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## **The 12 Elements of the PPA Image Competition as a Guide in Marketing and Business**

We are creators.

We are artists.

We are entrepreneurs?

The struggle to success as an artist isn't always about our ability to design and execute a perfect piece of art. More often, it's our lack of business mastery. Sometimes business can seem like the thing detracting from the art. As if its obligation to support us sucks the life out of the creative process. And what we miss is that business itself is also a creative process.

Our focus on craft is just one key to achieving our goals, whether that's financial, acclaim, or simply the ability to create what our imaginations are eager to bring into the world.

In my conversations with peers, folks who are exceptional artists and photographers who produce stunning work, I find the same trend appearing: they express they don't have a clue how to market themselves or run a business at a high level.

There are resources out there to learn these things. Yet, they are based in what can feel like a foreign language. I propose a new way of viewing business; a way that makes sense for photographers and artists, utilizing a lexicon already in place, and most commonly used in PPA Image Competition judging.

The 12 Elements of a Merit Image are used to frame the conversation of what makes a merit-worthy image and gives structure to the judging process. As image creators, we have become adept at incorporating these elements into our creative process, and thus, our art is ever evolving.

As many photographers and artists struggle as business owners due to a lack of business acumen, I propose we use the language we already understand and superimpose it onto our understanding of business. The following is a blueprint for business development, marketing and business practices using the trusted 12 Elements as our point of reference.

*Table 1 correlation of the 12 elements to business concepts*

<b>The 12 Elements</b>	<b>Translation to Business Concepts</b>
Impact	Your Why / Purpose
Composition/Center of Interest	Marketing Mix and Target Market
Technical Excellence, Color Balance, Presentation, Lighting and Technique	Operation Excellence
Creativity/Style	Unique Selling Proposition
Story Telling/Subject Matter	Your Marketing Message

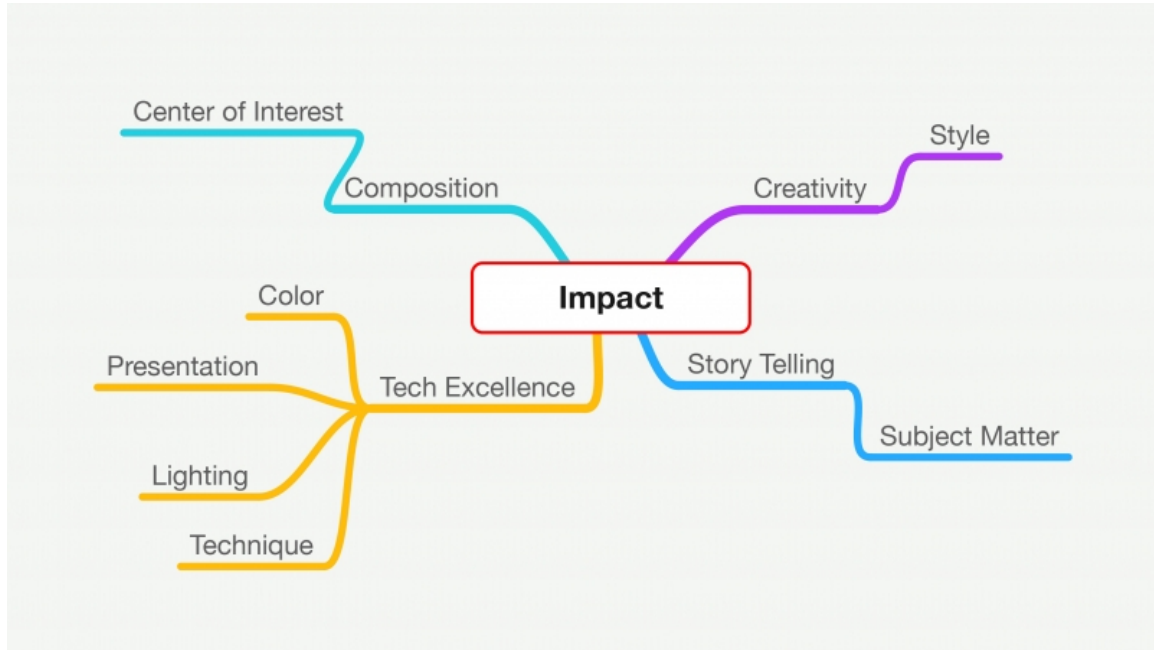


Fig. 1. from the PPA article: *A Fresh Way to Look at the 12 Elements*, by Lisa Dillon and Bryan Welsh

