

Ann Monteith has been president of PPA, recipient of the association's highest business award, and an in-demand instructor. These days, she's also guiding her studio into its latest incarnation: Persnickety Pet Portraits.

Grooming for *success*

GUIDANCE FROM A GURU ON HOW TO REFOCUS & RELAUNCH

From the very start of our photography business, my husband Jim and I have enjoyed creating portraits of pets, with or without their human family. Handling pets and understanding the psyche of pet owners came easily, as both of us are experienced dog trainers. Over the years we've enjoyed a steady stream of pet clients, as well as some nice recognition through a series of cover assignments for *American Kennel Club Gazette*.

As we narrowed our business focus to portraits alone, we were surprised to see pet portrait sales averages rise to match that of family portraits, historically our highest sales. Yet it didn't occur to us that we could support ourselves through a single-focus pet photography business, or at least not until we began to observe the profitability in the rapidly growing boutique portrait studio model, which typically targets a niche market.

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In early 2008, as we began to see signs of an economic downturn, we studied the feasibility of operating a studio-within-a-studio pet portrait boutique as a hedge against a possible recession. I've always felt that pet lovers are about as recession-proof as any market segment could be. By April we had established the following objective: To create an additional income stream for Countryhouse Studios by focusing consumer attention on pet photography through a niche business supported by an aggressive marketing plan. The planning process had begun.

The timing turned out to be perfect. I had nearly finished work on software for an interactive workshop on creating a marketing plan, sponsored by Marathon Press, and I decided to test the new software on what Jim and I decided to call “Persnickety Pet Portraits: A warm fuzzy division of Countryhouse Studios.” The software allowed me to sail through the initial steps in analyzing our business concept, establishing our market target, defining our marketing advantage, and clarifying our marketing strategies. Then I hit a roadblock: I was overwhelmed by the host of marketing products I could use to bring our strategies to life.

I solved the dilemma by categorizing the marketing functions needed to build a new business segment from the ground up. Then I

selected materials from one category at a time:

- business identity
- opportunity marketing
- client acquisition
- client education
- boutique packaging
- relationship marketing
- Internet marketing

BUSINESS IDENTITY

The foundation of a business image and a brand begins with a studio name, slogan or tag line, logo, and the design elements used in all marketing communications with clients, prospects, and vendors. These design elements, critical in establishing brand recognition, would be used on our business cards, letterhead, note cards and/or postcards. They are the foundation upon which to launch your business image, marketing messages, and marketing products. I began by discussing logo designs with my graphic designer, who provided three options from which the final design evolved.

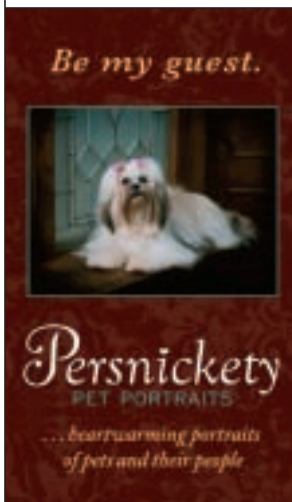


I kept the marketing design style simple and inexpensive by choosing a Marathon Package Website with colors that would blend well with our pet photography. The site design comprised white and three colors, and I added a blue tone. This became the color palette for my printed materials, along with a wallpaper pattern for texture. Used in any combination, the colors have sufficient contrast to make text and design elements easy to read.

I wanted my business card to stand out, so I chose a circle die-cut design that's also ideal for use as a packaging bag tag. I went with a conventional format for my letterhead and note card.

OPPORTUNITY MARKETING

I want to be prepared to exploit opportunities to promote business when I'm away from the studio, when I meet someone who expresses an interest in my profession or whom I believe might be a good prospect. To capitalize on these on-the-spot marketing opportunities, I created two business-card-size promotional



items that can be easily carried in quantity in a pocket or purse. I have two versions of Be My Guest free session cards, one featuring pets alone, one with pets and their people. Both versions of my three-panel

Teeny-Tiny Brochure pack a big promotional wallop—the piece is large enough to display several images along with a modicum of text, yet its miniature folded size makes it easy to carry along or slip into a letter or finished order. Either item can be handed out liberally—by a marketing partner or enthusiastic clients—to stimulate business during slower times of the year.

I also wanted to be prepared with a marketing product to distribute through marketing partners like professionals or retailers who deal with pet lovers. I got the inspiration for such a piece, our Accordion Brochure, from one that came enclosed with my order from an accessory boutique. I loved that the 3x3.25-inch piece could feature up to 14 single-page images, and I recognized how it could serve a host of opportunity marketing purposes, including partnerships. It's not hard to convince a potential partner to place a small basketful of brochures on a

counter, ideally at a checkout station. Just offer to return the favor by providing promotional or personal photography for your potential partners or by participating in some other marketing effort that might benefit them. A pet shop and several veterinarians have already said *yes* to our proposal.

