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# Your Bottom Line

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## Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

People see what they want to see. Because our brains *interpret* information our eyes gather about the world, our vision is susceptible to a host of distortions. We may believe our opinions are unbiased, objective views of reality. However, we visualize the world through rose-colored glasses.

The rose-colored glasses effect is evident when we evaluate our own photographs. We may think our work is far superior than others judge it to be, and the prints of fellow professionals aren't up to par with our high-quality photographs.

Perceptual bias can be stronger than we realize. I've dealt with countless situations in which a lensman deems his photograph—which wouldn't score more than 60 points in the PP of A print competition—to be as superb as a photograph earning more than 80 points.

This is one of the most serious problems photographers must overcome: The mistaken belief that we are better image-makers than we actually are.

To receive more accurate appraisals of our skills, we can enter photographic print competitions. Here a group of judges gauge a photograph's quality and generate a corresponding point score. Although many photographers may disagree with their scores, entering a competition offers the opportunity to view their work from the perspective of comparatively unbiased judges.

Print competition results are not completely free of prejudice—a particular judge may be partial to photographs utilizing complex lighting setups and numerous exposures, while another prefers a simple, one-light portrait. To counteract partiality, *panels of judges* are assembled. Averaging the preferences of several viewers helps cancel individual biases, resulting in more objective photograph evaluations.

Many image-makers claim their prints fare poorly in competition because they create photographs to please customers, not judges. While many may not agree with competition standards, one fact is

certain. If these photographers are as talented as they believe, achieving a high score at print competitions should be a piece of cake.

They need only attend a few competitions, ascertain judging criteria, and produce work geared to those specifications. If you play the game, play to win—aim to please judges even if your everyday work contrasts with your submitted photographs. Whether or not we agree with judging standards, competition criteria are difficult to meet. We may think we've surpassed them until we see our scores.

One trap image-makers fall into is asking photographer friends to critique our work. These buddies always can be counted on to lavish compliments on the print. You receive no benefits from this ego massage; in fact the practice may be damaging. Fellow photographers' praise may convince you your work is excellent when it may not be, and you'll fail to make serious efforts to improve.

Before stepping behind the camera, photographers must consider for whom we are producing the print. If the work is created for our own pleasure, we have free reign over the image concept and can make anything from old master's images to new wave photographs. On the other hand, if we submit the photo for competition and expect it to receive a merit or two, the print must impress judges.

If the photograph is sold to customers, it must please the buyer. For example, a mother may bring her daughter to a portrait sitting dressed in an outfit we know won't photograph well. While we can gently suggest a clothing change, we must remember the mother wears her own pair of rose-colored glasses. Although the bright yellow of the girl's dress makes her skin appear sallow, or the lace collar detracts from the impact of the child's smiling face, the mother will be thrilled with a portrait of the little tot clad in her Sunday best.

Not only must our commissioned photographs please customers, our studio displays must attract a variety of buyers.

For example, if we showcased only high-key portraits of children, we would promote our services to only a small segment of the market. Instead, display an array of photo styles depicting people of every age group.

As photographers, we must don the rose-colored glasses of our customers, and make images to suit people whose perception of the world is quite different from our own—this is one of the most exciting and challenging aspects of professional photography. We must not only listen to customer preferences, but also understand our subjects, and—even for just one photo session—see the world through their eyes.

Photographers share with artists the need to produce work to suit others. Both professionals may create art that conforms to their own tastes; however, if it doesn't appeal to potential customers, the work won't be purchased and they may become "starving" artists or photographers.

Artists may produce work that won't become respected or even accepted for 100 years or longer. Lensmen don't have that luxury—our photographic images won't be visible in 100 years unless we store them in a dark, dry place with a below-zero temperature. Besides, most photographers prefer to be paid for their work today—not 100 years from now. You can't purchase groceries on income expectations.

If you're interested in earning an attractive bottom line profit now, remove your own pair of rose-colored glasses and wear those of your customers. Remember, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Both your bottom line and success are determined by how well your prints correspond to customer preferences. If your images please only you, you may have but one happy customer...yourself. ■