## **Impact**

Impact is our why or purpose. Simon Sinek outlines why finding our why is so important in driving positive results in the book “Start with Why”. “People don’t buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it,” (Sinek 41), and he goes on to illustrate how this clear message makes us feel special, safe, and included, thus inspiring us to be more. This sense of feeling through what impact we want to make, and who we want to impact, is vital to any of our communication efforts. It frames the picture we endeavor to create, laying a foundation upon which we can build a healthy business.

The United States Marines have a motto “semper fidelis”, Latin for always faithful. (military.com) The Marines have a culture promoting each of its servicemen is a part of something greater than the one individual. All branches of the military share this strong

sense of purpose. The lack of defined purpose derails many businesses as they struggle to know themselves beyond just the profit motive.

As humans, being a part of something greater than self is hard wired. We want to connect, we want to see ourselves in others, to be represented, accepted, and celebrated. Part of our why and purpose as creators of art and business can't be determined without the consideration of who we're creating for.

In "Tribes", Seth Godin delves into the psychology of community, which he refers to as tribe. Seth says, "A tribe is a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea" (Godin 1). I daresay one impact we as artists wish to make is to connect through our creations. The reflections of our soul we exhibit to the world are a clear call to others to find our tribe members. "Do you see yourself in my work?"

So, why do you do what you do? Who do you do it for? Why do you do it for them? With these questions answered, we develop a deeper sense of our impact as business owners as well as artists and we connect to our tribe with authentic intention.

Another benefit of knowing our why is to help sustain us during times of adversity. No one establishes a business without asking themselves at least once or twice if it's really worth it. Many of us consider quitting. It is at this time of struggle that having a keen sense of purpose and why helps sustain us.

How do we as artists and business owners define our purpose? Let us go back to Simon Sinek and look at his other book, "Find Your Why", the follow up to "Start With Why". A good why resonates with us, will be clear, and actionable. "If we want to feel an undying passion for our work, if we want to feel we are contributing to something bigger than ourselves, we all need to know our WHY" (Sinek 7).

Companies like TOMS shoes have a clear why communicated through its charitable efforts. Buying TOMS shoes, the customer is aligning with the organization to make a difference. TOMS shoes why is expressed consistently throughout their marketing efforts: “Progress with every purchase” ([toms.com/impact](http://toms.com/impact)).

Another company with a strong why and impact is Warby Parker, the eyeglasses company. Their origins are in giving. “Buy a pair, give a pair. Alleviating the problem of impaired vision is at the heart of what we do, and with your help, our impact continues to expand” ([warbyparker.com](http://warbyparker.com)). This sense of belonging to the cause is one of the key reasons I personally now only wear Warby Parker eyewear. Warby Parker also keeps it simple to understand. They go on to say, “There’s nothing complicated about it. Good eyewear, good outcome” ([warbyparker.com](http://warbyparker.com)). In developing the why message, we can consider these examples and strive to keep our message simple and personal to create a strong connection to our tribe. Endeavors rarely succeed without a strong and intentional why or impact. Don’t settle for anything short of empowering.

### **Creativity and Style**

Competition in any business is a given, no matter if you are a photographer, realtor, tech company, coffee shop, or musician. How can you stand out from the crowd? You must have a unique selling proposition (USP). In the article “5 Examples of Unique Selling Propositions” by Wendy Connick ([Connick.nasp.com](http://Connick.nasp.com)) she talks about how your USP is a statement that communicates how your product or company is different and conceivably better than the competition.

This USP can become the company slogan. For example, the FedEx corporation: “When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight” ([fedex.com](http://fedex.com)) or Domino’s Pizza:

“You get fresh, hot pizza delivered to your door in 30 minutes or less or it’s free” ([dominopizza.com](http://dominopizza.com)). These slogans that communicate the USP become how you think about the company and is nearly impossible for any other company to take the number one position in the marketplace. Everyone else is fighting for second place.

