



Episode 57: Digital Makers | 3 Pillars to Great Storytelling

Featuring: Mingo Palacios & Andrew Abajian

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Transcript:

Mingo Palacios: [00:13](#)

PD Podcasters, this episode is from a gathering we held a few weeks back called Digital Makers. It was aimed at conversations with practitioners and their best practice in each of the digital spaces, be it blogging, vlogging, photography, storytelling. Every conversation is full of great insight and I hope you enjoy it.

Andrew Abajian: [00:38](#)

You also left out that I do a cinematography a lot. I actually do more cinematography now these days and filmmaking than photography and that's kind of where I jump in. So I really wanted to talk today to, how many photographers, cinematographers, aspiring

artists do we have? Oh, there's a good amount. Did you bring your cameras? Oh bless you. Bless all of you. iPhones count. iPhones absolutely count and they get a mark. I actually shoot super eight for a lot of my projects. A lot of my clients. I love film. I love its authenticity. I love that you can't doctrine it. It's so honest, especially in a story. So if you later have questions of like, how to shoot super eight, where do you get developed? How to utilize it? You can come find me and talk, but today I'm going to be talking to on the three storytelling pillar is that I personally use in photography and cinematography on every job that I've created. That helps free my mind to then be available to the story. I'm not stressing out. I'm not flustered. I'm not freaking out trying to how do I be creative, how do I do this, how to do that. I have these in place to free myself for that reason. So we'll jump in and also I apologize. I have not used presentations since college. It's been a long time, so we'll see how this goes.

Andrew Abajian: [01:57](#)

So the three that I use is relational, intentional and technical, and I'm going to walk you guys through what those are, what they mean and how I utilize them. And to wrap it all together, I'm going to show a film that I was hired to create for generosity water in Guatemala in November, and you'll get to really utilize and see this is how I use these three to create this content. So first we'll start, if you have your phone, pull it out. All of you probably have Instagram. I'm not great at Instagram, but if you want to connect with

me, that's the only social media I use. Andrew J. Abajian is my name. A little about myself, I went to Vanguard University. Any alum? Yeah. No. Okay. No one's here.

Andrew Abajian: [02:39](#)

I earned my degree in cinematography and directing. I'm actually self taught in photography. That was never my main goal, nor is it what I went to school for. It just turned out that right when I got out of college, one of my first jobs was doing photography, photo journalism with World Vision in Rwanda during trials of war crimes from the genocide. So my first venture into photography was the real deal. It was deep in jungle watching people who have murdered their neighbors be on trial. And that was my first job. That's when I truly fell in love with story telling, like really connecting with people, really hearing what their heart is and how do you photograph that? Well, how do you film them well? How do you do it without, I guess in a weird way of putting them on blast, like overexposing them in a way that's not authentic or utilizing it for your own platform instead of really wanting to connect with them and tell an honest story. And since then I've been blessed to, like Mingo, said I've got to travel with Rick Warren.

Andrew Abajian: [03:42](#)

I spent six weeks in Rwanda with him for the peace plan doing all kinds of film work in photography that they now use for a lot of their stuff. Anthony's team made a book that was Rick used to speak at the UN. That was like the majority of my photography from that said project, which I loved. I loved that book. You

killed it. It was so cool. But I've also been doing fine art destination weddings, which sounds like a weird term doing filmmaking because I saw there was a need and with that I've actually got to do stuff with NBA players, MLB players. Mingo actually assisted me shoot. How many of you guys watch Duck Dynasty? So a year ago I actually went and shot one of their kids' weddings in Tulum. So we've got the pain for three days with the whole Robertson clan in Mexico, which was such a good time, but now I'm focused mostly on humanitarian work, documentarian work, still do weddings, but I just really liked telling honest stories about people coming back to my love of when I first went to Rwanda as a young 18 year old, fresh out of college kid.

Andrew Abajian: [04:43](#)

So let's jump right in. Relational, it is in collaboration that the nature of art is revealed. I really believe as photographers and cinematographers, you have to be willing to initiate and engage with your clients before you ever step out and shoot anything. You have to be intentionally seeking them. You have to be available to hear their story, whether that's getting a cup of coffee, Facetiming, and so forth. The way in which two or more people connect implies that a connection isn't deemed necessary for any distant relationship to take place. Meaning you need to initiate conversation with people in your proximity to build a foundation. That's the first step in building trust and allowing your subjects, your clients, whoever it is to feel vulnerable in front of your camera, especially weddings. I don't

know if any of you guys are aspiring to do weddings. There's a lot of couples.

