

Judges are forever being asked why:

- "Why did that image do so well?"
- "Why is the technical aspect of an image so important to judges?"
- "Why is sharp focussing deemed sooooo critical?"
- "Why is the choice of paper, even a thing?"

And the inevitable and unanswerable question, "Why didn't my image do better when my clients told me they loved it so much?!"

Of course, there are many responses to those questions, so here are some thoughts from a judge's perspective.

The Purpose Of Awards

Firstly, it is worth considering that an image competition, whether based on prints or digital files, is partly an exercise in ranking the images from the best gold-, silver- and bronze awarded entries to those deemed to need more work. No matter the glorious images you enter into a competition, you are always competing with other photographers - other photographers who, just like you, have created images that stand an equal chance of winning.

And so it's down to the judges to work methodically through every image (and there may be thousands), figuring out the scores and being careful to give each image the time and attention that it deserves. Diligence is the name of the game.

Awards Criteria

Every competition will publish the judging criteria they are looking for somewhere, usually on the awards website, along with any specific rules. It is an excellent idea to study them and make sure that what you enter follows the rules and has the characteristics that the judges will score well.

I had a quick look at the criteria that three of the influential associations publish for their competitions:

FEP	BIPP	SWPP
Impact	Content of Image	Impact
Vision	Creativity	Creativity And Style
Technical Excellence	Subject Matter	Composition
Composition	Interpretation	Image Or Print Presentation
Creativity	Composition	Lighting
Personal Style	Centre of Interest	Colour Balance
Colour Balance	Perspective	Technical Excellence
Lighting	Direction	Photographic Technique
Subject Matter	Use of / Control of Light Style	Story Telling And Subject Matte
Mastery Of The Photographic Technique	Expression / Narrative Print Quality	
	Tonal Range	
	Graphic Stability Design	
	Texture Workmanship Technique	
	Freshness / Unique Appeal	

As you can see, these three (and there are hundreds of different competitions out there) are more or less describing the same thing with varying flavours of wording and emphasis.

Most awards sites provide guidance for what the judges will be assessing. So, rather than doubling up on things you can read elsewhere, what follows are notes on what I've seen and heard while working as a judge.

Impact

Irrespective of which competition you're entering, impact almost always appears near the top of the list.

A great image has impact and invokes an immediate and visceral reaction from a viewer: what do you want that impact to be? Do you want to evoke sadness, excitement, joy, energy, peace, awe, laughter or maybe tears? What is it about your image that will grab (and then hold) a judges attention?

Look for that wow-factor, whatever you choose it to be. If you can get the judges talking about your image for its impact, then the scores will almost certainly go up.

Bear in mind that the moment of most significant impact for an image is when a judge first sees it.

Many judges and mentors will encourage you to keep your image entries to yourself until after the judging, as this gives you the best possible chance of 'wowing' the judges with that initial, impactful view. Avoid posting it first on Instagram!

If you ever have a chance to eavesdrop on the judges chatting at the bar after scoring has finished, you will probably find them excitedly reminiscing about one of the images for its impact - even if it ultimately didn't score so well for other technical reasons.

Creativity And Style

Hand in hand with the image's impact, does the image have something about it (beyond that initial 'bang') that holds the judges' attention? Is it something we've seen before, or is it something unique?

Layout

I hear the word 'composition' everywhere in the industry, but I prefer the term 'layout' because it makes you think like a designer rather than a photographer. We're looking at the same thing, of course, but through different eyes.

As an artist, you don't just take a photograph; you design it. The placement of every element and the relationships between those elements is down to you, the photographer.

You design the image to make it pleasing and lead the viewer to the areas you want them to notice something true of all styles - whether it's photojournalism, fine-art or still life. In my experience, photographers often don't pay enough attention to the layout - even a simple portrait can be visually engaging by the considered placement of individual elements, a tight crop or an original viewpoint.

Presentation

The presentation of an image is more applicable to print competitions than digital-only awards. Where you place your image on the printed page is a design consideration in its own right.