Differentiating our companies then comes down to creativity and style. The elements of creativity and style can be hard to explain and sometimes even harder to recognize. Musicians might be the best at allowing themselves permission to differentiate with their unique style. For example, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Doors. Many people debate who is better among these three superstar bands from the 1960s. Most likely, you intuitively know the difference between them by their style. Can your prospective clients do the same with your brand and your products?

In a follow-me culture a copycat mentality can be a mistake and one that leads to mediocrity and ultimately competition on price. In the article “How To Define Price Competition in Economics”, Ellis Davidson states, “In price competition, two substantially similar products are judged by prospective consumers on their pricing, with the purchase made mostly based on which is cheaper” ([Davidson smallbusiness.com](http://Davidson smallbusiness.com)). This is commonly called the race to the bottom and one that proves difficult to sustain with any healthy profit margin.

To survive a competitive marketplace working to articulate your unique selling proposition clearly can prove to be even more important than having the best product in the marketplace. It’s human nature to want to be viewed as an individual with your own characteristics even if they still follow commonly held norms. However, in developing your USP use caution to not be so on the fringes that clients can’t identify with your brand and

ultimately choose your competition. It's a tough balancing act to be the first or most unique and yet appeal to enough of an audience to be viable and sustainable.

### **Composition and Center of Interest**

A cornerstone of photography and the visual arts is composition and using it to bring the viewer to the intended center of interest. As a business owner, our center of interest is the call to action for our potential client. In the visual arts, composition is the placement or arrangement of visual elements or ingredients in a work of art. It can also be thought of as the organization of the elements of art according to the principles of art (Wikipedia). In business, we can compare composition to our branding and messaging.

Composition techniques like the rule of thirds or leading lines have long been the standard taught in Design 101. If our goal is to capture the attention of our target audience, and we know as humans we seek to be reflected, to find people who are like us – our tribe - messages that resonate to our values, personality, and lifestyle, then we can create a message that culls out all but those who we want to serve.

With them in mind, you can articulate your why and USP in a way that represents them, therefore creating a concrete connection. The saying you can't be all things to all people is accurate and something to take to heart.

Leading lines from design are the active compositional prompts that take the eye directly to the target in a manner that is both pleasing and desirable. We can compare this to attracting our ideal client to hire us for photography. Say you want to attract business owners to provide professional headshots. We know our ideal clients frequent LinkedIn. So, we create a website which includes a section of professional headshots we've produced in the past. Then we create a LinkedIn post about doing headshots, featuring a collage of

headshots as samples of our past work. Business owners or professionals looking for headshots will be drawn to that LinkedIn post. This LinkedIn post includes a link to the headshots section of our webpage, and every touchpoint along the way includes contact information.

Leading lines in this scenario are the LinkedIn posts and professional headshot samples. The center of interest is the contact information. Potential clients are drawn to this work because we're displaying other professionals just like them – indeed, they've found their tribe.

To further illustrate center of interest we can use the concept of clarity. Clarity in business can be applied to having clear vision of where you're going. Deciding what we want and being deliberate about each action to move our business toward that destination will help us grow efficiently. Clarity can also be applied to business as being specific about plans. "I want to go into business as a photographer," is the broad brush stroke. Our business plans need detail. What kind of photography do we want to create? What does our ideal client look like? Where do we want to provide these services? Completing a comprehensive business plan fleshes out our plans and builds the image in our mind that we want to bring into fruition.

### **Storytelling and Subject Matter**

The point of a great story is to bring the audience into a personal relationship. A powerful tool that marketers, artists, authors, and all other creators have at their disposal is storytelling. Stories educate, entertain, and provide a reflection our clients can test to see if they see themselves emulated in our work.



Gone are the days of the one-size-fits-all messages. Our audience is more diverse and receives other marketing messages on a magnitude never seen before in human history. We must craft messages our potential clients understand and gives them the feeling the product was made just for them.

In image competitions many competitors ask for input or crowd source their titles to see what resonates and speaks to a group of fellow competitors. This testing is similar to a practice in marketing called A/B testing where two different versions of advertisements are tested to see which one has the best conversion rate.

If we use this proven testing model with our competition titles, I contend we should also use it in our marketing messages (storytelling), so we find the chord that best resonates with our intended audience. In the article “The Key to Creating Content That Resonates with Your Audience” Beth Hayden says, “One job you have as a content marketer is to think of your reader as a tuning fork. You need to publish great content to create resonance with that reader – to get that person to emit a particular tone that gets them to know, like, and trust you” (Hayden copyblogger.com).

