

Is the School Photography Industry in Jeopardy?

by Abe Orlick and Don Franz ©2020 Photofinishing News, Inc.

This article was prepared following numerous telephone discussions with various people in the school photography industry. While readers may disagree with some of our statements, our goal is to stimulate open-minded creative thinking to motivate change in this industry.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 virus has changed everyone's life. The short-term impact is obvious, but what about the long-term effects? The paradigms of some professions may shift: and one of those professions is high-volume sports and school photography. The overall photography industry has already undergone several paradigm shifts, including film-to-digital, online ordering and mobile engagement, digital files vs. physical prints, on-site printing at events/tournaments, etc. These paradigm shifts were born of transformation of norms and the evolution of new behaviors and attitudes.

The Arrival of The Digital Era

More than twenty years ago, as the digital era was blossoming, co-author *Abe Orlick* served as the president of World Council of Professional Photographers (WCPP). With the help of Kodak funding, WCPP developed a program called "Imaging Futures." Its mission at that time was to try to educate and prepare professional photographers for a significant paradigm change that was on the horizon. In the numerous countries where he was invited to speak, he stated in his presentation "The paradigms of the industry are changing, and those who are resistant to the oncoming changes will not survive."

That message proved to be visionary, as the professional photography business worldwide has undergone a complete transformation, not only in the picture-taking side, but also in the picture-making side. And it goes beyond the technology used for capture and print; it encompasses marketing (what we say, how we say it, where we say it), supply chain and delivery/distribution, etc.

Ensclosed studio photographers who had invested years in perfecting their techniques and developing a clientele began to realize their livelihood was being

challenged by “gig” photographers (in the US we estimate that there are more than 100,000) who embraced social media and did not carry the overhead of a fixed studio. These “semi-professionals” recognize, as Millennials emerged as their potential customers, capturing memorable expressions and offering modest prices had become important buying decisions. And capturing digital images enabled these photos to be repurposed into ever-expanding products and services, especially as Millennials desired digital files aligned with their digital lifestyles and ecosystems along with their intense use of social media to share and engage friends and families.

At the same time, digital print production brought new entrants into the output side and the “professional” and “consumer” labs/printers introduced new output products and competition drove down prices. Now, an individual yearbook could be ordered, or a batch of individual personalized yearbooks could be ordered under the same “volume pricing.” And prints could be ordered from the pro lab or consumer alternatives such as Shutterfly, Walmart and Walgreens, Artifact Uprising, etc. The once delineated pro and consumer channels were now blending and overlapping and consumers leveraged choice to shop pro content in retail and online options.

Parents and friends, carrying increasingly capable camera and video systems, are taking and exchanging photos in a wide variety of environments. Self-publishing and easy-to use software, began to aggressively compete with an established industry standard.

With its tradition dating back to the 1920’s, the high-volume school and sports photography business was slow to adapt to the initial paradigm shift, but now takes all photos digitally. That said the industry remains slow to adopt new ways to engage and commerce, and has yet to fully leverage online and mobile solutions, largely for fear of losing the value they see with pre-pay.

A new threat emerged: gun violence in schools raised fears about outsiders entering the school, albeit that most of those wielding these weapons have been students. To screen those entering school premises, school districts proposed requiring a photo ID card for every student and teacher.

This ID requirement was an ideal opportunity for school photographers to create “standardized” photos with a minimum interference with class time and generate additional incremental income. Sadly, the major school photography companies ceased on this new requirement as a free perk to negotiate the contract, establishing a benchmark every school photographer was expected to include in their proposals.

Schools are already beginning to implement retina and fingerprint ID technology, obviating the need for photo ID cards. School photographers believe that producing the ID and other services for free is what is keeping them in the schools. In high school the freshman Photo ID card could be used for the 3 years, and the images could be provided by non- professionals.

Other industries are turning to automation for manufacturing, necessitating the retraining of employees for new skills. How can volume photographers prepare for the changes that are occurring in their markets?

