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Subject: **Brand Building for Today's Portrait/Wedding Studio**
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Brand Building for Today's Portrait/Wedding Studio.

Successful studios have “brand recognition”. Consistently over time, these photographers have worked with a four step program to build their brand. When we think of brands in general, certain company names quickly come to mind: GM, Nike, McDonald’s, Campbell’s, Heinz, etc. Why does this happen? Cognitively, we respond to certain visual symbols. Principles of branding work in any industry or business. You can use the same four steps to enhance or build a “brand” for your photography business.

The four steps are Promise, Personality, USP and Identifiers. Most business people jump the gun by erroneously thinking identifiers are the “brand”. McDonald’s golden arches and Nike’s swoosh emblem are good examples of an identifier. But these emblems would not have any marketing power if the first three steps in the brand establishing process were never implemented.

The Promise:

Though not needing to be unique, the business promise must always be fulfilled. Back peddling on the promise will be taken by the consumer as being manipulative where stated values and benefits are really smoke and mirrors to cover up substandard products or services. By stating a promise in writing, a guarantee is being made. Make promises that can be kept without egging on conflict with consumers. “Either you are happy or we will refund all your money”, is a strong promise for products sold off the shelf like a picture frame, but can lead to needless debates with consumers over subjectivity and value judgments relating to portraiture. “Quality portraiture to be cherished for a life time,” as an example, is a practical promise and very non-confrontational. Successful businesses stand behind their promise statements.

The Personality:

Businesses do have personalities that consumers feel and react to. Personalities of hotels and restaurants are very easy to discern. All cruise ship lines and Disney work on their personalities every day. Most small businesses including photography take on the personality of the owner-photographer and studio employees. Research shows that brands do have personalities that take on the value system of corporate culture or the small business owner. Consumers are more than happy to do business with a personality similar to their own which is why front line employees can sour even a good studio operation. A successful portrait studio is always friendly and supportive where everyone is smiling including the customer. Moody people should not be working in portrait studios period. Being cognizant of your studio's personality is crucial.

The USP:

The Unique Selling Proposition describes a brand in contrast to the competition. When listening to the radio, reading of magazines or watching television, the general public is constantly being bombarded by unique selling propositions. It's the American way. Most corporations pay ad agencies millions to develop their USP. Professional photographers do not have that luxury. When drafting an USP much credence is required. "We're the best" just will not do at all because that particular USP is now over used and carries very little weight with the informed consumer.

Where to begin in drafting an USP is critical because each USP should differentiate your studio from all others in the same competing area. If consumers perceive each studio's USP as the same, they will most likely select any studio from the yellow pages, literature received or advertisements. To establish an USP baseline, most studios had selected key words and phrases from past customer comments. No embellishments were required because the USP was based on truth and fact. The baseline was reworked into a simple sentence that clearly communicated to the consumer the uniqueness of the studio. This procedure is highly recommended. Remember the USP is not the studio's mission statement. Here are a few USP examples:

1. Artistic skills and knowledge of light used to create masterpieces.
2. We just don't take pictures...we create family memories.
3. It is all about you!
4. Classic elegance and personal expression abound here.
5. We are the quality difference...let us show you.

The Identifier:

The identifier step is all about symbols. The first three steps must be conceptualized to

symbols such as a logo, a key phrase or jingle. When consumers drive towards any mall they are exposed to a huge array of symbols that jogs the mind to recall feelings and perceptions of products and services. For some consumers the golden arches make their mouth water for the taste of a burger and french fries. Visualization of a symbol or hearing a sound on the radio is all it takes for our minds to recall the sales pitch---buy me. A studio's logo should represent the embodiment of what that studio really is. Time needs to be devoted to the symbol creation process if a logo is to have power.

The designated identifier such as a logo must be applied to all marketing efforts: ads, sales brochures and materials, business cards, letter head, web site, etc. Repetitive use of the identifier is required to aid consumers in the mental recall of the brand.

May we suggest a good studio web search to see how studios are using their brand or to see if they actually have a brand. Successful studios have established a brand.

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