The movie “Black Panther” was acclaimed because a generation of black youth for the first time said, “I see a superhero who looks like me.” In the article “Why ‘Black Panther’ is a Defining Moment for Black America” in the New York Time Magazine, Wallace describes Ryan Coogler’s film as a vivid re-imagination of something black Americans have cherished for centuries: Africa as a dream of wholeness, greatness, and self-realization” (Wallace nytimes.com).

Storytelling is key to the deep relationship to our subject. Spend the time and craft the narrative. From this story, the proceeding elements will land more accurately where we

intend. As a business, we must create a positive personal connection, one that can't be duplicated or easily imitated by the competition. Business, like art, is all about the relationship between us and our client, and that starts from the very first impression.

### **Technical Excellence: Color Balance, Presentation, Lighting, and Technique**

Using music again as our example: how many times have you heard that a musician of rap or rock got their start in classical music? Another example is the modern dancer trained for years in ballet before ever breaking out into the more expressive areas of dance.

The discipline to know the fundamentals at a high level is essential to the finished product or art piece being able to stand the test of time. The common sentiment, “learn the rules like a pro so you can break them like an artist,” is what sets a moderately skilled artist apart from a master. We can get extremely rigid about the elements of technical excellence, and then the focus is less on art and more on rules. Flexibility will help us create unique work. Nothing crushes creativity faster than being told it’s been done “wrong”. This applies to creating art or creating business solutions.

A typical phase in business is to write an Operation Excellence (OP/EX) plan. We can translate technical excellence elements (color balance, presentation, lighting, and technique) of the 12 Elements to explain Operation Excellence in business.

We inherently know quality and excellence when we encounter it in a product, and we use our pocketbook to reward the creator of exceptional craftsmanship. Brands like BMW, Lexus and Mercedes build automobiles that meet concepts of technical excellence and have become legends in the marketplace. The companies that can not only communicate but also demonstrate this technical excellence are the ones that can demand a premium price for their product.

If we become adept at increasing our company's OP/EX in all areas, we increase the value we offer our clients and can therefore charge accordingly. We can reframe how we attain operational excellence through the implementation of technical excellence elements to our business plan.

Let us think of color balance as just balance. We all need to strive for the elusive work-life balance, or the balance between product showcasing and asking for the sale.

In interviews about his book "Jab, Jab, Jab, Right Hook", Gary Vaynerchuk says, "You must give, give, give before you can ask" (Vaynerchuk youtube.com). This balance is vital to retain the client we worked so hard to identify. Once we get the product in front of them, we don't want to turn them off by yelling at them to pick us. Vaynerchuk also outlines the importance and complexity of balance in the article "How to Balance Business and Family". Vaynerchuk writes of the difficulties of separating our business from family. As he sees it, his business, employees, and clients are an extension of family, a perspective that becomes an emotionally exhausting life.

The pursuit of balance is a whole topic to itself in the self-help world. To bring it back to the photographic 12 Elements think of how colors work on the color wheel. What is harmonious and what is not? To simplify the task of balancing life, we can try doing more of what brings value and peace to us, our business, and our art and less of what is incongruous to who we are as people, artists, and business owners.

When I see a gift in a small blue box with a white ribbon, I'm immediately drawn into anticipation because this is not just any little blue box, but it's a Tiffany blue box. Tiffany is one of the most iconic brands that leverage presentation to evoke emotion and anticipation. What's inside can be the same as any other company, but the presentation makes it unique.

We wouldn't deliver handcrafted photography in the same packaging that UPS used to deliver to our door. In our industry, Gregory Daniel has done a marvelous job showcasing the presentation of his art to clients in a way that becomes an event unto itself. If you haven't seen it, check out his Instagram page at @gregorydaniel. His presentation shows the care and pride he takes in delivering his product.

Another example of creating a memorable presentation of product is demonstrated by Ruth Chris Steak House restaurants. At Ruth Chris, the steak is the centerpiece of the plate. "A legendary method, each steak is seared to perfection, finished with butter and freshly chopped parsley and served sizzling on a 500-degree plate" (ruthchris.com). Achieve this level of presentation, and the product will be in a league of its own.