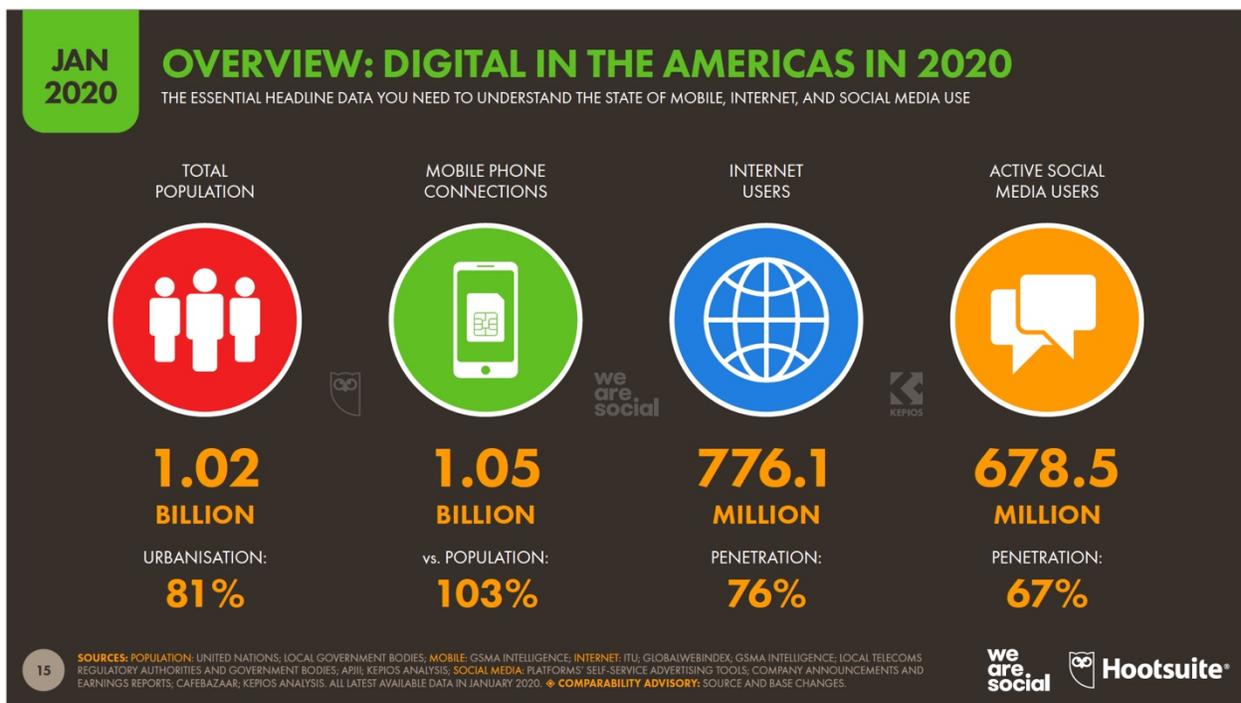
Another paradigm shift has arisen: social media marketing. Do high-volume photographers fully understand the Internet and its possibilities? After all, although this is a "relationship" business, with access to students and athletes controlled by a "gatekeeper" such as the school administrator, photographers do have opportunities to interact with students and their parents. They have the digital images of the students from last year, both individually and as a group, which can be used to create a wide variety of additional products.

Understanding The Internet

Let's take a quick look at the Internet and its possibilities. The **Digital 2020 Global Digital Overview** (<https://wearesocial.com>) provides fascinating statistics worth studying. Figure 1 shows the overview of digital in the Americas.

This Global Digital Overview projects the average amount of time that US Internet users aged 16-64 spend on the Internet each day is 6 hours and 42 minutes [2 hours 42 minutes via mobile phones and 4 hours via computers]. 35% of the survey respondents in that same age group indicate they use voice interfaces each month (any device). The number of active social media users compared to population aged ≥ 13 is 83%. Your Website should be optimized not only for both computers and mobile devices, but even for voice.

Figure 1 - Digital in the Americas



What about E-Commerce?

Figure 2 shows an overview of the global e-commerce. Retail e-commerce in the US during 2019 is estimated at \$365 billion by Statista, growing to \$600 billion by 2024. M-commerce with mobile devices represented 45% of the total in 2019. In North America, Shopify estimates that the three main methods of payment for online purchases are credit card (70+%), digital payment (35%), and store gift card (25%) 30% of online shoppers say they would be likely to make a purchase from a social media network like Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter or Snapchat, according to Big Commerce, and 23% online shoppers are influenced by social media recommendations. Posts with photos get 53% more Likes, 104% more comments, and 84% higher click-through rates.