The placement of the image, the colour and finish of the paper, the inclusion (or exclusion) of a border will affect the judge's impression when they first see the image.

Oh, and of course, your paper choice and print quality are critical too. Too many images are let down by sub-standard prints on floppy, cheap paper when the image may have done much better if, for instance, you printed on rigid fine-art board. For example, if you print on flimsy paper, it will be hard to judge on the viewing lightbox!

Matt papers tend to reduce the contrast of an image with much softer blacks and subdued highlights than gloss papers - if you're using fine-art matt papers, make sure it's appropriate for your picture.

Some papers scratch easily - test them! You do not want a panel of judges spending valuable time debating whether to ignore marks on the paper rather than enjoying your image.

Choosing, testing and printing with high-quality papers and boards is costly, but the investment is nearly always rewarded when it comes to awards!

Lighting

When you think about it, a photograph is nothing more than the representation of light - an X by Y grid of tiny points of luminescence. We take three-dimensional reality and represent it in two dimensions, using nothing more than pixels.

Does the lighting in the image provide shape, dimensionality, atmosphere and substance to the photograph? Does it feel like I am looking at something with form and presence?

Is the hardness or softness of the light appropriate for the subject matter? Most importantly, can we see the photographer's input and control of the lighting, whether it's in a studio or out on the street? There is a misconception that 'photojournalism' imagery - portraits, news, weddings - give the photographer no control over the lighting. Well, that may or may not be accurate. Still, if you look at the best photojournalists' work, the lighting is always incredible - they understand how to capture it - they have that indefinable timing and eye for lighting.

Colour And Tonal Balance

Do the colours and tones of the image do their job (whatever that job should be)? A misty landscape may only have the most subtle, subdued colour, eerily picking out shapes from the gloom. Simultaneously, a fashion image may be adventurous in its use of intense colour, drawing the viewer to the clothing or the lifestyle. The judges are looking for control and the deliberate manipulation of the tonal palette to support the image.

Monochrome or Multichrome?

When you're trying to decide if the image should be monochrome or colour, ask this question first: is the colour an integral part of the image? Is the colour adding or distracting the viewer from the story you're trying to tell? For instance, fashion images are almost always colour because the image's job is to sell clothes. At the same time, portraits are much more suited to monochrome as the picture is primarily the person's character.

Have you ever considered the cover art used to sell musical albums? I know they're primarily on iTunes or Spotify now, though I long for the days of vinyl! Still, the marketing team's selection of colour or monochrome tells you a little about the music before you've even hit 'download!'. The music business is well-versed in the creative use of imagery and how to set the tone before you've listened to a single note!

Lens Choice

In the end, I've listed lens choice, but it's not precisely the lens selection that is under scrutiny; instead, we are examining the impact your choice has had on the image. Every focal length (and, simultaneously, your distance from the subject) will distort the image's perspective. Is this distortion adding or distracting from the result?

For example, does using too long a lens flatten any sense of proportion of a product image? Conversely, does using a wide lens and a close distance distort a face's features, enlarging the nose? Lens choice is important!

Hot-Spots

The brightest part of an image (or the darkest part of the image is predominantly high-key) will naturally draw viewers' attention. Make sure the area that is standing out is the element you want it to be. I don't know how many times I've heard a judge's comment along the lines of, "I wish the subject's hand weren't brighter than the face!"

Control Of Tones

Make sure there is tonal detail throughout the image - do not let blown highlights or blocked up shadows sneak in. If you have pure white or pure black, make sure it's for a reason and a deliberate choice on your part and be aware that if you do have blown highlights, they will always be spotted and rarely forgiven.

If it's a print competition, make sure you lay ink down on every inch of the paper - and try to avoid having any jet-black areas. Paper-white and pure-black areas of an ink-jet print show a phenomenon called 'gloss differential' - different areas of the print reflect light differently. This effect can be distracting and will always entice the judges into investigating your image's technical aspects.

