

Primarily designed to target women, boutique studios are defined by their ability to create a “language of connection and intimacy” with their female clients. Personal service and specialized products realize this concept.

MARKETING

By Ann K. Monteith, M.Photog.Cr., Hon.M.Photog., A-ASP, CPP

The photographic industry has long recognized that women are the ones who choose the photographer, the primary buyers of portrait and wedding photography. Still, it's taken a decade-long influx of women into the profession—and some enlightened studio owners—to put female consumers at the center of photo-marketing efforts and to change the direction of studio photography.

Some of today's most financially successful photography businesses, run by women or men, fall into the emerging business model best described as boutique photography studios. Like their retail counterparts, these photographers recognize that boutiques are powerfully attractive to discriminating women seeking something different in a crowded marketplace of ho-hum goods and services. For many women with discretionary income, specialized products and personal service hold far more appeal than anything in mass-market department stores.

With hardly a ripple of fanfare, the boutique studio revolution has quietly yet dramatically changed the market. A growing number of photographers of both sexes are opting to create niche businesses and adopting key aspects of the boutique experience.

Each of the studios described here has a distinct personality and experience to offer clients. They differ in many ways, from studio size and décor to branding to product selection. What they all have in common in their boutique-market approach is a tight focus on the needs and desires of the ideal consumer.

Left: Even the packaging at V Gallery reflects a distinctive style. Boutique studio owners know that when it comes to attracting women, finesse is key.

What women want

It's specialized, it's personal, and it's changing your market.



©V Gallery



©Jeffrey and Julia Woods



©Jeffrey and Julia Woods

Top: V Gallery in Morton, Ill., epitomizes the boutique studio look with jewel tones, accessories and beautiful lighting. Everything works together to provide an environment that women clients understand and enjoy. Left and above: Urban chic reflects a different boutique personality at the studio of Jeffrey and Julia Woods in downtown Washington, Ill.



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Lori Nordstrom bases her style, her studio and her tag line on the idea of real life. This concept even extends to her client service. She's always mindful that a portrait session is a big event in her clients' lives.

"You might be tired, but this session means everything to your client," she says.

"It might be their only portraits this year or for several years, so don't let them down. Try to be the best part of your client's day."



LORI NORDSTROM

ENVIRONMENTAL & FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY



Sarah Petty, CPP, Sarah Petty Photography, Springfield, Ill. Though Petty's business comprises photography of families, children and high school seniors, she has focused her branding effort on her whimsical portraits of young children, a niche she thoroughly enjoys serving. Petty's studio is located in a quaint upscale shopping center frequented by her target market. "Our ideal client is someone with several kids who values art and photography and believes in investing in heirloom-quality work," she says. "We concentrate much of our marketing on educating clients on how to decorate their homes using our artwork as inspiration."

Jed and Vicki Tauffer, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, V Gallery, Morton, Ill. From the day they opened their studio doors, Vicki and Jed Tauffer managed to create a high-profile image of success. The eclectic studio design is the virtual embodiment of the boutique concept.

"People know when they walk into our gallery that they will be investing in a high-quality product," Vicki explains. Like other retailers of boutique products, the Tauffers stress the importance of offering a distinct selection of merchandise. "Having unique products and different options creates excitement and keeps clients coming back again and again," says Jed.

Sandy Puc, M.Photog.Cr., ABI, CPP, Expressions Photography, Littleton, Colo. Although much larger than most boutique-style studios, this 5,000-square-foot building maintains an atmosphere of personalized service, friendship and community that makes it a magnet for families looking for consistently pleasing portrait products. "As a high-volume, high-grossing studio, our business concept is very unusual," Puc states. "It's a model we can maintain only by making our clients happy, whatever the cost. We justify our prices by treating everyone as

This custom-designed and artfully painted play area in Sandy Puc's studio provides both style and function. Many Expressions Photography clients are children, and they need something to do while waiting for their session to begin, or when their parents are placing orders.

our most important client in terms of the way we market, the service and experience we provide, and the quality of the products they buy."

Lori Nordstrom, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, Lori Nordstrom Studio, Winterset, Iowa. Nordstrom's boutique studio is defined by her chosen niche, celebrating real life, also her signature style and her marketing tag line. Working from her residential studio in the small town of Winterset, Nordstrom has become a recognized maternity and baby photographer. "When you concentrate your marketing on an aspect of your business that you love, it doesn't mean that you can't or won't do other types of photography," she explains. "When

you become an expert in a specific area, you get more recognition, and that leads to inquiries about other types of photography.”

Jeff and Julia Woods, both Cr.Photog., Washington, Ill. Everything about the Woodses’ photography, business image and marketing style shouts urban chic, a sophistication that captures the imagination of fashion-conscious clients in their small Midwestern city. The architecture and the furnishings of their downtown studio underscore

Sarah Petty creates “wow” marketing materials to attract the attention of prospective clients. New moms who are looking for something different receive a strong message about creativity through this multi-part mailer enhanced by clever die cuts and folds.

their wedding life and portrait life business concept, “providing one-of-a-kind pieces of art to enhance clients’ homes,” says Julia.

