

Performing well in competitions

by Kevin Casha

The worldwide explosion of photography since its transformation through the digital revolution has concurrently seen a proliferation of photography-related competitions. Although for some photographers participating in competitions is not their cup of tea, contests undoubtedly have their advantages. Besides the possibility of winning the prize, they are essential to promote your work and diffuse your name. This is extremely important for up and coming newcomers who want to get noticed in the extremely competitive arena of photography.

Another very important factor to compete, or work towards a qualification, is the fact that you challenge yourself to produce better work, to work in genres of photography which you might not have explored, to study and explore what other photographers are doing and why they are successful.

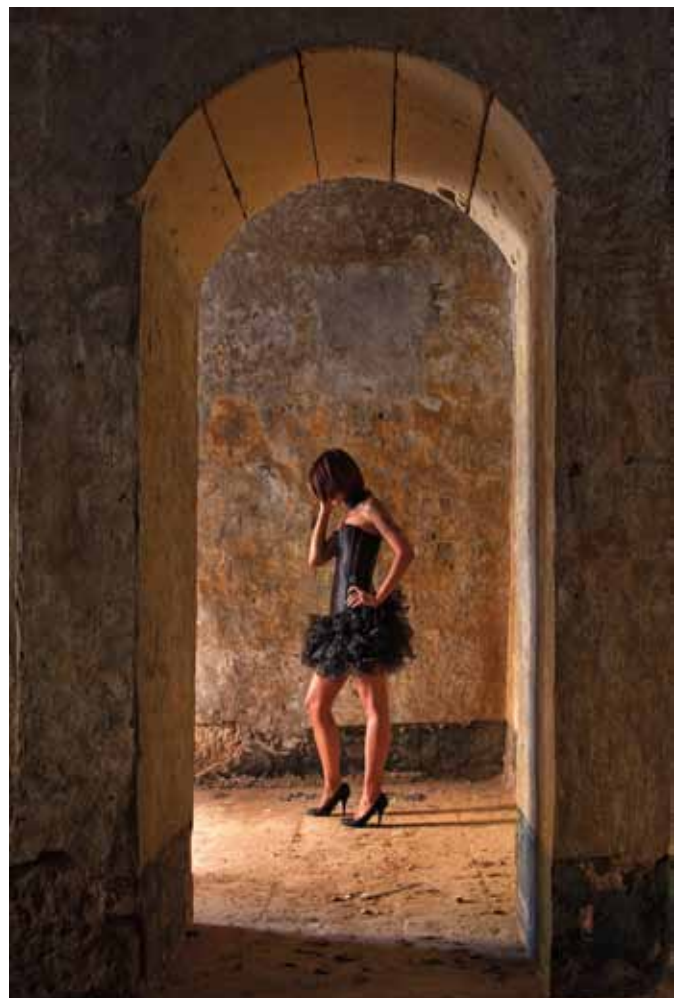
In this short write-up I would just like to evidence some practical pointers, gained from my years of experience both as competitor and as judge, on how to gain quick inroads into this sphere of photography.

1. Choosing Carefully.

The competitions you enter need to be studied and chosen carefully. Naturally, the fewer participants in a competition the more chance of doing well. So initially, I suggest that you source out competitions in which you will be directly competing only with your peers and photographers who are at the same level as you. It can be daunting for a beginner to compete with experienced and professional photographers – regular bad results are not very conducive to boosting your confidence. In this case, the law of averages would make this probability a reality.

So try to source out lesser known and less established contests. It is definitely wise to start from the lower rungs and work yourself up. Avoid contests which attract huge numbers of participants.

Framing the subject creatively



2. Themed competitions.

It is also obvious that free unthemed competitions are more popular than themed contests. So working more on the latter type can give you better results. It is a fact that people are somewhat lazy when entering contests and they are more apt to choose from their stock images than particularly work towards a set subject. Thus, themed competitions have less entrants so they are a better option particularly for beginners. Actually, the stranger and harder the theme, the less participants.



The correct use of pattern

3. Free entry or not?

Now this is a double-edged sword, which, like most things in life, has its pros and cons. Everyone hates to pay, so free contests are much more popular and subscribed. Contests which do not carry entry fees will not have as many contestants so, here again, perhaps investing some money in paid contests can produce dividends. Some contests may have other rules which, for example, put restrictions on age or on the camera used. Again, these will attract fewer participants, so looking into the rules in detail can be beneficial.

Whilst on this subject, I cannot stress enough that rules are to be carefully understood and strictly adhered to. Many a good entry is eliminated because some entrants only skim through competition regulations. This is one of the main reasons for disqualification and it is not usual for organisers to tell you this – so your disqualification would be most probably not associated with your level of photography.

Also, beware of adding borders and watermarks – most competitions do not allow this. Do not make the mistake that some painters do and make the frame of your image more artistic and eye catching than your actual work!

4. Be Different.



Striking models and unlikely combinations attract attention

Try to be different and stand out from the crowd. Although having a good stock of images helps, it is generally more successful to go out and specifically shoot for a competition. Where possible, you must attempt to stop the judges in their track with something a bit 'out of the box.' Going for the obvious and for clichés will rarely get you anywhere. Try to be different and research the theme in depth before you start shooting. Keep that camera down and use your brain and your eyes to plan your photographs. Few images are successful by chance – the vast majority of successful images are the result of painstaking observation, thought and preparation.

Getting the judges to notice is daunting, but take the time to read the regulations in depth so you fully understand what the organiser is asking for. Then think about the type of image most entrants would submit and make sure to keep clear of that type of photograph, then conduct research into how you can make yours different.



Keeping an eye for the unlikely



Narrative in an image makes it more interesting

5. Technique.

Perfect technique in competitions is a must. You will make the judge's work easy if you fail in the right technique as this will give the judge a reason to summarily dismiss your work in favour of other images which do not carry technical flaws. Exposure, composition, cropping, focusing, colour enhancements and editing should be of a professional standard. Avoid over processing the photographs.

6. Social Media Contests

Avoid contests which are free but are judged by the number of 'Likes' or votes through internet media such as Facebook. These are usually aimed at increasing traffic on the organisers' sites or pages but the worst thing is that the winning image is usually the one whose entrant has badgered the most number of people to vote for his or her image. Although the winning prize can be great, such contests do not give you any guide as to where your images stand. In fact, entering contests which actually give you constructive and valid feedback on your images, even if they do not carry a prize, is very beneficial towards improving your work and thus your chances of faring well.

7. Organisation

The more you become interested in competitions, particularly if you start doing well, the more you are inclined to participate. Organisation is the key to increasing your chances of winning. Make folders where you keep images which you feel are of a certain noticeable standard. That way, each time you are interested in entering a competition, these images will be quick and easy to find and you will not be disheartened by having to search through countless hard drives and folders.



Effects should only be attempted when they add to an image

Moreover, make sure you track any feedback and results you get from competitions you enter so you will be able to gauge better any progress and which images are doing well. Keeping track of the competitions you entered is imperative to knowing your success rate and what has worked best for you. You can then apply this knowledge to future contests.

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8. End note

I cannot encourage beginners enough; most of my initial progress and knowledge in photography came out of competing. Being a photographer who just snaps images and keeps them on his computer is not my idea of photographic enjoyment. Photography is wonderful because it helps us interact and learn from one another. Do not be afraid to go out there and try, even if you fail. The learning curve is more than worth it.

Reflection: It is not true that the same people win competitions, but it is true that those who win competitions are those who enter!

Good luck!

Kevin Casha
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Societes Monthly Competition Entry

Handling Light creatively is vital

