How to Win a Photography Competition

By: Darren Rowse

Photography Competitions are a wonderful way to improve your photography. While photography just for the sake of photography is a lot of fun sometimes a competition can help you raise the bar as a photographer as you know your image will be seen by a discerning group of judges and possibly even displayed along with other winners.

Photography competitions come in all shapes and sizes and range from online friendly competitions or assignments (like the ones we have in our forums each week) through to local competitions in photography clubs through to international photography competitions entered by pro photographers.

Having judged and entered my share of Photography Competitions I thought I'd write up a few tips for aspiring photographers wanting to have a go in competitions:

1. Know and Follow the Competition Rules

While they might be a little boring to read – the terms and conditions of entry to the competition that you're entering are the place that you really need to start when considering if and how to enter.

There are two main reasons for this:

- **How will the images be used**? – Each competition will use the images submitted differently and it worth considering the implications of this. The first competition that I entered made one of it's conditions of entry that they could use the images in pretty much any way that they wanted after the competition. This left a lot of photographers angry when their images started appearing all over the place.

- **It can mean the difference between winning and losing** – one of the heartbreaking things about being involved in the running of a competition is seeing the many wonderful entries that are submitted incorrectly and as a result are not able to be considered for a prize. Read the rules of the photography competition to see how many shots you can submit, when they need to be in, what format they should be in etc – and stick to these guidelines or you could well be wasting your time!

2. Stick to the Theme of the Competition

This leads us to our next tip – an obvious but important one – stick to the theme! I am always amazed when judging competitions just how many of the images leave A LOT to the imagination of judges in terms of how they relate to the theme.

While there is generally room for creativity and interpretation of themes, there's only so far that a group of judges will allow an image to stray from the nominated theme of the competition.

While it's always possible to find an image in your archive of shots that fits the 'theme' of a competition – I find I have more luck when I shoot something new with the competition in mind. I not only get better results this way but more importantly – it means I'm taking new images and learning more about photography in doing so.

3. Do Some Research

It is amazing what you can do to improve your chances of winning a photography competition if you just do a little logical thinking and research before you start shooting.

If the competition is annual, look at the winners from last year – while you don't want to copy them, they could give you some hints as to the type of images that do well. If the competition is run by an organization or has a major sponsor – this can also be worth keeping in mind as it could tell you about the type of image they are looking for. Lastly – if the judges names are published take a little time to familiarize yourself with their work. What style of work do they do, what type of image might they appreciate?

4. Avoid Cliches and Stand Out

If the competition has a theme it can be a fine line between a great shot and one that is a predictable cliche. Keep in mind that judges will potentially be viewing thousands of images in their task of choosing winners so if your image is just like everyone else's it's not likely to even get on their radar.

A tip I was given by a mentor years back for interpreting themes was to identify the type of shot that you expect everyone else will be submitting in response to the theme and then to set out to do everything you can to set yourself apart from it. This is a skill that comes with experience – but it's worth learning.

Stand out from the crowd by choosing compelling subjects, striking colors, unusual but strong composition etc. Display your knowledge of rules of composition but don't be afraid to break them if necessary.

5. Aim for Technical Brilliance

This should go without saying but from my experience as a judge I can only say that many photographers seem to settle for less than their best.

If an image isn't perfectly focused, exposed brilliantly or composed strongly – take another one.

Don't settle for mediocre results – the judges won't!

6. Avoid Distracting Elements

One of the big mistakes that I see in judging of photography competitions is images where the photographer simply has not paid attention to every part of the frame. Distracting elements pop up in backgrounds, foregrounds, color etc and they can mean the difference between a good shot and a fantastic one.

7. Go for a Reaction

As I think back on winning images in the last few competitions that I've participated in as a judge and participant – they all do a great job of 'connecting' with those that are viewing the image. Tell a story, hit people with emotion, do something with a shot that connects and evokes some sort of a reaction in those looking at the image.

Technically great shots without a 'soul' will leave judges wanting something a little more. I know when I'm faced with the choice between the 'technically perfect' and a shot that is slightly less technically brilliant but which connects with me that it's the later that usually gets my vote.

8. Enter Another Competition

Did you win? Yes? Build upon your success and enter another one. No? Do try again! The glory of winning a photography competition fades in time – but the lessons that you learn in competing will stick with you forever.

What Would You Add?

Have you entered photography competitions? How did you go? What tips would you add to the above ones for others wanting to improve their chances of winning photography competitions?

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