

## How I Use Storytelling to Sell Art

Help your viewers learn about your work



### River Foam Negative

“What does it mean that this is a negative print?” asked a lithe, dark-complected woman who I later learned was named Jackie. This was my first big art show, and I was having a blast sharing the stories behind my photographs.

I explained that when working on this piece I had really liked the composition, but I wasn’t in love with the colors. By reversing the colors (essentially making the print look like an old-fashioned negative), I turned the warm colors cool and the dark areas light. What had been muted browns and yellows were now vibrant blues. I explained my process of taking a slow exposure giving the foam on the river time to swirl and make patterns.

“See here, where the reflection of the trees is almost white?” I pointed to the framed canvas that I had printed, sealed, mounted and framed myself.

“Oh! I didn’t even see the trees! It’s exquisite!”

Jackie bought the piece.

She asked if she could see the original, not negative, piece on my website. I assured her she could.

“I’ll be in touch,” she said as we parted. “I may want the original, so I can have them side by side.”

It was the story that pushed Jackie over the edge from appreciating a piece, to buying it.

## Does Art Need A Story?

An art purchase is unlike most purchases. If someone is in the market and has the means, they will buy a work of art if it resonates deeply enough — regardless of the cost.

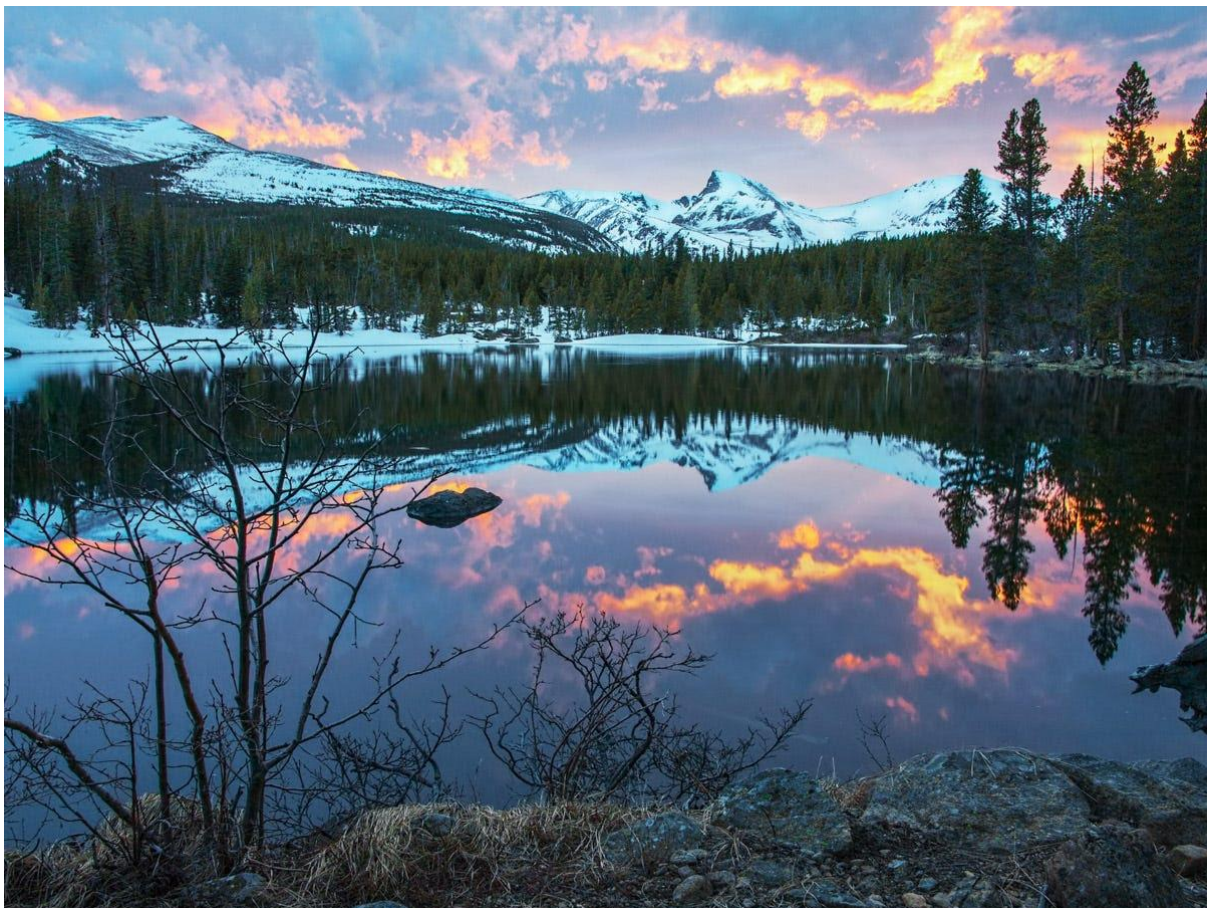
My folks had an interaction with a local photography gallery owner several years ago, and asked the question I hear a lot, “Where did you take this?”