Pin-Sharp Focussing

If your image is soft - especially if the subject's eyes are not pin-sharp - it is unlikely to do well. The judges will penalise out-of-focus entries immediately (I am drawing a distinction here between an image that is accidentally out-of-focus to the use of creative defocussing for artistic impact.) If you have any doubt that your entry is sharp, don't enter it.

Dust Spots

I love the transition to digital photography. Almost every aspect of it is an improvement over film days (though I miss the darkroom!) These days, every measure you can think of surpasses the capability - both technically and artistically - of celluloid but one area that is a constant misery? The dust spot. Your sensor would be immaculate in an ideal world, and there would never be a need for spot-removal tools in post-production. It would save a lot of time! However, the reality being what it is, make sure you have gone over your image in tiny detail, looking for dust spots - trust me, you do not want a judge to be the person who spots those spots for you!

Details At The Image Edge

Scan around the edges of your image. Anything protruding into the sides will be a distraction as it sits tight against the perfectly straight border. Usual culprits are chair backs, lampposts, safety signs, bits of door frames and the occasional hand of an unseen being!

Motion Blur / Camera Shake

Well, it better be for a reason. Don't include images with anything other than creative use of camera or subject movement.

Image Repetition

Do not be tempted to enter five variations of the same image. Remember what I said about 'impact'. Once the judges have seen 3,4,5, or even a dozen entries clearly from the same author and of a similar subject, it is hard to avoid comparing them, diluting the impact.

Pick just one image. I know that isn't easy, but it is necessary. Do not enter related images, as it can only bring your scores down.

Different Isn't Everything

Sometimes when we're judging, we see images trying too hard to be different; it can feel like the author is trying to win a competition rather than creating an image to be enjoyed as much as appreciated for its technical excellence. Don't lose sight that being different to stand out has to balance with everything else.

Newborns Health & Safety

A judge will look at the baby's welfare in your image and consider this when judging this genre. Ensure you don't wrap your babies too tightly and that the pose isn't restricting the airway of blood flow (we do not want to see tiny fingers and toes turning blue!)

Be aware of manipulating babies into poses that are not comfortable (for the baby, of course - we don't care if you have to stand on your head!), and you should not be doing it. Just because their little limbs are flexible doesn't mean it is OK to bend them into unnatural positions. Judges rarely look at these images favourably: the baby's welfare is paramount.

The (Big) Devil Is In The (Tiny) Details!

Every little detail counts. Awards are won and lost on one or two points out of a hundred. Trust me; the tiny details can be the difference between a gold or a silver award.

Here are just a few things that I've spotted in the last few judging sessions I've been part of:

A ring rotated on a finger, so the jewel was in a weird position (this matters if you have someone resting their head on their hands!)

A skewed necklace with the catch sitting out in front

A tuft of hair poking out behind a neck like Frankenstein's bolt

A fire exit sign like a green halo behind a bride's head

Edges of chairs or the hands of unseen people creeping into the frame

Hands that look like they have no 'owner' - e.g. when a hand creeps around someone's waist or over a shoulder look carefully to make sure it doesn't look like a medical specimen!

Backgrounds

If you add textured backgrounds to your images, that's no problem at all. However, you must do it carefully.

Firstly, if you have a shallow depth of field on a face and your replacement background is pin-sharp, we can spot the addition. You need to soften the background (and maybe add a touch of grain) so that it's technically correct.

And don't miss any areas! Every single competition I've judged, we have encountered images where parts of the original background show through somewhere - often in the gap between an elbow and a body or between the strands of someone's hair.

Photographers often think judges penalise backgrounds added in post-production, but that isn't the case; we deduct marks for unconvincing backgrounds that distract from the image.

Moire Patterns And Banding

These are two different things but equally distracting. The first occurs when capturing small repeating patterns such as those in the fabric of a suit, while the latter occurs in smooth gradients - blue skies often fall foul of this, as do plain studio images with vignettes.

There are plenty of videos out there showing how to fix these issues, but rest assured, the judges will spot it if it's in the image.

Intangible Quality

I hear this over and over and over again: "There is something about the winning image that is simply stunning - it has a quality to it."