Beverly Walden, M.Photog.Cr. and Tim Walden, M.Photog.Cr., F-ASP, Lexington, Ky. Walden’s Photography has a long tradition of providing elegant images in three signature styles: color studies created in-studio; emotion-filled relationship portraits in black and white; and lifestyle portraits created in an environment that has special meaning to the client. Two years ago, they broadened their boutique appeal when Beverly created a Walden division directed toward women clients. Called Beau Visage, French for “beautiful face,” this relaxing spa-like studio within Walden’s offers “a more artistic

portrait and a place to retreat from the outside world,” says Beverly.

Regardless of the differences in their business personalities, these six studios have a common approach to marketing. Their promotional strategies reflect a singular understanding that women respond differently to marketing media and marketing messages than men do. Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., author of “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation” (Quill), cites studies showing that 70 percent of women learn most about a product from someone who owns one. One of her most interesting conclusions is that women consumers tend to speak and hear “a language of connection and intimacy” rather than a competitive language of status and independence.



10 LESSONS YOU CAN LEARN FROM BOUTIQUE STUDIOS

1. A focused business concept that makes it clear to consumers what you do, how your business is different, and what they can get from you alone. Sarah Petty's whimsical marketing materials and her trademarked tag line, "funny faces... magic places," set the tone of the studio experience for parents and children. "Our entire facility is set up to capture the magic of children," Petty explains. "There's nothing for them to break, our lights mount to a track on the ceiling, and we have a treasure chest, a trampoline and other goodies to ensure success with every session."

Lori Nordstrom reflects her business concept in her marketing personality. She explains, "Our business is about capturing real life, so our displays and marketing pieces need to speak 'real life.' Nothing appears to be posed or staged. This is important because we don't want to lead people to believe we are something that we are not."

2. Know your ideal client—what she wants, where she shops, how she thinks, what she values. Jeff and Julia Woods believe so strongly in this principle that from time to time they travel with their staff to Chicago to learn first-hand what kinds of products and services upscale clients expect. They patronize the same hotels, restaurants and boutiques as their clients. "If you don't live an upscale lifestyle," says Jeff, "it's a good way to learn the expectations of people who do. It's a fun way to have a break from business, and the business benefits enormously from the perspective you gain."

3. A commitment to marketing quality is as important as a commitment to image quality. Marketing at the highest level has always been a hallmark of Walden's Photography. According to Tim Walden, it's more impor-

tant than ever. "As the distance between good photography and exceptional photography has narrowed," he says, "control of the marketplace has shifted from creating outstanding images toward consistent and compelling marketing. Today it is vital for you to separate yourself from the competition through consistent marketing quality."

4. Establish a memorable brand and give it meaning through inspired marketing. How do you create inspired marketing? Says Beverly Walden, "The first step is to define your photographic style. If your style is emotional, then market in an emotional style. Doing so will add passion to your marketing efforts."

A vital part of Sarah Petty's branding strategy is creating unusual marketing pieces—mailers with die cuts, textured papers, and unusual folds—all designed to catch clients' attention. "Your brand is what people think about you," she says. "When you send a marketing piece that is quite obviously creative, clients gain a perception that your photography is creative as well."

The Taufers reinforce their brand by using visual consistency in their marketing materials and packaging—featuring eye-catching bronze, black and leopard designs and their distinctive V logo.

5. Create compelling, must-have products with your ideal client in mind, gaining inspiration from current retail trends. A primary characteristic of boutique studio owners is their eagerness to develop unique products that support and extend their brand. Sarah Petty markets her cheerfully framed images as exclusive wall décor for children's bedrooms. The Woodses focus on cutting-edge ways to display images, from edgy wall installations to toddler sessions presented on a toy View

Master viewer. Lori Nordstrom's Gallery Book and Story Book collections showcase important events or special moments in the lives of children and families. Sandy Puc' creates specialty products for each product line she offers. Beverly Walden creates one-of-a-kind virtual paintings of her Beau Visage clients. The Taufers offer jewelry, handbags, photo-stones and image boxes, along with original wall accents.

"You have to get out of your studio and see what's happening in the world of retail," Puc' says. "These are the trends that ultimately will affect the products you create. Understand what the 'big dogs' are doing, and you can take the lead in your market by creating products and marketing concepts that will make clients pay attention to your business and keep them excited about you."

The real function of Sarah Petty's packaging is giving clients a great send-off as well as something to show to their friends.



©Sarah Petty

Boutique studios are powerfully attractive to discriminating **women** seeking something **different** in a crowded **marketplace** of ho-hum goods and services. With hardly a ripple of fanfare, the boutique **studio revolution** has changed the market.

