



Overcoming Consumers as Competitors

Today's digital cameras give consumers the ability to be their own portrait photographer. More parents are doing their own senior portraits using ink jet printers or taking their images to mini-labs. When film was popular, wedding photographers had to contend with relatives being competitors. It wasn't uncommon at nearly every wedding that someone's uncle, equipped with a SRL camera with a bag of lenses, was attempting to photograph over the pro's shoulder. With digital cameras nothing has changed, uncle now has the latest 10 mega pixel camera with a zoom lens still being the proverbial pest. However, now mom and dad believe they can be their own senior photographer. This growing trend is becoming more common place and most likely will not go away any time soon. The professional has to take action.

Just the other day a dad was in the local park posing his two sons next to a crab apple tree. Note: he was posing not just taking snap shots. He may have had to take 10 shots to get one good one, but this is all he needs anyway. The days of expensive film processing and hit or miss picture taking are gone. Dad gets his best pose without having to spend a dime on film or processing. He most likely will have conventional paper prints made at Sam's Club or mini-lab after doing a little touch up with his free version of Photoshop. What is missing here are the professional sitting fee, a \$400 package sale and perhaps a frame sale. This phenomenon is repeated over and over everyday of the year. It is no wonder that professional photographers are having to work harder and advertising more to maintain sitting counts.

Is there a solution to this perplexing problem? As technology simplifies once difficult and complex tasks, even with photography, the professional must offer products that mom and dad cannot easily produce. A high level of skill and technique must be employed while keeping in mind that software writers will be following your trail attempting to simplify your techniques for consumer consumption. Just perhaps it might just be too late for some professional photographers. Go to www.photofiddle.com. We believe, however, overcoming consumers as competitors is still a battle worth fighting.

The battle may be difficult for some professionals because they are already on the slippery slope of selling small print sizes (8x10 or smaller), using ho-hum lighting and posing techniques and raising prices to stay on budget. A personal audit of your price list, senior and wedding package content and sample prints will indicate how steep the slippery slope really is. The problem is that mom and dad and the new professional competitor are relentless and will not give up that easily. Added to that are camera manufacturers and software writers all attempting to grow their consumer photographic market given that the professional market is a mere dwarf in comparison. It is simple: there are only 36,000 recognized professional photographers while the consumer population is now 300,000,000, which all boils down to the principle: 'just follow the money trail.'

History is a great teacher. What went around eventually comes back around. Just look at technology. Electric cars are coming back, and soon nuclear power will be center stage as it is already in Europe. Steam will soon be on the forefront as coal technology is modernized. It goes on and on. OK, our point is every art history course has the same central theme: portraiture was and still is very important to certain people as evidenced by continued museum attendance. Over the centuries any person of financial means usually owned an oil original of themselves. First, it showed their status in society. Second, it was to be an heirloom. Can this concept be replicated today? Yes, it certainly can if qualified professionals pursue this market. Keep in mind people of noted fame have asked to be photographed by Andy Warhol, not the other way around. Yet, the Warhol process was extremely simple: a large Polaroid camera combined with a silk screen process. Today on www.yourartisticside.com any consumer can make their digital image into a Warhol look-a-like. Or, they can select from many artistic styles, have a print made, and even have it printed on canvas without going to a professional.

A priority requirement is taking the concept of portraiture to a higher level or to a different medium that becomes "art." Currently, some photographers are exploring digital black and white hoping that the nostalgic look takes off. But, without understanding the artistic use of extreme shadowing and the science of dark room printing, very few photographers can duplicate the Hollywood portrait look of the 1930's. If done well, using digital capture and Photoshop, B&W can certainly be a revenue generating niche for some. Further exploration of this niche is needed to determine if sufficient consumer demand actually exists for all professionals including other potential niches.

The concept of 'artist commissions' needs to be reinstated for digital portraiture. Hand oil and pastel portrait artists all operate on a commission basis .i.e. consumer pays in advance. \$10,000+ is the usual starting price for an original portrait. For the financial elite, the \$10K price tag does not even take

a second thought. A standard, base price for digital artistry for portraiture needs to be determined when combining photography, art and print. As an example, go to www.idmoserstudios.com. The major difference is that **you** take the picture, not the consumer. Either you or a lab would complete the digital transformation to a piece of 'art.' Here is a simple outline of the commissioned sale process:

A). Have camera will travel. Only large metro areas most likely will be able to support a fixed location studio. To get started you may have to travel between cities for appointments: example--Chicago to Milwaukee to Minneapolis/St. Paul , and then eventually settle on one location as your market becomes established.

B). Take a series of poses from many angles and lighting variations all being conducive to Photoshop and painter software application for the artistic style one wishes to promote. Note: most standard lighting ratios do not provide a proper foundation required to adequately transform, with software, a typical portrait digital file into a piece of art resembling a hand painted portrait. Your ability to light the subject will make all the difference. A well lit flat look may be the best place to start. Software can always add shadows & high lights and emphasize the main elements in the background to give the impression of 'oil artistry.' The final look needs to be natural, not forced. Most camera time would be in the client's home, office or unique outdoors location.

C). Complete the artistry in your studio or at a lab. The project may take several weeks. Keep in mind that a digital portrait artist may only have 30 commissions per year at an average of \$5k per commission for a total gross of \$150,000 per year. Net profit would depend on travel expenses and image output, but overall expenses would be low because you would be working out of your home with very little overhead.

D). Referrals can generate future business. Happy customers will tell your story. Keeping up with the Jones' will do the hard marketing for you. An ad in your city's high brow magazines may be necessary to get the ball rolling.

If you are proficient with Photoshop and painter software, commissioned portraits as a niche business model may be the best way to pursue an artistic career in digital photography that can be very rewarding and less stressful. Becoming established in this niche may require time to make the necessary connections with potential clients. At a minimum you will be able to offer a product that most prosumers and professional photographers (unless outsourced) could not match and at a price level that rewards your bottom line.

A Google search clearly illustrates that mom and dad can easily compete with the professional to self fulfill most of their portrait needs, but not on the

same quality level. **The future of professional photography may just depend on how well the pros can distance themselves from that which the consumer can do for themselves.**

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