The next element we will discuss is the lighting. Of course, we know the importance of lighting in photography; it's the base everything else is built upon. In business, lighting can be translated as spotlight. For example, some products you might want to spotlight during certain times of the year or seasonally.

The clothing industry does this exceptionally well with their product offerings by matching the mix of items to the upcoming weather season. They showcase shorts, for example, just before the weather turns in anticipation of the weather change, so they build awareness and anticipation in the mind of the consumer. It's the same method they use to sell coats in the late summer.

Shine the spotlight on a product and create demand before the competition or the consumer even needs it. For photographers, this showcasing is done for future high school seniors just after they ring the final bell on their junior year, a full 12 months before they officially graduate. This spotlight approach is used heavily to high school juniors in

preparation for goods and services they will purchase as a senior, including prom tickets, scholarship applications, and college applications. This one year is a marketer's dream to capture the target audience using a spotlight method to get attention and drive sales.

Another way to use light to market our services or goods might be to highlight a key feature of a product. As photographers, we know how to light, and we know that the eye goes to the brightest area of the image. We can use our keen knowledge of lighting to put our business, product, or service into the "light" as masterfully as we light our photographic subject. The art of lighting a subject photographically using all the tools and expertise that a professional photographer is the perfect analogy for how we can set business priorities, draw attention to our products and services, and increase awareness.

The final element in this technical excellence grouping is technique. Can we articulate our process or product assembly in a way that separates it from the competition? Is our technique superior in a way that others can't compete with? This element is an often-overlooked element used for differentiation. In the book "Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant" by W. Chan Kim this point of differentiation is driven home by the stories of companies that either succeed or fail in head-to-head competition in the marketplace.

For instance, Apple wasn't the first computer. Jobs took the existing technology that at the time was sold separately, and bundled the pieces together into one finished product, ready to be used. This tactic set Apple apart from his competitors who were still just selling parts. This point of differentiation is essential to standing out in the crowd and finding new fields of abundance.

We often hear “everyone’s a photographer now”. As photographers, what can we do to ensure our technique is sought after? Like anything that reaches a level of market success, the imitators will come out of the woodwork quickly. We see this in image competition often. Once a particular style or technique gets the attention and rewards of the judges, many copycats come out the next year.

One way to combat this is to be so good that no one can duplicate your work. I see this in the work of Ben Shirk of Iowa. Ben’s photographic and art-finishing techniques have allowed him to reach the highest levels of success in the photographic competition community. Ben further goes beyond the competition with a level of mastery that still leaves a gap between him and his pursuers. Another example of masterful technique in our industry is Ella Carlson from Massachusetts. Ella is a recent Grand Imaging Award winner from PPA and her album “Most Wanted” will be the standard for creativity, style, and technique for years to come.

Ella has the imagination to see these art composites a feat unto themselves, but she also exhibits the skill and techniques to pull it off in a never-before-seen work of art. What are some possible marketing techniques we photographers can draw inspiration from? One place to look is to the Ben Shirk and Ella Carlson of the marketing world, Seth Godin. In his book “Purple Cow” Godin instills the value of being remarkable in your creation, rather than being noticed in the marketplace.

The work of Ansel Adams would be a prime example of an artist that had such robust techniques in his time to separate his work from the competition, and I believe he would still be remarkable today and most likely even be at the forefront of techniques unknown to many at this time.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the systematic unpacking of the photographic 12 Elements of a Merit Image and overlaying them onto reliable and tested business principles lessens the confusion for the photographer on understanding how to market and position their business in a way that can lead to success. By taking language photographers are familiar using and embracing it as a model for business I hope to empower the photographic industry to become as artful in their execution of business as they are in their art.

We spend years mastering our skill through image competition. Our common language is infused with the 12 elements. Rather than reinvent the wheel, we have an opportunity to utilize our shared lexicon as a model for operating and marketing a business.

With this model in place, we can more easily translate what it takes to develop skills needed to not just create art, but create sustainability, independence, and wealth.

Use impact to make a difference through your business. Separate yourself with your creativity and style. Define your market with composition and center of interest. Be a storyteller and have a subject that your audience identifies with and marry this to technical excellence, balance, presentation, lighting, and technique. By adopting this framework, we have the elements needed to achieve our most lofty marketing and business goals.

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