Andrew Abajian: [05:35](#)

You will find 100 percent of all your clients are completely uncomfortable in front of the camera. They're terrified. They're like, I don't know how I look. I don't know this, this and this and this, and a way to break that is by building a foundational friendship with them prior to your shoot because now you're friends, right? You're not this hired stranger that's just staring down the barrel of the lens with them, freaking them out, your relational with them. You're intimate with them. You're allowing them to be vulnerable and they feel comfortable with that. Thus they're gonna find themselves being themselves in front of your lens. This goes for documentary filmmaking too, especially when you're interviewing people about subjects that can be really heavy. If you're not relational with them, then they're not going to be able to let their walls down and be comfortable in front of you.

Andrew Abajian: [06:17](#)

How might you apply this? I really like to ask questions. I love asking questions, not just surfacy questions. I'm talking about questions that a deep friend might ask them. A lot of shoots, especially weddings, I will actually ask them, how's it feel knowing that that person loves you, so if you're married or if you're in a relationship, if someone were to ask you directly, like how does it feel knowing that your spouse loves you, like not just loves you, like they are committed to you for the rest of their life? That's not a question someone can just be like

answer immediately. They have to really think about that. There is an emotion that's going to come from that. They have to really understand what that means to them. I always like the one, if you could tell that person one thing, what would it be? Again, it's a thoughtful thing.

Andrew Abajian: [07:01](#)

They can't just casually be like, "Oh, I love McDonald's." Like tell them that that's the end of it. They're going to think intentionally about what it is that they want to say as well as if you could accomplish anything, what would it be? That one's a little more open ended, but I'll ask these a lot of times before when I'm in client meetings and I'll actually ask these same questions during shoots. If it's weddings, if you ask that question, you could tell them, whisper that in their ear, like whisper your answer in her ear and right there. Now there's an honest connection between you and them as well as with each other and you're getting a real moment out of them because whatever he says is going to mean the world to her and vice versa, and that's such a great tool to have in your pocket.

Andrew Abajian: [07:42](#)

It's building that relationship. It's allowing everyone to be connected before you begin shooting. I like to follow up as well. For most people, being themselves in front of camera is a daunting task by positioning yourself as a valued friend versus a stranger, as I mentioned, you set yourself up for success. Asking questions matters and also follow up. Build that relationship. Don't just simply ask these questions,

shoot and then move on. Follow up with them, talk to them before the shoot, during the shoot, after the shoot, build friendships. I love going to get coffee with clients. The biggest thing I will say right now is never agreed to enter any project, any project, I don't care how big, how little, ever. Never agree to it unless you have met them face to face. That could be simply on Facetime if they're not in the same state and you're going to have a relationship moment with them or at least go get coffee if they live far, meet halfway.

Andrew Abajian: [08:36](#)

Work a way around to be able to be available to them because I tell you now it will save you. It'll build such a strong foundation that when you actually get behind your camera and are in these vulnerable moments, the walls come down and you're having fun and they're having fun and you're not stressed out. You're not panicking. That's the number one tool. Be Relational. Seek it out, initiate, ask questions. Follow up. Three, be intentional. Cinema is a matter of what is in the frame and what is out. How many of you guys know Murphy's law? I've heard of Murphy's law. They use it briefly in the movie interstellar. He names the daughter Murphy. The whole premise of that is anything that can go wrong will go wrong. It is a law that I live by when it comes to photography and cinematography. I like to script an outcome to the best of my ability, so again, I'm not scrambling when things don't go my way.

Andrew Abajian: [09:34](#)

I'm not scrambling or flustered when the day is chaotic and I will tell you now the day will always be

chaotic. It will not ever just be easy. Whether that's weddings, whether that's editorial, fashion shoots where this documentary filmmaking, it'll always be chaotic and that's kind of the fun of it. It really is the joy, so I script an outcome. You've got to resist the urge to walk into a shoot with an attitude of let's just see what happens. That is not the best way to go into it I guarantee. You're going to be frustrated when you're like, "Let's just see what happens" and then nothing's happening and you're panicking because you're not getting the content you want to get. There will come many moments when the story has not yet revealed itself and you'll be left scrambling to be creatively decisive onset and I will tell you now that will be very unattractive to your clients.

Andrew Abajian: [10:22](#)

I don't care who they are. If you're like, "Um, let me check Pinterest real quick. Just give me one second" and you're over on the side like trying to look up poses. They're going to sit there being like, "Are they not prepared? Do they not know what's going on? What is this?" You need to be organized the best way I can put it, which I know is weird being artists. We like to be like free and loose and casual and let's just see how it goes and it doesn't always work out well like that and I think these are the steps that I learned a long time ago. I got to prepare myself. I got to apply Murphy's law that when it does happen, I'm not stressed. You're still mellow, you're still chill, and your clients again will appreciate that because you're calm,

you're relaxed, you're engaged, and you're creatively moving through your flow.

