



# The Business of Laser Scanning

## Surveyors & “Wedding Photographers”

Our story begins many years ago when surveyors ruled the world. These are the highly trained professionals who are an absolute necessity in a world of land ownership, wealth, and political control. After all, they’re the ones responsible for accurately documenting the earth—right? Surveyors have enjoyed a rather powerful and prestigious position in the economic food chain with their training and licensure barriers that was at one time thought to be impenetrable. So, they commanded a sturdy fee for their services and life was good. However, they were also under the false pretense that their world could sustain like this indefinitely and they were wrong.

The advent of new technology changed the world and came in the form of a laser, or LiDAR (light detection and ranging). This offered a whole new value proposition... the ability to collect millions of data points, incredibly fast, at a great distance, and with little or no prior history. No professional training, certifications, licensure, or other barriers to entry. If you were feeling lucky, you didn’t even really need E&O insurance.

Coincidentally during this same time, the banks crashed our national economy. People had to reinvent themselves to make their mortgage. They were recovering contractors with nothing to build; techies who’d lost their tech; real estate people who specialized in condominium sales; etc. So, the need to survive created a group of hungry innovators. Anyone who had learned about this new laser scanning LiDAR technology, and had an entrepreneurial urge... was now in business. Or at least could be bloody tip of the spear.

I’ll label this group the ‘wedding photographers’ because unlike the professionally trained surveying brotherhood, they required the *zero* pre-qualifications. The only prerequisite was the ability to turn on the scanner, fog a mirror, and bullshit their way into a job...and BOOM, you’re a laser scanning service provider! This group was great at making promises they couldn’t keep and many to this day struggle to achieve successful financial metrics. However, they figured out how to stay in business and solve a client’s problem(s) and they were affordable.

These two groups did not play well together. The surveyors were a proud profession of technical experts and believed their livelihood was being threatened by a bunch of wedding photographers (crashers) who were offering deliverables for far too cheap. The service providers thought the surveyors were stogy old guys who refused to change. Each had a legitimate position and they continued to grind.

Furthermore, the traditional business model for the surveyor, for example reselling data *they owned*, was being threatened by the scanning providers where turning over point clouds and whatever else the client wanted. And scanning that was done inside a building honestly didn’t require any survey control as long as it was “close enough” ...a concept that a surveyor finds blasphemous. The end user was the real winner as often is the case with disruptive technology changes business practices.

As the conflict continued the hardware and software manufacturers were creating new product that continued to make it easier for both service providers and surveyors. They created excellent instruments and software to produce outstanding

deliverables. So “the rules” were evolving beyond anyone’s control. This eased the pressure for the two combatants and both realized they needed to change or die. Each ultimately realized they were providing slightly different solutions and that they could coexist.

Surveyors will always provide a functional role wherever the situation requires precision and documentation. The “wedding photographers” (survey providers) understand they’re better off working *with* a competent group of surveyors in a joint effort to solve client problems. Each should seek an alliance with the other for mutual benefit.

The innovation of technology isn’t going to stop. In fact, it will be accelerated by the national trade labor shortage. Owners and builders will have no choice but to continue to rely on both groups to provide accurate digital information about existing conditions.

I believe the future will be much greater democratization of laser scanning and it will be made more affordable every year. The better we can collectively work together to recognize the continued change the longer we’ll all remain financially successful. We must adopt or become obsolete.

*As usual, I appreciate any questions or feedback. Furthermore, I’d love the opportunity to blog about a topic you suggest...any ideas??* ■

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