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In new era of photography, some struggle

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Twenty years ago, Bob Ocken was shooting 200 weddings a year.

This summer it's down to two.

Since the recession in 2008, Ocken, a Little Rock-based photographer, has seen his business drop by 20 percent to 50 percent each year.

Ocken attributes slow business to an increase in the number of new photographers who are experts at marketing their services.

"It's not only affected my business, it's killed my business," he said.

Ocken said over the course of his career he's honed his skills in photography, but he hasn't gained the business savvy needed to compete.

"At some point, you have to decide to be a business person," Ocken said.

Photographers who got their start before the internet had to learn how to market their business using social media - and they had to do it while competing with people who have grown up with the internet.

Nancy Nolan, a Little Rock-based commercial photographer, said new photographers are starting out in a climate that's entirely different from how she started.

When Nolan first started photography in the 1980s, she would send her six leather portfolios embossed with her name to companies looking to hire photographers.

"I was shooting fashion and when FedEx came along we would have to have model comps sent off overnight," Nolan said. "And that was really great until the fax was invented. We sat by that fax machine and watched those first head shots roll out. We were like 'Oh my God!' And we would call and go 'Did you get the fax?'"

Now, through web-hosting services, photographers can get a basic website for less than \$100 a year. On Facebook, many photographers create a page for their business and advertise their services using Instagram, Twitter or Pinterest.

Nolan said the Internet has changed the pace of the industry and made it harder for veteran photographers to stand out.

"It didn't hurt that you were more visible," Nolan said. "But it made everybody more visible."

In many ways, Nolan said, she admires the younger group of photographers for their marketing savvy.

"People who've been working in the industry for a long time, who really have the chops, find it's difficult to be found because there are other people who have chops in different areas, like tagging their site so they come up first in searches," Nolan said.

In addition to heightened competition, consumer preferences have changed in a way that works against a photographer's bottom-line.

Consumers today often request digital files in lieu of prints.

Michelle Posey, a Little Rock-based portrait photographer, said in order for portrait and wedding photography businesses to survive, they have to offer printing services.

Posey said she's seen photographers give in to the demand, cutting their printing services, selling their studio spaces and offering digital files. She said she's watched most of these photographers go out of business.

When consumers want only digital files, Posey said, they're willing to pay less for a photographer than if they were to purchase prints.

"I totally understand that you wouldn't want to pay that much for it, because if you're just putting it on your computer, I would argue that you're getting almost no value out of it," Posey said.

Amy Carper, who just moved into her downtown studio in the Little Rock River Market, said she stays in business by catering to highprofile clients and offering specialty printing services.

Carper prints her photos on handmade paper, the same kind used by 19th-century artist Claude Monet, at a local print shop. She offers photo albums through the same company used by the Queen of England.

Years ago, Carper said, she saw the industry change and decided her business model had to stay ahead of the game.

"The economy fell and I lost people that couldn't afford me," Carper said. "I decided that I loved this boutique feel and I love having a handful of clients. So I took a deep breath, raised my prices and went very exclusive."

Ocken has not been able to differentiate in the same way. He's tried lowering his prices, but then people think he's underselling himself. When he raises prices people think he's charging too much, he said.

Ocken sold his studio space. Starting this year, he's offering digital-only packages.

To keep his business afloat, Ocken relies on contracts through companies and venues. He used to have a contract with Verizon Arena in North Little Rock, and now has a contract with a bike company.

Other photographers have started selling photos as stock images - a segment of the industry that Nolan said is overtaking wedding photography as the most profitable sector.

Carper said she's relying on her extensive stock image collection to get her through retirement. Eventually, her children will inherit her archives.

"I've shot for the President Clinton Library for six years and I always take photos of every person that's anybody because at some point I'll probably go into stock imagery," she said.

Nolan is an optimist when it comes to the state of the industry. Last week she helped judge photos shot on phone cameras for a contest by the Arkansas Mobile Phoneographers.

"I think maybe it's our place in the world, as the older crowd, to go out and say, 'You know what? This is valid,'" she said. "There is a lot of crap out there, but there is a lot of really good, exciting stuff too."

Beyond battling the financial downturn and racing to master new technology, Nolan and other photographers want their work to command the same respect it used to.

"I think it's just frustrating when people diminish what we do, and that happens a lot more because it's so easy to do," Nolan said. "Photography is one of the easiest art mediums to participate in, but it is the hardest to distinguish yourself in."