Andrew Abajian: [11:08](#)

This is how I do that. Type A, I know it's a weird thing. Compartmentalize your ideas into intentional lanes. I know the idea is again, an oxymoron. We're artists, we like to be free and loose, but by doing this you will free yourself up to be more creatively available and keen on the story as it unfolds. This is my breakdown. I'm going to spend a little bit of time here because it might seem weird. So say you have 100 percent of your mindset how you want to do that. I put 25 percent of my client's expectations into my bundle as you will, my gear bag. This is what I'm thinking. Okay, this is what they hired me for. This is where I know they want to accomplish. This is what they want to see. I'm only going to put 25 percent of my effort into understanding that. Next 25 is going to be my own creative synopsis.

Andrew Abajian: [11:55](#)

Twenty five percent is this is what I would like the outcome to be, but chances are it's not going to play out that way. So don't get your hopes up. How many of you guys have done weddings yet? Did the day play out the way you thought it would? Not even remotely. Not even close. You can kind of create a synopsis of you're like, "I think that it will go like this." It won't go like that. It'll just be chaotic and thrown around and that's okay. That's the beauty of cinematography and photography and journalism is it's all an unknown. You're just doing the best you can to release yourself to be creatively available. The last

part, the main part, this is what I do for every single shoot, doesn't matter if it's a documentary film, a wedding, editorial is you make a day of schedule.

Andrew Abajian: [12:39](#)

Always make a schedule. What that looks like for me is I say, okay, this day they want eight hours of shoot based on the expectations and synopsis, I'm going to say from two to three, I'm going to do this from three to this, I'm going to do this, and I write out by time a full shoot schedule that I then put on my iPhone as the background image. People cheering and they know it. It'll save you because then again, as you're going through your day, as you're flowing, as you're doing your thing, you just can take little scans and be like, okay, sweet. This is where we're moving. This is where the story's going. I'm feeling good. Everything's calm, no one's stressing out. We're not panicking. We're enjoying our time. We're enjoying what we do and that's the point of being an artist and photographer, cinematographer.

Andrew Abajian: [13:22](#)

You're a storyteller. You thrive in it. You love it. You love getting behind the camera. You love taking images. So, I mean, this just really helps. So you're being relational, you're engaging with your clients, you're being intentional. You're not setting their expectations too high, you're planning for Murphy's law, but you have your little template in place just to keep you at ease when you're going through the day, and the last one for me is technical, which I'm sure for a lot of photographers, cinematographers. This is the big one. I mean everyone can talk about business,

admin, but technicality of your gear is so important. You must witness the narrative unfold through your lens, not in post production. I'll say that again. You must witness the narrative unfold through your lens, not in post production. You need to know your cameras capability so intimately that you never ever say, "I'll just fix it in post." Saying those words admits that there is a gaping hole in your knowledge as a storyteller. We live in a culture where postproduction is king. It reigns. Look anywhere today and there's like 50 bajillion million photographers selling their presets. It's like, okay, how did that even become a market? Because 10 years ago everyone was shooting film and if you didn't know the technicality of film, you had no job and it has shifted now to just being iPhones, Instagram and in the edit, it's all become about the edit and the quality of the content behind that is shallow. There's nothing there. There's no story. I've seen so many films, many pictures, so many things where it's just for the sake of it with a pretty preset. There's just nothing there. And to me, being a good photographer and being a good cinematographer is about telling a good story. It's about finding the honest narrative that's within that.

Andrew Abajian: [15:06](#)

So you really want to resist that. In order to capture something authentic, you must not rely on postproduction gimmicks. As an artist, you have to understand your gear so intimately that you can create the visual you want all in camera, and you can do that. You are capable of doing that. By doing so,

they'll never come situation that you're not skilled enough to handle at that moment because you know your cameras so well, in any shoot, in any scenario, if the light changes, if a light goes out, if there's shadows, if there's this, you know your camera, you know your gear so well that you're not flustered. Again, all of these things, freeing your mind creatively, relies strictly on being confident in what you have before you to not get upset to where you're then not being creative, and that's a tough place. I've been there.