One of the most versatile of all promotional materials is a simple product line postcard. My choice for Persnickety is the extremely useful 4x8.5 card size, which also fits into a No.10 envelope; it can be used alone for direct-mailings, displayed and handed out on location, included with sales letter mailings, and as an element in an inquiry fulfillment packet.

Every business needs materials for handling inquiries about studio offerings—at the very least a marketing postcard or brochure to send along with a response letter to prospective clients. I prefer to exploit such opportunities by sending an information fulfillment packet containing a response letter and promotional materials, and housed in an attractive folder. To make my Persnickety packet cost-effective, I use an inexpensive off-the-shelf portrait folder from Marathon's Bella Grafica line, and personalize it with a decorative belly band

and studio sticker. I also use this folder to package 8x10 prints, and to hold the material in the client information folder we present at the portrait design session.

CLIENT-ACQUISITION

Eventually, every business in the process of re-branding must implement client-acquisition strategies to expand its marketing reach.

Direct marketing, whether accomplished through handouts or direct mailings to targeted lists, has always been a mainstay of our business. Because our ability with pets is known in the market, we decided to create a high-concept mailer to send to a list of well qualified prospects provided by a local veterinarian, and to hand out to members of a regional dog training club in which we participate. The inspiration for this piece was a new-baby portrait mailer, designed for Bella Grafica by photographer Sarah Petty, Cr.Photog., CPP, of Springfield, Ill. The piece captivated me with its four inserts, making it versatile enough to use in a variety of client-acquisition tactics.

- The gold insert, with info about our qualifications and our focus on creating decorative home furnishings, always goes in the folder. We can also insert a blue note card with a personal handwritten note to the prospect.



- When used in direct marketing, the folder includes a \$100 gift-card carrier insert. Because it targets well qualified prospects, who are familiar with our work through displays at the pet-related businesses and professional offices from which we have received our leads, the gift card is an appealing offer.

- With another insert, the folder becomes a charitable marketing fulfillment carrier designed for fundraisers or auctions.

- The folder also can be used as a carrier for our two-panel circular Persnickety Gift Certificate. The piece fits perfectly inside the folder, and makes an impressive statement to the gift recipient who opens it.

CLIENT EDUCATION

An important part of our studio’s marketing mission occurs during the portrait planning session held a week before the sitting. This assures that both the client and the studio are fully prepared for the session. It’s also an opportunity to present a client information folder, designed to enhance the client’s perception of the value of our work. In addition to the appropriate information inserts, it contains an impressive 12-page portfolio booklet showcasing our pet photography, a brochure that illustrates the value of portraiture as

decorative wall furnishings, and an accordion brochure, which we I hope the client decides to share with others.

In addition to justifying our prices to the client, the folder and planning session assure that the entire portrait process and eventual sales session will go smoothly.

BOUTIQUE PACKAGING

Artful packaging plays an important role in enhancing the perceived value of our portraiture. I prefer to use portrait folders, as opposed to individual mounts, for two important reasons: so our portraits won’t end up being displayed in dust-catching paper mounts, and because they’re more economical than mounts—we can place multiple 8x10s and 5x7s in each folder.

Both 8x10 and 5x7 portrait folders fit nicely into 8x10 brown portrait boxes, which we decorate with a belly band and sticker. A coordinating wallet box adds visual variety to the collection, and the boxes themselves are placed in an eco-friendly shopping bag that’s a big hit with women. Because it’s personalized for each client with a portrait inserted in a pocket on the outside, women love to carry the bag around town to show off to their friends. It’s a classy way to



Packaging plays an important role in enhancing the perceived value of your studio’s portraiture.

conclude our transaction, and it provides another avenue for the client to spread the word about our business.

RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Being in business as long as we have has shown us that fostering repeat customers is a key ingredient in maintaining a financially successful studio. We’ve learned, too, that the most satisfactory transactions for consumers are those that result in their emotional satisfaction. It’s the little things we do to show courtesy and appreciation that clients remember, because these are the things that touch them on an emotional level.