6. Provide an experience for your clients. Lori Nordstrom is passionate about giving every session 100 percent of her attention. “You might be tired, but this session means everything to your client,” she says. “It might be their only portraits this year or for several years, so don’t let them down. Try to be the best part of your client’s day. Ask yourself, ‘What experience can I give my client that she will not receive elsewhere?’ and ‘How can I continue to build our relationship?’”

When Puc’ offers her popular Limited Edition portrait sessions throughout the year, she’s well aware that a big reason parents make repeat visits is to see the joy their children experience during these fantasy dress-up sessions. “They look at the portraits and remember the emotion of the experience,” she says. It becomes part of the parent and child’s shared history.”

7. Know that clients appreciate your opinion and guidance. All six of these studios use pre-view projection techniques to guide their clients’ portrait purchases. Julia Woods explains: “Projection has allowed us to offer our clients the experience of a comfortable sitting area, surround-sound music, dimmed lights, chilled drinks, fun snacks, and a professional with knowledge of art and how it is best displayed. All of these things make the value of what we sell much higher. It attracts clients who are willing to pay for quality, but who expect first-class service. And when they have a great experience, they tell their friends how wonderful it was.”

Beverly and Tim Walden take the additional step of providing clients with a written sales suggestion brochure, which provides a verbal and visual recommendation of their favorite images and suggested sizes for display because, Tim says, “Clients truly do value the opinion of the artist who created the image.



©Walden Photography

Attention to detail in every area leaves a favorable impression. At Walden's Photography, even the powder room is well appointed with the Waldens' art.

You should never hesitate to express your thoughts about their purchase decision.”

8. Create a buzz-marketing strategy. These boutique studio owners understand how important it is to have their clients and prospects talking about them. Internet marketing has become a way of not only providing information about the business, but also of enabling clients to pass it on to their friends.

Sam Puc’ uses her Web site, expressions-photos.com, to keep eager parents informed about upcoming Limited Editions fantasy portrait opportunities. Lori Nordstrom advises prospective clients to review nordstromphoto.com before visiting the studio because, “I want them to get a sense of the personality of my business before we meet in person.” Jeff and Julia Woods’ Daily Buzz

blog is well read by clients. “They see things that amaze them, and they want to tell their friends about ‘how you can have dinner with 20 guests while hanging suspended in air.’ Their friends have to check it out, so they send them to our Web site (jwportraitlife.com). It helps to established us as artists as well as make prospects interested in us as people.”

How important is word-of-mouth buzz? Just ask Lori Nordstrom: “A happy client—especially an involved client—is a walking commercial,” she says. “Your clients can be your most aggressive marketing campaign. When they talk about you, you don’t have to talk about yourself, and there is no marketing expense involved!”

9. Create marketing partnerships with local business and charities. One of the best ways

to get your studio noticed is to partner with businesses that serve the same kinds of people you wish to serve. “Offer to put images of their favorite clients on their walls,” suggests Sarah Petty. “Pretty soon they’ll be bragging about you, so you don’t have to brag about yourself!”

Expressions Photography has become a household word throughout the Denver area because of the many partnerships that Sandy Puc’ has forged with local and national charities. “Your business will grow when you help these organizations raise money, because so many people come to know you through your efforts on behalf of their charity. Best of all is the

Every aspect of Walden's Photography is designed to provide a pleasurable experience for the client.



©Walden's Photography

satisfaction you receive in knowing that what you do for a living makes life better for others.”

10. Establishing relationships with your clients is the key to long-term business success.

Start gaining their trust and friendship by educating them about the value of your portraiture and catering to them on a personal level.

The Waldens are passionate about relationships. This passion informs not only the relationship style of photography they are known for internationally, but also every aspect of their marketing philosophy. “To create exceptional images, you must know the story of the people you are photographing,” Tim states. “That’s why the portrait consultation is so important.”

“Trust is an important aspect of achieving good sales,” Beverly adds. “When you spend time educating your client about the portrait process, it raises the perceived value of your product. This allows the sale to become a forgone conclusion without having to apply pressure or risk having the client fall victim to buyer’s remorse.” The Waldens also look for ways to pamper their clients, such as leaving a welcome gift of private-label Walden Water, Chapstick, and a handwritten welcome note in the dressing room. “My goal,” adds Beverly, with a smile, “is to make them feel guilty should they decide to go anywhere else for portraits.”

One of the surprising benefits of the boutique model is business that’s easier to manage. “When you stop trying to be all things to all people and instead focus on a very specific type of client or concentrate on a particular niche or style of photography, your business becomes much

less complicated,” Sarah Petty concludes. “This in turn gives you more time to really enjoy what you do, and you have more time for yourself and your family.” This, perhaps, is the most important gift of the boutique studio revolution. ■

Learn more about Ann Monteith’s Boutique Studio Revolution at the Chicks Who Click conference in the Bahamas, June 25-27. Making a debut at the event, BellaGrafica marketing products developed by the studio owners mentioned here. For more information about Chicks Who Click, visit www.ppa.com.

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