Andrew Abajian: [15:49](#)

I've been there when everything doesn't go your way. Murphy's law is hitting. Nothing's planning out. The light is so harsh compared to what you were hoping it would be. It's just none of it played out into your advantage because you know your gear, you're not stressed. You're going to do some things and I'm going to share some of the features that I like. Preference, camera body. Who shoots Canon? Who shoots Nikon? Who shoots Sony? Yes. Fuji? One person. I shoot Fuji and then Panasonic. I would say those are the major ones. If you're doing photography and cinematography. Research what camera body's going to work well for you? Do not just simply look on Instagram and go, "Oh, that person's using a Canon Mark Five because everyone's using the same camera. I would look at the opposite. I would be like, what's popular in culture right now?

Andrew Abajian: [16:46](#)

I'm going to run the farthest away because then my work is going to stand out and be individualistic.

Never just look and be like, "Okay, that's the casual one." I'm convinced that Canon has just made cameras designed just for the wedding industry, which they're great. I shot Canon forever and they are amazing on wedding documentary shoot days. But there are so many other cameras you can find that are going to read color differently. Their sensors going to be different. They're sharp. All these things that you can do so just really research what it is you want to create and then start with your camera body you to get there. The next actually even more important is your lens, your glass. I will preach this over and over and over. Your lens and your glass is more important than your camera body. You could have a Canon Rebel from 1990, and if you have amazing glass, your pictures, the quality of the content you create is going to be better than the person on a Canon Mark Five, shooting on just a basic lens.

Andrew Abajian: [17:44](#)

Always invest in your lens more than your body because I guarantee you two years of shooting on a lower end body with a really nice lens is going to get you a lot farther than shooting on a really nice body with a basic lens. Does that make sense? Big thing for me, especially when it comes to stories is the glass they use tells a different story. They all tell different stories, so research their focal length, their f-stop range, their sharpness. I personally love lenses that can go all the way down to f one point two, one point four. I love shallow depth. I love being able to focus on exactly what I want focused and everything

else doesn't matter. That's how you're going to tell a good story. That's how you can take a really good portrait, really good frame of an interview. Be okay dipping down into those shallow depths where it gets blurry. Everything doesn't have to be f 16 and everything's in focus, but if that's how you want to shoot them, then that's great, but be intentional about it. Don't just do it because it's there. Really find what it is you want to tell and how you're going to get there.

Andrew Abajian: [18:52](#)

Focus and framing. Who shoots on mirrorless cameras? We've got a few. I'm going to preach this over and over again. Focus peaking. If you are not using focus peaking on your mirrorless camera, you are missing the greatest feature of your life. If you're not shooting on mirrorless rent one and try it and just see if it changes the way you enjoy shooting. There's a lot of websites where you can rent camera bodies and lenses for like 150 bucks for a week. They're not bad. They're not taking insurance out anymore on you, which they used to do, which was a bummer because you have to drop like \$1,200 in insurance plus the cost of the lens.

Andrew Abajian: [19:22](#)

I personally shoot Fuji now for all my photography. It was Canon for years. Tried Fuji. It reminded me of why I love photography. It reminded me why I love documentary, photography, journalism portraits of people. It re invited me back into this relationship with the camera and I loved that and focus peaking is a reason for that because I'm a manual shooter. Give me manual all day. I will go through the camera and

set everything up the way I want to be so that when I shoot, I'm getting what I want in camera on the first try. And focus peaking is great for that. Also the way you frame get creative, try different things. Don't just look at Instagram and go, "Oh, everyone's framing like this." Which if you go through Instagram feed, every Instagram feed is just full body shots that people in fashion maybe doing like a few little things.

Andrew Abajian: [20:10](#)

None of them are actually getting close. I mean when's the last time you saw a portrait of someone's face that was close and intimate and you're seeing details in their face like that doesn't exist anymore. I mean, I feel like that's how a lot of people started out. I mean, Annie Leibovitz is a portrait master. Go look at her old work, go look at any photographers old work. They're very intentional with their portraits of how they're. They want people to experience you truly, and I think that's a good thing, but that all comes down to your focus and your framing and being intentional in that way. Last is Kelvin. How many of you know at Kelvin is? Yes, there are a few. You can change the color temperature in your camera to get the fuel you want before you take the shot. Canon, every camera has it.

Andrew Abajian: [20:52](#)

I mean, I'm pretty sure even the lowest Canons have it. You can go in and change the Kelvin. What that looks like is the higher the number, the more warm it's going to be. The lower the number, the more blue tones it's going to be. So if you're a photographer that likes to shoot and make things really warm, jump in

there, crank the Kelvin up until it's sitting where you want it so that when you shoot the images you're looking at in your camera, it already looks exactly like you want it, not auto white balance, autofocus. Let's see how this plays out. I'll fix it in post. Do not ever do that. If you've said those words, raise your hand. I want to see. Yes. Don't do that. You've bought these amazing cameras that give you as an artist, so much control. Take it like learn your camera.