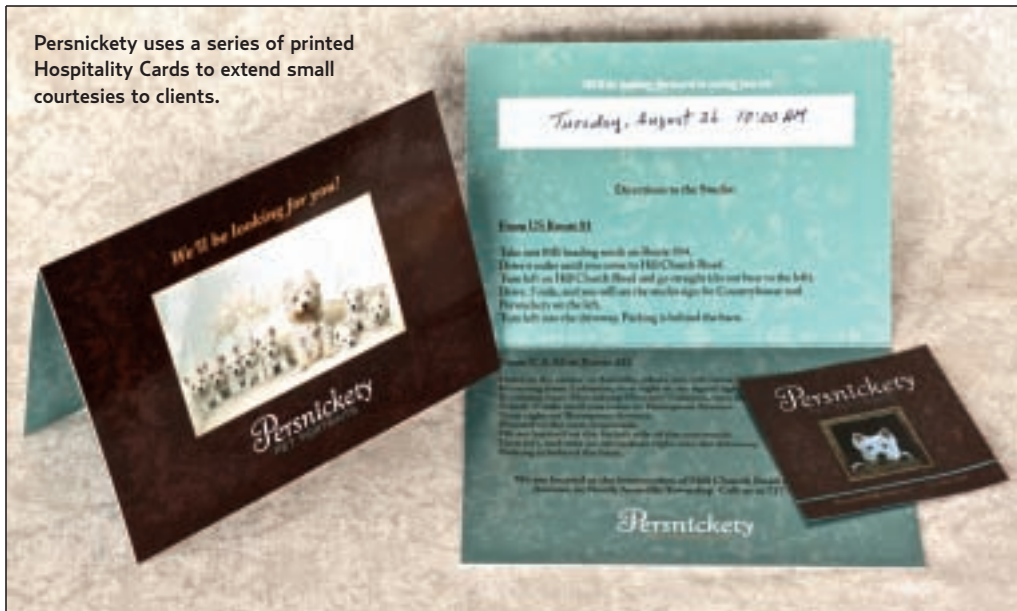
In creating the marketing plan for Persnickety, we looked for ways to extend small courtesies in all of our encounters with clients, starting with a series of printed Hospitality Cards used as follows:

- *We’ll be looking for you!* includes directions to the studio and a studio logo magnet.
- *We’re so glad you’re here!* is a handwritten welcome note used in a greetings tray holding a bottle of our “branded” water,

Present a client information folder during the portrait planning session a week before the sitting.



Persnickety uses a series of printed Hospitality Cards to extend small courtesies to clients.



write about the promotion in an e-newsletter that contains a link to the blog, so that recipients of the e-mail can click on the link to learn more about the promotion, read other blog items, and/or visit the website.

Although the grand opening of our new enterprise will be in the late fall, Persnickety Pet Portraits is already in business. We were amazed that clients and friends began to ask about the new business as soon as they saw the Persnickety sign go up, and that some new prospects have already found the Persnickety website and blog.

If we were looking for a good business

a fresh flower in a bud vase, and a fancy water bowl for the pet.

- **A sneak peek from Persnickety** is presented at the end of the sales session. Affixed to inside of the card is our choice of an inkjet-printed image from the session. We expect the client will enjoy showing it off to friends and co-workers, and this will help generate buzz about their experience with us.

- **Thanks a bunch!** initiates our client referral program. This card contains four smaller fold-over cards, to which are affixed wallet images from the session. Clients hand out the cards to their friends, who may then present the card to us for a free session. When the studio receives a referral card, we send a personal thank-you note to the original client with a \$50 gift card.

When first-time clients come for the pick-up appointment, we present them with a fold-over note card with a membership card for our VIP (Very Important Pet-Person) program glue-dotted to the inside. It's an attractive presentation. We believe that when a client has a membership card in his or her wallet, it's a constant reminder of the studio.

In keeping with our belief that it pays to provide clients something unexpected at the

pickup, we give them 25 inexpensive 5x7-inch, two-sided press-printed calendars featuring an image from the session on each side. This marketing strategy has several important business benefits. No matter how happy clients might be with their portraits, it's always possible that someone will feel uneasy about making a large purchase, and an unexpected gift is likely to ward off feelings of buyer's remorse. Furthermore, when a client displays the calendar in an office or hands it out to a friend, it's another way of spreading the word about our business.

INTERNET MARKETING

A key aspect of our Persnickety marketing plan capitalizes on Internet-based opportunities to expand our marketing reach through viral marketing—the modern-day equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising. In addition to the Persnickety website and blog, which is linked to both Facebook and Twitter, our Internet strategy includes an e-newsletter. All of these products are provided by Marathon Internet Marketing Services. The e-newsletter serves as a “viral trigger” to send readers to our website or blog. For example: I can create a blog post about a Persnickety promotion, then



The Persnickety website and blog is linked to Facebook and Twitter.

omen, we got one the very day our marketing materials arrived: Right in the middle of dinner, a lady we didn't know knocked on the door of our house after business hours. She'd seen the new Persnickety sign, and wanted to inquire about having her field trial dog photographed. It was exciting to be ready to impress her with our new marketing materials. This is one time we didn't mind having our dinner interrupted! ■

Go to www.ppmag.com this month for a slideshow of all of Anne Monteith's Persnickety Pets marketing materials. Also visit www.persnicketypetportraits.com and www.monteithportraits.com.