Social media has become the epicenter (as are mobile and apps) of consumer socialization and the industry must embrace it towards marketing, engagement, image sharing, etc. We do not intend to delve into the social media, as there are numerous sources for information. However, Let's take a quick look at the largest ones.

Figure 2 – Global E-Commerce Value

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GLOBAL ECOMMERCE VALUE: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

PERSPECTIVES ON THE OVERALL SIZE AND GROWTH OF THE GLOBAL ECOMMERCE MARKET (IN U.S. DOLLARS)

TOTAL VALUE OF THE
GLOBAL CONSUMER (B2C)
ECOMMERCE MARKET



\$3.43
TRILLION

ANNUAL GROWTH IN THE
VALUE OF GLOBAL B2C
ECOMMERCE SPEND



+18%

ECOMMERCE SPEND AS
A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
GLOBAL RETAIL SPEND



16%

WORLDWIDE AVERAGE
ANNUAL ONLINE SPEND
PER B2C CONSUMER



\$2,594

MOBILE'S SHARE OF
GLOBAL B2C ECOMMERCE
TRANSACTION VALUE



50%

219

SOURCE: PPRO, "PAYMENTS AND E-COMMERCE REPORT: WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE (2020 EDITION)" (DECEMBER 2019). NOTE: FIGURES REPRESENT GLOBAL VALUES, NOT JUST VALUES FOR WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE.

we
are
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While Facebook has lost its luster – 66% of US Internet users aged 16-64 who responded to the survey say they're worried about how companies use their personal data – *We Are Social* projects that 180 million people in the US are using Facebook. On a global basis, Facebook's ad audience is 56% male and 44% female.

In the US, Instagram is projected to have 120 million users, with a quarter-on-quarter growth of 3.4%, or 4 million people. Instagram's global ad audience is balanced: 50.9% female and 49.1% male.

LinkedIn, considered a B2B app, has 160 million users in the US. LinkedIn's global ad audience is 57% male and 43% female.

In the US, 101 million people are using SnapChat, and 4 million are joining every quarter. This app is primarily used females, with a global ad audience of 61%.

Twitter's global ad audience is 62% male, and there are a projected 59 users in the US. During the current pandemic, social media marketers are employing Twitter to share how they're managing working from home, and swapping tweets about the challenges of not being able to visit with colleagues and friends. Can school photographers take a similar approach?

Pinterest has 79 million users in the US, three-quarter of which, on a global ad audience basis, are female. The 25-34 year-old group, a key age group for school photographers, females are dominant.

The *We Are Social* Website contains many statistics, with a free daily email to which you can that features developments on the Web. Another useful Website is *Sprout Social* (<https://sproutsocial.com/>), which offers numerous ideas and suggestions about social marketing. In his speech during SPAC 2020, consultant Ed Monahan presented numerous ideas to help school photographers increase their business.

Impact of the COVID-19 Virus

Now, suddenly, another threat burst onto our world, and the school photography industry has had no time to prepare — COVID-19. Schools — from kindergartens to colleges — are closing and classes are being conducted over the Internet. Social distancing has become de rigueur. The graduation photo, one of the only “rites of passage” that does not discriminate against students’ race and/or gender, will not be made this year.

In the midst of this pandemic, anxiety to protect the health of students and teachers has forced the cancellation of spring school day, graduation and prom portrait activities. For the estimated 6,000-7,000 US school photographers, these activities represent a significant portion of their annual sales. This unanticipated abrupt loss of income will have a severe impact on the cash flow of school photographers. Should the emergency measures now being enforced continue through the summer, they will impact the autumn school portrait sessions.

Sports photography is equally impacted as spring seasons and leagues are cancelled. The sources for capturing content, students and athletes, are likely shut down and therefore unavailable for photography or sales. Will there be a rebound this fall as parents unable to buy spring pictures purchase with a vengeance this fall? Maybe, assuming the photography companies can survive with no spring season and hold on till fall.

The paradigms of education are changing. School are underfunded and many student activities have been eliminated, so music, dance, and arts education is provided by private institutions. Computers and tablets are entering the classroom, and even being supplied to students at home. Online classrooms are being tested during the current crisis, and may be more extensively employed if they are successful.

