



FG

FOREGROUNDWEB

Images matter most – a manifesto for serious photographers: focus on quality and stop looking for shortcuts

If you find yourself always seeking to make small tweaks to your photography website, please sit down, this is an intervention.

Through working on so many photography websites over the years, I started to see a pattern emerging: despite having mediocre images, many photographers expect big results and are avid for easy tricks for online success.

It's understandable, the Internet is full of "How to..." and "Top 10..." listicles promising quick results.

And I will try to turn the ForegroundWeb site into a great learning resource for photographers, but I'll never lose sight of what's truly important in this industry.

Consider this a manifesto for professional photographers looking to build a sustainable long-term photography business:

IMAGES MATTER MOST

Learning some SEO tactics or changing your site's background color are not the keys to building a better photography business. Posting your images on Instagram will also not magically get you to photography stardom.

Focus on the quality of your images. Learn to create epic content.

Photographers should indeed work on their site's SEO, marketing, etc., but not expect that they can "fix" a mediocre body of work. Image quality is critical.

When you share mediocre content online, all the best possible promotion tactics and website tools in the world won't make it popular. At least not in the long run.

Are you proud of your images?

I love love love this short piece from Seth Godin, it speaks volumes in many areas of life and business:

Lessons from Neil Young

I've been listening to Live at Massey Hall: Neil Young and thinking and even crying a bit. It's an awfully powerful piece of work.

Two lessons for marketers, one small, the other bigger. First, it's interesting to note how much more excited and open the crowd is to songs they've heard before. Even some of the songs that ended up becoming classics got a tepid reaction because they were unknown at the time.

Second, on songs that aren't working so well, you will hear Neil try harder, play louder, raise his voice and strain to make an impact. It doesn't work. At all. It's what you say, most of the time, not how you say it.

How do you feel about your work? How do you feel about the photos you put on your website or the ones you hand over to your clients?

Are you proud of them, or do you feel the need to shout? (aggressive pop-ups, ads, exclamation marks in your copy, unnecessary business jargon, etc.)

As a quick follow-up to this, I received this interesting question from a friend:

“What about the images you are so proud of you can't wait to share, but after a month or two of posting, you consider them to be cringe-worthy?”

I guess it can happen in a few cases ...

- The photographer can't separate the new from the good (“the novelty effect” overwhelming the sense of quality)
- Some sort of fear (of success or failure) causing the photographer to not be confident with what they just posted
- Or it's just part of the photographer's natural evolution.

A quote from one of my favorite books of all time: [Steven Pressfield - The War of Art](#): having just published his first book, Steven showed it to a friend:

“Next morning I went over to Paul’s for coffee and told him I had finished the book.

“Good for you,” he said without looking up.

“Start the next one today.”

Content is king

Bill Gates coined this expression in 1996, and the abundance of average content online makes this an even stronger statement today.

I often see photographers obsess about small design tweaks, spending weeks or months fiddling around with insignificant little details, but then doing a lousy job when [selecting images for a good portfolio](#).

Quality images should always be [the priority for a photographer](#).

Website design, SEO, and marketing are important too, but it’s the visual impact of great photos that always drives successful photography businesses forward.

Content creation is more accessible

Photography has seen a boom in recent years with the introduction of cheaper DSLRs and powerful smartphone cameras. Professional image editing software is becoming more and more accessible to the masses, as are website themes & tools. The only differentiator, therefore, becomes the quality.

More than a decade ago, pro photographers worked well with ad agencies or print publications, but now there's an endless supply of images.

So photographers need to constantly adapt to market changes and realize that quality is the only constant.



Form still matters

The visitors to your photo site always have expectations (for layout, experience, colors, etc.), you definitely have to try to meet them, to present your work in the best possible way.

But that only becomes a priority when the images (the “core” of the site) are as good as can possibly be at that point in time.

Websites act as enablers

A good website won't do all the hard work for you, it will never replace quality content. Consider your website as the enabler, the tool you can use to express yourself, to create value.

To put it differently, think of your website as a multiplier of the quality of work you put out.

If amazing images are backed by a powerful website, results can be impressive. Websites can surely drag photographers down sometimes (like talented artists with no easily accessible contact information), or they can also sometimes pump up the status of an average photographer.

There are surely a lot of **things you could be doing wrong on your photo website**, but most of the time, though, it comes down to the true value of the images. Aesthetic value, journalistic value, commercial value, personal value.

Distinctive content starts marketing itself, generates social media traction on its own (or with very little effort). It almost has its own momentum, you don't have to "drag" it around.