The photographer replied, “It doesn’t matter where it was taken. It’s art. If it speaks to you, you should buy it.” It turns out that the photo spoke to my mom (who never splurges on things for herself) and my folks bought it.

That photographer’s comment has stuck with me though. Should I share general (or even specific) locations with customers? Should I talk about what it was like capturing the image? What kind of information is helpful when making a sale? I wondered how many sales he could have made through the years if his customers knew more about his work.

I’ve come to believe that a picture might be worth a thousand words, but a picture with a thousand words is priceless.

## Why Tell The Story



Sawtooth Reflection — Marketing Description: Sawtooth Reflection Indian Peaks Wilderness — 12,304 ft. The Indian Peaks Wilderness is the lesser-known little brother to Rocky Mountain National Park just west of Boulder, Colorado. It is a favorite of locals who want to avoid the tourists. Shooting from this unnamed pond, well away from a trail, was a true wilderness experience. As I sat waiting, a soft wind kept rippling the water, and the clouds remained



colorless. Then a hush descended, the birds quieted, the wind stopped, and for just a moment the clouds lit up in brilliant color. I pressed the shutter, then it was gone.

When I first started selling my photos in consignment stores, I was told the following story by Elaine, one of the owners. She had overheard two women discussing a framed version of the above photo, *Sawtooth Reflection*.

“Oh, I’m sure those colors were added in,” Elaine overheard. Then it got silent for a minute or so.

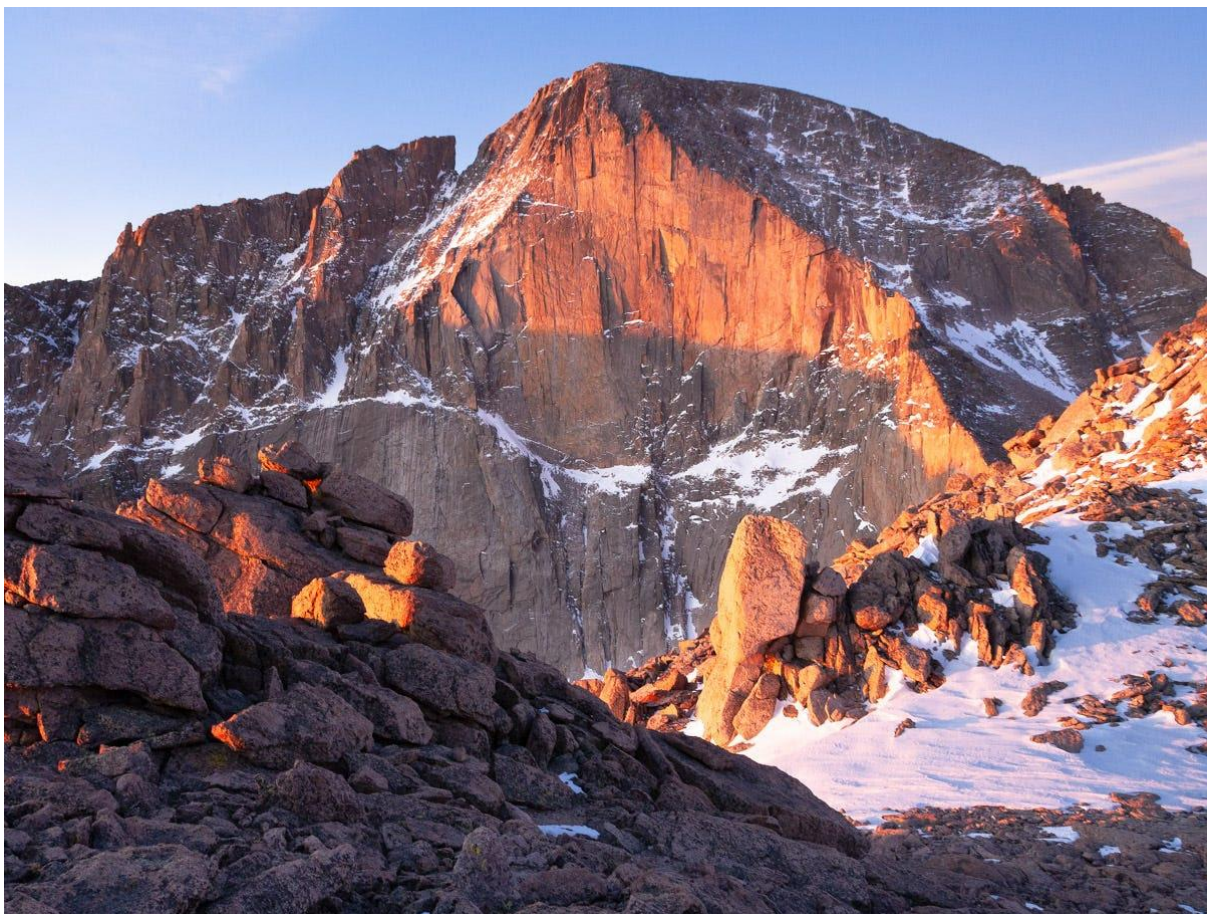
“Wait listen to this,” the woman told her friend, and read aloud the part of the description telling how the colors appeared just as the world hushed. Reassured that I hadn’t “faked” the picture, she bought it that day.

