

A Picture Of Growth...

Wagner Portrait Group Expands Despite Tough Market

by Matt Berkley

If he could use only one word to rationalize his business' success, Hal Wagner would say "persistence." It's been his maxim for as long as he can remember.

"I'm not really good at any one thing," he smoothly admits. "I do a lot of things average to above average. But I've remained persistent and stayed on course."

Keep in mind that what Wagner describes as average, most would consider phenomenal. In the photography industry, independent businesses are literally choking on fumes. But the St. Louis-based Wagner Portrait Group has proven to be a happy exception. In July, Wagner Portrait Group opened its seventh location, adding a Columbia, Mo., office to the chain that reaches from Kansas City well into Illinois.

As Wagner explains, the company built its image around a system of freestanding studios that offer a range of products to the community. Wagner Portrait Group provides commercial, business and family photo packages. But the heart of the business, and the bulk of its work, has always been Wagner's school accounts. For years, school photographers worked sporadically. Wagner found a way to sidestep the annual lulls, creating a whole new model to level off cash flow. Wagner photographers work with proms, graduations, high school seniors in the summer, underclassmen in the fall, yearbook in the winter, spring with elementary students, and extracurricular and sporting events throughout the year. He says, "Instead of a seasonal photographer with work gaps and cash flow problems, we've become a 12-month operation with full-time people and experts."

Wagner's satellite studios are successful, he claims, because they mimic each other in



While working in the sales division of Brown Shoe Company in the 1960s, Hal Wagner was looking for a career change. After a chance encounter on a golf course with a professional photographer, Wagner discovered his new career. In 1971, Wagner opened Wagner Portrait Group, which provides commercial, business, school and family photo packages. Being involved in the community, forging local relationships and listening to clients have helped the firm grow to more than seven locations throughout the Midwest. Shown above: (from left to right) Leslie Elgert, general manager; Hal, owner and founder; and Penny Wagner, Hal's daughter and director of sales and marketing.

a community-member perception—becoming involved, forging local relationships, and most importantly, listening. "We do our best work when we listen," says Penny Wagner, Hal's daughter and director of sales and marketing.

Wagner Portrait Group was formed after a chance encounter on a golf course with a professional photographer specializing in school photos. Wagner, who was working in the sales division of the Brown Shoe Company, was eager to strike out on his own. After doing just that, Wagner found that success would not be easily won. In the early 1970s, when Wagner started out,

the St. Louis photography industry was closed to little startup firms with no history or tangible experience. But Wagner knew it was a relationship game. His new schedule had him up early and driving for hours into the rural areas of southeast Missouri, calling on schools in places like Sikeston, Cape Girardeau, Dexter, Charleston and New Madrid. Accounts were opening and piece by piece, the Wagner Group began to rise.

Wagner can't help but credit the firm's success to another concept he employs: innovation. The advent of digital photography and technological advances has forced many others his age to abandon the indus-

try. Wagner has welcomed the challenges. “We’re very open to change. We always try to keep that open-minded mentality, always looking at what’s next, how we can improve, and finding ways to incorporate new things and move forward.”

One big change that Wagner started incorporating four years ago was a new lighting diagram for optimum photo quality. After testing for over a year and examining hundreds of thousands of school photos, his technicians discovered the perfect lighting scheme. Wagner refers to it as the company’s fingerprint, its stamp that differentiates it from the mundane work of so many others.

“Visually there is a major difference with our pictures when you put them next to our competitors’ shots,” says Penny. The Wagner Group, she explains, has truly revolutionized the traditionally irritating school “mug shots” into portraits people are infinitely more proud of. “We’ve successfully captured the art of the school portrait. To look at them, you really wouldn’t know where the photo was taken. It’s a beautiful

studio portrait that just so happened to be photographed in a school gym.”

Faced with fierce competition and less demand for more photos from its customers, the Wagner Portrait Group has developed an aggressive sales plan to develop new clients to add to its strong base.

Despite other choices, Wagner’s clients come back year after year because of trust, says Leslie Elgert, Wagner’s general manager. “We’re very upfront with situations that come up. And if we do make a mistake, we don’t sugar coat it for customers. We tell them exactly what happened and what we need to do to correct it. And they really appreciate that.”

More than happy with the new Columbia, Mo., operation, Wagner is now casting a glance back on the horizon. He’s older now, but his persistence is still a driving force. It’s a tough industry, a tough market, and Wagner knows it. Still, he has no doubt in continued expansion. As for now, he hopes to increase market segments and foster more growth in the current locations.

Wagner Portrait Group

Owner: Hal and Mary Ellen Wagner

Founded: 1971

Employees: 110

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Wagner Portrait Group has seven locations across Missouri and Illinois that provide commercial, business, school and family photo packages.