Don't stop with launching your site

A great website is just a storefront for your images, a window into your work. And quality is the main factor driving engagement, it's what truly keeps people on your site and makes them want to come back.

And it requires continuous effort, it's a long-term challenge.

Colorful buttons, live-chat bots, or fancy popups never work that well. Neither do social media profiles.



Sure, in this new age, it's become easier to reach larger audiences through social networks. But the [successful photographers](#) who constantly stand out on social media platforms are the content creators, the professional photographers who only share their best work.

It's clear that the recent smartphone & tablet explosion makes it even easier to consume content. And the fantastic rise of platforms like Instagram is evidence of where the market is heading.

But social media platforms are just "tools" you can leverage to promote your content. But they do not create value out of thin air. Your social media success depends on how visually impressive your photos are.

Quality vs. quantity

You shouldn't mistake your worth as a photographer for how many thousands of images you publish on your site or how many Facebook likes they get.

I'm not against quantity.

Sure, it's a good idea to keep your main portfolios as "tight" as possible, for maximum visual impact, but your entire image archive can be as large as you want.

Quantity is actually a great way to “reach” quality. Shooting more photos will slowly help you become a better photographer.

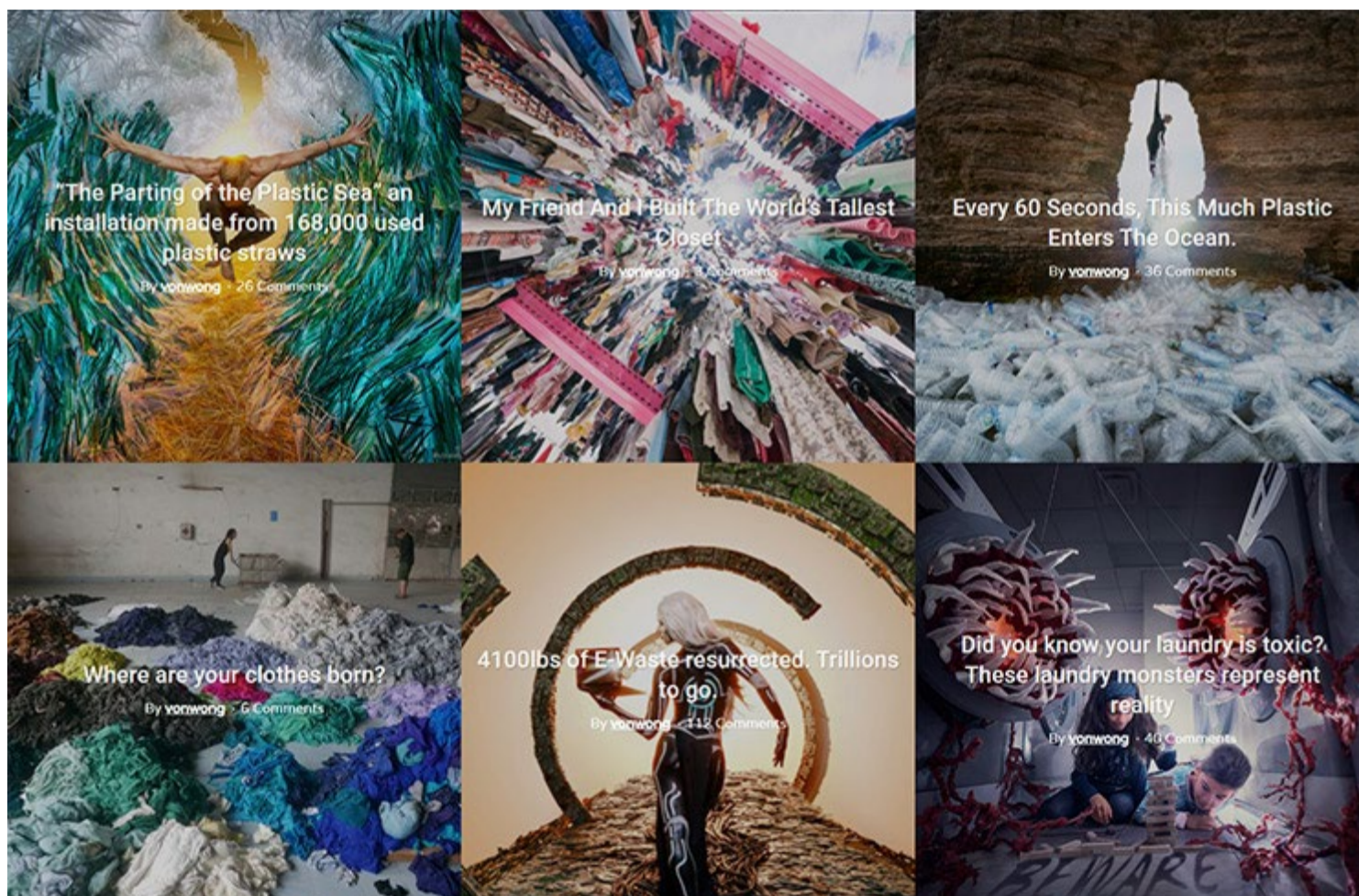
What I’m referring to is making sure that your website is a solid foundation that showcases your best work, instead of just relying on paid advertising to get traffic.