People do buy art when it resonates with them, but often it’s a story combined with the image that they connect with.

It usually starts with the image. A customer may love that photo, and whatever emotional strings it pulls may be enough to get them to buy. But maybe not. Why not feed them a story as well? Emotionally irrelevant information will be neutral, and shouldn’t sway a buyer either way. But some information might strike a chord that you didn’t know was there.

The point is, that the power of stories is subjective, just like art. You don’t know the emotional landscape of your viewers, but if you don’t put the story out there, you will never have the opportunity to connect with them in that way.

### **What To Include In Your Story**



[Longs Diamond Sunrise](#) — My biggest seller in northern Colorado

Writing and telling descriptions about your photography is also an art. Everyone will do it with their own style and their own voice. I do think that the most important element that should always be included is:

### **Emotion**

Ask yourself, “How can I connect with my viewers’ emotions?”

### **Location**

There is a reason why the most common question about photography is where it was taken. It’s the same reason that my mountain photography probably wouldn’t sell well in Florida. People have deep feelings about places. Longs Peak is the monarch of northern Colorado, where I sell most of my work. Therefore, Longs Diamond Sunrise is my most popular image. If I was down in Colorado Springs, it would be Pikes Peak instead.

### **The Journey**

Tell a bit about what it took to capture that image. Did you nearly miss it? How many iterations did it take? What problems did you have? People love good stories, so by spending time telling family and friends about your photography adventures, you can hone your stories and your voice.

### **A Human Emotional Theme**

Connection. Journey. Renewal. Hope. Refuge. Strength. Perseverance. Faith. Is that just a photo of a mountain, or is it a celebration of strength? Is that just a sunrise, or is it faith made real? Is that just a rugged trail, or is it a journey to adventure? Serious viewers of your work will tell themselves a story of your work if it is good enough, but you should still give them your interpretation. If you can’t give your own work personal metaphorical meaning, why would anyone else?

### **Include Your Viewer**

This is hard for me, and it might be the most important piece. Using words like, “Imagine yourself,” puts your viewer into the scene. Or “Eat breakfast next to this idyllic lake,” helps them to visualize owning your photo. I am just now trying to do this more in my written online descriptions, and I need to figure out how to share it in conversation as well.

### **Brand Yourself**



[Pastel Dawn](#) — “Dawn is a special time to experience faith. The long night is nearing its end, and faith is being rewarded with the coming of the day.” — This online description helps brand my company, “Creation Images.”

People follow artists even more than art. What is your story, and how can you share it? Do you have a greater mission than just taking pretty pictures? How can you create a culture that people want to be a part of?

A great book that talks about “Story Branding” is [Start Something That Matters](#) (*paid link*) by Blake Mycoskie of the TOMS shoe movement. It’s a movement more than a shoe company because he pioneered the philanthropic business model.

He outlines ideas like creating a common language, having a shared “enemy” (like hunger), and having a larger mission. People want to be a part of helping the world in some way, and they will be more likely to buy your art (multiple times) if they feel like they are included.

For me, my mission is “To explore, capture and share the beauty of God’s creation, to inspire faith, hope, and goodness.” My photography business, Creation Images, uses phrases like “Experience Real” and “God is the Artist” to brand my mission in a way that is simple enough to resonate with people.

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