Let’s consider a hypothetical scenario posed on the *Nextdoor.com/Stonegate* Website in Scottsdale, AZ : *“There are many classes already available at the high school level on-line. If they proposed closing schools 6 months ago, ending all*

sports, etc., what would have been the reaction? Outrage? Now we have Coronavirus and parents are pleading with the schools to close.

"So let me ask this. What if we go to e-learning / on-line schools, and then there is a fundamental shift in education to not reopen schools? I mean it's basically home schooling. I'm not saying this will happen, but once you set precedence, then you have dug the hole. I could see the state governments looking at the cost savings. Shift all supply costs to the parents. No transportation costs - no need for buses. We wouldn't need as many teachers, or counselors; although we would still need some, but it would be a fraction of what is needed now.

"There would be no need for school security, janitors, attendance staff, assistant principals, principals, etc. We could expect no more mass school shootings.

"Then, since they no longer need the land, municipalities could sell that land to developers. How much money could the state and local governments save by closing all schools?"

"I'm not saying this will / could happen. However, this is something to ponder. I know there are kids that rely on school for meals, but what do those kids do during weekends, holidays or vacations?"

The possibilities that the Nextdoor author raises may seem improbable or even impossible, but many are presently being implemented under the current crisis. School photography is already facing challenges with decreasing participation and purchases. So-called Debbie and Dan Digital photographers are cutting into the revenue of established school photography companies. Many schools no longer require that the yearbook photo be taken by the official school photographer.

What distinguishes those standardized images taken by professionals from "consumer" images? Parents and friends take hundreds of pictures with their phone cameras every year and share them via the Internet for free. Can school picture sessions also include images that conform to other government specifications, such as passport photos?

Are new photo ID cards every year essential when so many other government photo IDs have extended expiration dates and students may not significantly change their appearance in a year? Can these ID card services or other service providers make the card more valuable?

In the early stages of publishing, national yearbook publishers were better equipped to produce books in relatively small numbers, less expensively and faster than commercial printers. Later, they developed unique software that enabled them to create the yearbooks digitally.

However, even yearbook purchasing is declining. Fewer than 1,000 US colleges and universities are now publishing yearbooks and the yearbook publishing industry is experiencing their own paradigm shift. Independent publishers and even commercial printers are taking market share with the capability of digital printing and easy-to-use apps. Short run printing, even printing a single book, is no longer a challenge.

It's Time For Creative Thinking

Unquestioningly, this COVID-19 pandemic is heightening the challenges already facing the high-volume sports and school photography industry. It is time for creative "out-of-the-box" thinking, even working with other industries, to solidify a place for this photography business in the future.

Other photography branches have also experienced paradigm shifts. The hospital baby picture business, dominated by a few major companies, evolved into the new born baby business, with photos taken both in the hospital and the home. But, as more gig photographers entered the business, it became challenging. Mom365 is a prime example of a company with a vision. It not only takes photos, it has a blog, forums for mothers and mothers-to-be to exchange experiences (parenting, getting pregnant, pregnancy, baby names, etc.), and even contests to engage customers. Bella Baby has a Baby Life section for continuing to photography babies as they grow.

What are your skill sets besides photography? How can these be applied to other activities? Can you leverage the Web to sell more than School Day photos that engage Mom and build an ongoing relationship that includes sales / marketing / merchandising?

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About the authors:

Abe Orlick started a school photography business with his wife Esther in his kitchen. Together, they grew DaVor Photo Inc. into a significant company serving the Northeast US. With the arrival of digital, they recognized that converting their entire operation to digital would take a significant investment with little ROI. So, to provide the best option for their employees, they sold the business. Abe was a founding member of the World Council of Professional Photographers and served as its president. Following retirement, Abe continues to be involved in the school photography business through frequent contact with industry members.

Don Franz has been studying and writing about the worldwide professional and consumer photography business for more than fifty years. Besides his Photo Imaging News monthly publication, now in its 37th year, he writes for other international photo industry publications, conducts international market research, and has organized and presented at numerous conferences throughout the world. He is familiar with the school photography business, having served as the Director of Publicity for the Professional School Photographers of America and both established and served as editor for the monthly School Photographer newsletter.