Well, what is that quality, that secret sauce? Of course, I chose the word 'intangible' deliberately - if we could define it, judges would always win any competition they entered! And that doesn't happen.

Clone Covertly

Flawless post-production is a dark art all of its own - and cloning is possibly the darkest of the dark. If you have to clone something out (or in), duplicate some background, or even if it's an integral part of your creative flair, be careful to leave no trace of what you have done. Think of it as a covert operation where you can do whatever is necessary, but no-one (and by no-one, I mean the judges) must ever spot it.

Too Sharp For Your Own Good

One major misconception in preparing your files is that sharpening is what it says it pretends to be: sharpening. It isn't. There is no such thing. Sharpening in post-production is simply the process of exaggerating the difference between light and dark tones where they sit beside each other, creating an impression of sharpness. There are many and varied tools for sharpening: local contrast, high pass filtering, structure, detail sharpen, smart sharpen, unsharp mask, the list goes on and on.

But be warned: in every competition I have judged, someone will mutter about an image that has been "over sharpened." "Over-sharpening" can mean many things, but in this context, it usually means we can see tiny 'halos' around objects where the sharpening has been over-applied.

Conversely, I have never heard a judge say an image required more sharpening. Ever. Nope, not ever.

Do what you will with that observation.

Hang Your Work

No. Seriously. Print it and hang it. Somewhere you can see it every day. Over your desk, in the downstairs loo, on the studio wall. It doesn't matter. Print it. Hang it. Enjoy it.

It's amazing what you'll spot after a period of time. Everything I've mentioned above, all of these things and more, will become apparent.

Don't Leave It To The Last Minute

OK, we're all guilty of this. If you give yourself lots of time to select, finish and print your entries, you will spot any defects before the judges have a chance to find them. Time gives you the best possible chance to correct any minor blemishes or save yourself the entry fees for images you ultimately decide aren't going to work.

And, yes, I do know every photography is busy will run right up to a deadline. But the photographers with a consistent track record in competitions will make the time throughout the year.

Taste Your Food Before You Serve It

I don't know how to say this without upsetting people.

But here goes.

When it comes to print competitions (or qualification submissions for that matter), do not ever - and I mean ever - submit prints that you haven't personally seen and reviewed yourself. That's akin to a chef serving food they haven't checked and tasted. Well, be warned, any good chef will tell you: they always test their food.

Over recent years, I have heard more and more judges' comments about sub-standard printing and photographers responding that they trusted their suppliers.

I am so sorry, and I hope this doesn't upset anyone, but there is rarely any excuse for this. If you haven't seen, checked and personally signed off your prints before the judges get to see them, you only have yourself to blame.

Please Don't Plagiarise

Do I need to expand on this? Don't do it. Copying any other author's work or, worse, including imagery that you didn't create and don't own the copyright for is against the rules of pretty much every competition on the planet.

And this extends to images created during workshops or seminars unless you happen to be the photographer running the session. If in doubt, double-check with the organisation managing the competition.

Sadly, I have been involved in investigating a handful of cases, ultimately leading to disqualification. It's no fun for the judges or the entrant.

Do Your Homework

Study the winning images of competitions, and appreciate them. I mean, really, appreciate and enjoy them. Soak them up, draw in how the entries make you feel. Look at the details, look at the layout of the elements, the atmosphere, the colours, the post-production. Figure out why it makes you feel that way.

That magical quality will remain elusive and indefinable, of course, but it will always be there. Somewhere. Every winning image has it.

And Finally...

Don't worry if you don't do as well as you would like. Chalk it up to experience and appreciate the work of the others that did well. Don't beat yourself up, and don't let it fuel your insecurities - the same insecurities we all have as creatives.

On a different day, with different judges, it could have been you picking up that gold award.

Tomorrow? Well, tomorrow, that might just be the case!

And whatever else, don't shout at the judges and be kind to yourself!

With many thanks to Paul Wilkinson FBIPP

www.masteringportraitphotography.com