ Working within a community also provides an opportunity to meet potential future clients and increase the chance that word will spread about the photographer's business.

In creating an image, a businessman should know how important it is to place the company name on everything. "Use your product as its own billboard," is a tactic Jane Applegate suggests in her book, "Great Ideas for Your Small Business."⁵ Any advertisement featuring the business should proudly display the business' name uniquely

³ Applegate 161-163

⁴ Applegate 162, 153

⁵ Applegate 153

in the foreground of the ad. The name of the company should be seen from the street, and it is helpful to provide an eye-catching sample of the products the photographer is capable of producing.

Acquiring customers may seem to be a job within itself, but the ultimate success of any business directly correlates to the success of its marketing endeavors. After all, we must acknowledge that interested clients are probably savvy and have shopped comparatively. They are usually looking for the best deal they can find. It is essential to realize that a customer does not come to the photographer just to buy pictures; he buys the “total experience.” Most potential clients are not just looking for a low price. Many want not only quantity, but quality, and a comfortable buying experience. Quantity is available at Wal-Mart, Target, etc., but the comfortable buying experience is only provided by the photographer and his customer service staff.

From the moment a potential client approaches the photographer about a possible session, the photographer must be ready to “sell” himself as well as his products. During this early stage in the relationship, the photographer will not be able to impress the client with an “experience.” Instead he must rely on his own enthusiasm and energy, allowing the potential client to share in the heightened level of enthusiasm. The photographer should be personal, approachable, and show interest in the client. Andre Amoyt claims “you can have the best portfolio, the nicest looking gallery, but if your people skills are lacking, you are fighting an uphill battle.”⁶

To fully understand a client’s position, a photographer should try to look at himself from the customer’s point of view. Unless the photographer has the lowest prices

⁶ Amoyt Market Yourself; Peters and Austin 39, 68-70; Trump 71

in town, he will need to show the customer that he does offer the best deal for his money.⁷ Hopefully at this point, the potential client is no longer looking at the price; instead, he is now envisioning the difference this particular photographer can offer. Persuading the client to see the actual quality of the photographer's work can be extremely difficult, but once the client realizes he is getting a superior piece of work, the price no longer becomes a problem.⁸

Sara Cliver suggests going even further to impress the client. Asking questions about the client's goals, industry, or business could bring unexpected approval and pleasing thoughts to the client. Cliver stresses showing interest in the client's life, as well as the project, might ensure the bond between the client and photographer. She also initially suggests verbally walking the client through the entire procedure of the project, as to minimize any unwelcome surprises during the procedure. Again, the photographer should continue to show enthusiasm in what he wants to do for the client; obviously, if the photographer sounds bored with a project, the customer will probably not be interested in working with him either. With a positive outlook on the forthcoming experience, the client will probably decide to work with the photographer.⁹

"Expectations are what people buy, not things," says Ted Levitt in Peters' and Austin's A Passion for Excellence.¹⁰

Some photographers may disagree with these marketing strategies, convinced that

⁷ Amoyt Market Yourself, Trump 71

⁸ Peters and Austin 51-52

⁹ Cliver Managing the Client

¹⁰ 70

gaining publicity merely requires commercial advertising. These photographers do not realize how much the business arena has changed. It has become increasingly difficult for a photographer to make an impact in the industry. As technology continues to advance and production costs drop, the electronics industry has flooded the consumer market with professional quality cameras specifically designed for the novice. This technology has allowed for the much easier mastering of the basic skills of a photographer. Acquiring these basic skills, especially through the use of home computers and digital editing software, has allowed consumers, as well as potential clients, to become more proficient at creating their own images. The access the public has to photography only increases the importance of offering and advertising a “total experience” superior to what the public is trying to accomplish themselves.

One of the biggest mistakes a photographer makes when a client turns down his product is blaming it on the client’s perception. The problem is that there essentially is no reality, at least from the customer’s point of view. There is only perceived reality, the way he chooses to see the value of a product or the quality of a service. A photographer may be considered a master at his craft by other photographers’ standards, but if his business is selling his work, then awards and certificates and his known expertise mean nothing.¹¹ L. L. Bean, an outdoor apparel and retail company in Freeport, Maine, displays the following poster:

A Customer is the most important person ever in this office...

A Customer is not dependent on us; we are dependent on him.

A Customer is not an interruption of our work; he is the purpose of it. We

¹¹ Peters and Austin 70-73, 87

are not doing a favor by serving him; he is doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so...¹²

A business transaction is successful when the customer is the center and focus of the transaction. Utilizing and promoting this type of customer service is extremely effective in marketing a photographer's image. This prevailing customer service must include all staff members in addition to the photographer.

A business may have the most intelligent people working the job, but if it does not have a positive image projected throughout the community, it will go nowhere. Business starters are so concerned with building strong internal forces that they do not focus on the marketing obstacles, and their businesses collapse. The interaction between photographer and customer is the most important communication within the establishment, and the introduction to that interaction lies within marketing.¹³

Putting too much focus on innovation is another mistake entrepreneurs make when trying to make an impact in the industry. Photographers pursue creating new techniques in lighting and implementing different styles, but photography is no longer the experimental science it was in bygone days. The business of photography, while concerned with innovative strategies, can not forget the ultimate goal – a constant flow of money thus ensuring the success of the business for the following months. Simply said – *profit*. Thus affording to do what a photographer loves, which is best described simply as taking pictures, requires utilizing marketing strategies which project and advertise the

¹² Peters and Austin 95

¹³ Deschin 119-144

exceptional image of the photographer.¹⁴

A successful career in photography ultimately takes a great deal of patience and fortitude. A photographer has taken the first steps to his success once he establishes his image within his community. Public marketing strategies such as those aforementioned ultimately lead to interactions with prospective clients, which then require personal marketing strategies, or the ability to sell the photographer's image along with a product to the clients. What makes a photographer's business superior to others is the "total experience," not the awards circling his office. It can be summed up by saying SELL YOURSELF OR SELL THE BUSINESS.

¹⁴ Blanchard 36, Deschin 9-11, Peters and Austin 119-120

Works Cited

- Amoyt, Andre. "Your Definition of Marketing?" and "Market Yourself." Jonathan Penney, Inc. E-mail newsletter. 18 October 2005.
- Applegate, Jane. 201 Great Ideas for Your Small Business. Princeton NJ: Bloomberg Press, 1998.
- Blanchard, Ken. Mission Impossible. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.
- Cliver, Sara. "Managing the Client: A Fairy Tale." Digital Web Magazine 3 Jan 2002 6 Jun 2008 <http://www.digital-web.com/articles/managing_the_client>.
- Deschin, Jacob. Photography In Your Future. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.
- Peters, Tom, and Nancy Austin. A Passion for Excellence. New York: Random House Inc., 1985.
- Smith, Jeff. Success in Portrait Photography: Marketing and Management Techniques for Studio Owners. Buffalo NY: Amherst Media Inc, 2002.
- Thoenes, James. "Photography-How the business has changed." Website Development and Internet Marketing. 14 Apr 2006. 9 Jul 2008 <<http://digitalkeyto.info/business/photography-how-the-business-has-changed.html>>.
- Trump, Donald. The Art of the Deal. New York: Random House Inc., 1987.