Profiting in the Seniors Market
Senior portrait photography remains a lucrative specialty

Tara Propper

RON ROUSE : Targeted Marketing

North Dakota-based RON ROUSE (http://rousegallery.typepad.com) is all about quality over quantity. For Rouse, the key to a successful marketing campaign is focusing on a core group of seniors. "My promotional brochures showcase the entire group of seniors I would photograph from a particular community or school. This correlates to my 'targeted marketing' emphasis on seeking a smaller group of seniors, rather than a high-volume orientation. When clients can be spending close to $2,000 on a senior portfolio, it doesn't take long to see a substantial portion of your business benefit from this type of high-end focus."

Rouse relies heavily on his new blog. "I started a blog three months ago, and the response has been explosive. I post something every day on the site, which has become my primary connection to current and future clients. Not only are people finding out about my work, but they enjoy reading the stories that I post. I am able to track how many people are looking at the site, when they are looking at it, and what particular pages they are looking at, and I find that people are constantly visiting the archives."

Rouse offers AsukaBook coffee-table books as part of a senior portrait order. "If a client hits a certain price point in the order, the coffee-table book is included on the house with the order. For each senior who receives a book, the book is going to be a great keepsake for them, as well as a tremendous initiator for word-of-mouth referrals for our studio."

DAVE JUNION: Mystery Marketing

For Wisconsin-based DAVE JUNION (www.junion.com), cutting-edge images and a subtle marketing approach are integral to his success. "We like to create an air of mystery when it comes to our marketing strategy. We want our images to speak to the clients. We don't use gimmicks or the hottest tricks. We have the higher-end client base in the community, doing 200 seniors with a $1,200 average order."

Junion favors building relationships to sending out direct-mail pieces. "We have actually become known for not mailing to seniors," he says. "Our marketing is about getting into the community through schools, businesses, and nonprofits. For example, drama programs and sports teams approach us, so we put together really creative posters for the students, which they hang everywhere. Instead of having our name stamped on every corner in bubble letters, our website address is subtly marked on the bottom."

Junion's lighting equipment has also helped Junion draw seniors to his studio. "The majority of our top-selling images are tighter, cleaner head shots. The light control I can achieve with Larson's softboxes is the main reason I am getting the work I am. The product is invaluable."
Stephanie Clark: Direct Communication

Kentucky- based STEPHANIE CLARK (www.stephanieclarkphotography.com) targets the seniors through her website. "Parents, by and large, are not computer- savvy, so my website really speaks to the kids more than the parents. The seniors are the ones making the decisions and choosing the photographers; the parents are just financing it."

From inside her 1917 mansion- which is on the National Register of Historical Places- Clark cultivates an environment that is appealing to the students. "The mystique of my studio and my images are prominent on my website. Switching to a Flash site through Creative Motion Design in February has really helped my business. Through the back end I can update frequently, which is important with seniors since they are always checking out websites."

Clark stays connected to her young clientele by keeping up with the latest trends. "Recently I've been influenced by the grungy, scrollly designs many retailers-Anthropologie, Urban Outfitters-are incorporating into their branding. I've been using lots of digital shabby-chic backgrounds, and Digital Anarchy's Primatte has been a very useful plug-in for this look."

She also offers photo gifts such as a charm bracelet for senior girls with images of their best friends; photo handbags for Mom; calling cards with image, name, cell phone, email address, and MySpace and Facebook info; and multi-image storyboards in unique sizes.
BRIAN LITTLE: No Limits

Ohio-based BRIAN LITTLE (www.bd-photo.com) is a no-limits kind of guy, which comes in handy when marketing to seniors who want to push the limits. "I don't limit the amount of clothing changes during a session; I don't limit poses, locations, or time, and I certainly don't limit my packages."

While Little's pricing is available on his website, broken down into five different packages, everything he offers can be customized. "All my packages are mix-and-matchable to make sure they get everything they want. The seniors and their parents appreciate not feeling bound to one thing. Their referrals run my business. We also do a lot of mailers, go to local fairs, and have a booth at the annual Fulton County Fair, where we book half of our seniors." They have a shoot every day this year.

To heighten the dramatic appeal of his images, especially the current grungy look, he relies on Graphic Authority products. "I use their frames, borders, and brushes for designing mailers and senior books, and for bordering proofs. They have the edgy style I was looking for and are a great company to deal with."

JON & LINDA JOHNSON: Model Job

JON and LINDA JOHNSON (www.trianglephotographers.org), based in Ohio, know that their client base is primarily girls who want to look and feel like models. "We promote the seniors session as your 'senior experience'-come and feel like a model. Our sessions run about an hour and a half and are fast-paced with many outfit changes, so it feels more like a fashion shoot. We photograph so many looks that it makes it much harder for clients to narrow down their selections. They want a photograph in every outfit. This has definitely increased sales of our Capri flush-mount and peel & stick 8x8 and 10x10 albums. Some of the seniors actually use their 10x10 albums as their first modeling portfolios."

Switching to DVD proofing was another good move for the studio. "Our senior orders doubled the first year we introduced DVD proofing, because they don't have paper proofs to scan and copy. They are ordering more and they're happy about it. After transferring all our images onto DVD with Photodex ProShow Gold, we buy copyright-free music, then play the slideshow like a video. Our clients feel like they're watching MTV and they're the stars. They take the DVD home and mark their favorites in a little book of all the images. Large images, music—it adds to the experience."
JAMES SCHMELZER: Get Out There

Operating out of Shelby, Michigan, JAMES SCHMELZER (www.elitefoto.com) is everywhere, from MySpace to YouTube to MTV. "Word of mouth is really our strongest asset. We do direct-mail fliers and have a MySpace page and a commercial on YouTube. Everybody has a MySpace page and watches YouTube, so we try to get the kids to our page and add us to their friends list." They also have a video production company, where they produced their own 30-second commercials, which run on VH1 and MTV.

Most of their business is from referrals. "What makes a photographer is their everyday work," says Schmelzer. "Can you make someone who is average look exceptional? If you get a teen supermodel and you place her picture on all of your brochures and postcards, it doesn't say much about your ability as a photographer."

The studio itself has played a huge role in booking clients. "We have a big, new warehouse studio, so it looks really edgy. Kids can see if you're doing something new as soon as they walk in. We have five sets inside-even the outside scenes-each with five Westcott lights. With 22 sets, I can take them through different scenes without moving any lights."
ANGELA CARSON: Diversify

What do you do when a client wants one image and her mother wants something completely different? According to Michigan-based ANGELA CARSON (www.angelacarson.com), you diversify. "With senior photography, you really have two clients. I have two people I have to make happy, and that's why they both come to meet with me ahead of time. I always ask my seniors, 'What are we going to do for Mom, and what are we going to do for you?'"

Carson creates panels with multiple images to satisfy both clients. "These panels have really been popular this year. You have one large image that's 24x30-a base image-and you place other images onto it like a montage or a collage." Using one of her clients as an example, she explains, "We had a senior who was a guitar player. I asked him to tell me what his music meant to him. He said, 'Everything just stops when I am playing.' We incorporated that quote into his panel."

"Using Classic Albums, we do a ton of 8x8 leather-bound books with 30 to 50 images, which gives seniors and their mothers an opportunity to select more than your typical packages." Clients select their images while seeing them projected in Carson's studio. "We don't make proofs and we don't offer images online. Part of our custom experience is spending time with clients choosing images."