Too many photographers are making desperate attempts to market low-quality images (on any type of website, no matter how good it is), and then are worried about hearing crickets for a long time.

No paid advertising will help you there. The quality of the images is probably not good enough.

The point is to always add meaning to your work, to create galleries that inspire people and make them think.

That needs to be the foundation that everything else sits upon. Switching your mindset from quantity to quality cannot happen overnight, though, it requires experience and courage.



Don't forget that quality is relative

Creating a quality portfolio also requires [planning](#) and finding a good niche for your business because being a generalist will make this much much harder for you.

Everyone compares images to what they've seen from other photographers. But if you're in a very narrow and creative niche, you'll have fewer competitors, and the "perceived quality" will be much higher.

Because they're unique, images will "feel" more interesting overall.

So how do you know whether the quality is there or not?

- get a professional portfolio review from a trusted photographer or a marketing agency
- ask non-partisan non-family people for feedback
- have the patience to let your images "fly" on their own to see if they get shared (independently of any marketing efforts), that's usually a great confirmation that they're quality stuff
- in some sense, you never truly know. You might have a gut feeling that some images are better than others, but because photography is an art form, you can never be too sure. There are infinite levels of quality you can reach as your career progresses.

Follow your own path...

Especially when you're starting out as a photographer, if you spend too much time focusing on technical details (website stats, what social media buttons to use, moving design elements a few pixels, etc.), **you're unavoidably comparing yourself to other photographers**, to how others have shaped their work.

You should instead focus on your own journey, on growing your art over time. You're not here to compete with the world, you just need to enjoy the ride and celebrate your passion.

Focusing too much on bells-and-whistles, on superficial business metrics or analytics, almost always distracts from the essential: learning to "see" creatively, adding more meaning to your photo projects.

[Working on improving your photography site](#) deserves its own time, for sure, but sometimes you're better off by **having the courage to take a break from your website and instead work on a creative personal project.**

... and the path should lead to your legacy as a photographer

Your legacy will not be how beautiful your website was. Or how well it worked on mobile. Or how many Instagram followers you had.

Instead, your legacy will be those few really great photos you shot. A remarkable project you worked on. Or a particular "signature style" that you developed (if you're really good).

Don't lose sight of this. The quality of your images should be your guiding star.

Take action

Create a challenge for yourself to always try to publish epic images to the best of your abilities.

If you have great images, they will spread on their own. Your website traffic, the number of clients, and your self-confidence will start to fly.

In fact, a lot of successful photographers have poorly-designed (or even abandoned) websites, yet they're still running a fruitful photography business.

So when you ask yourself why you aren't getting enough work or visitors to your website, when you wonder why your images aren't being shared online that much, deep down, you probably know the answer. And in most cases, it has nothing to do with your website.

Are you creating quality images?

What could you change to make your portfolio amazing?

If you got anything out of this manifesto, if it struck a chord, I hope you'll do this for me:

Give a copy of this PDF to someone else. Ask another photographer to read it, and beg them to make a choice about quality.

We need more creative photographers putting amazing work out into the world. So please spread the word.

Thank-you.

- Alex



Your photography website is the “foreground” of your work. Make it amazing!

Differentiate yourself from the world of photo hobbyists with my unique design & development services and results-oriented articles. Don't get stuck in the “background”!

ForegroundWeb is a one-man cozy web-design studio, on a mission to improve photo sites out there.

If you run a photography website or blog, you're probably looking for more clients and better ways to professionally showcase and sell your photography work. You also know that a great website can help you find work and raise your prices over time, like a marketing engine.

But what's the purpose of it all?

You want the freedom to do what you love, to infuse your personality into more meaningful photo projects.

Splashing a coat of paint on a half-baked site theme won't cut it anymore, there are millions of hobbyists already doing just that.

ForegroundWeb wants to give you the clarity & tools to differentiate yourself.

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