Andrew Abajian: [21:39](#)

It's truly you will find so much more enjoyment when you go film, when you do these things for cinematographers too, I forgot to mention this, be intentional about why you're shooting handheld. Be intentional about why you're on a tripod. Be intentional about why you might be on a steady cam. Is it out of convenience or is because that's how you want the story to be seen. Choosing your lens. I'm going to show a film at the very end of this that I just did recently. I chose to use a 24 millimeter lens for the whole film because I wanted a subject like you, I wanted you to be seen, but I want to the world around you to also be experienced because it was in a third world village in Guatemala. I wanted people to experience the people but also the surrounding and you only can do that with a very specific lens to get the framing you want.

Andrew Abajian: [22:25](#)

I was intentional with that decision because that's the story I was hoping to tell. That was my 25 percent synopsis of setting myself up to then let the story unfold and see what I could gather. So if you don't

know how to use your Kelvin again, you can come. I'm going to be here at lunch. I'm probably going to be here the rest of the day. Like all these questions, you can come find me like I love chatting gear. I love geeking out. I love just going and shooting and trying new things and finding what really works for you in the story you want to tell. So to recap, these are the three pillars. I use these all the time before I go shoot, be relational, initiate conversation with your clients through thoughtful questions, and always follow up to build a solid foundation. You've got to be intentional.

Andrew Abajian: [23:10](#)

Compartmentalize your ideas into intentional lanes. Do not fall victim to Murphy's law unless it's technical. You've got to learn to create within your camera, not in post production. I really believe those. I applied those to all my work. I created those from work being in the field, whether that's in Rwanda, in Guatemala, or just a fashion editorial, like all of these things. I guarantee you if you just follow these pillars, it sets yourself up so you're more relaxed, you're more casual, you're more confident and you're going into every single shoot and scenario ready to just see what unfolds. You're not pushing anything. You're not forcing anything. You're just kind of stepping back and being like, okay, let's enjoy this. Let's have some fun. Let's see what we can get out of this. By practicing and applying these three pillars, you free your creative mind to be available to see the story unfold before you.

Andrew Abajian: [24:04](#)

You have built a relationship with your clients, you have planned for the day, and you understand your camera's abilities because you're no longer flustered overthinking it. The story will unfold organically and I say these things too because I'm going to finish this film. I know you guys can smell fish tacos. Everyone's hungry. Everyone's ready. Don't get hangry because I promise I'm going to show a short, short film shorts like seven minutes. I was hired in November by Generosity Water, if you haven't heard of them, they're amazing. They build wells all over the world and they sell their water bottles. I think they sell them at Starbucks, other shops so forth. But their whole goal is to build wells in third world countries to bring clean water to people who, most of them have never even seen what clean water looks like. It's absolutely amazing what they do and it's about sustaining life, but they also do it in the name of Jesus, which for me is even more amazing.

Andrew Abajian: [24:52](#)

They understand that the water of life is Christ. So there's pictures that you see here, I was hired to do photography and cinematography. How many of you have ever done that on one project? We got two. It's tough, right? Just you, no assistant. This is just me a week, eight days in deep Guatemala, hired to do all photography content for new website as well as a short film that they're going to show on the website as well to donors to help tell the story of these people and hopefully gain more attention to people wanting to get involved and help fund and themselves go and

fund wells. As you can see, a few of the pictures the story that unfolded, this is probably one of my favorite pictures I took, which is one of the workers chilling in front of someone's house and I didn't even realize it at the time.

Andrew Abajian: [25:40](#)

A perfect clean bottle of water sitting between them and you have this juxtaposition that just unfolded before me because I was relational with the women who lived in that house. I was going to visit her every day because I was intentional. I had an idea of kind of what I wanted to tell because I was technical because I understood my camera so well. I didn't have to worry about what this lighting, what the scene looked like, simply saw it unfold, get the shot, and that's how it works. I mean, to me, that's how the most powerful images happen; you're not forcing it. You just simply were available and prepared, and that's the best thing you can have for you as your skill set.

Mingo Palacios: [26:23](#)

We'd like to thank Purpose Driven Church for making this podcast possible. If you've been feeling burnt out or plateaued in your ministry, we invite you to join us for Purpose Driven Church conference happening this June right here in Southern California. You can learn more and register by visiting PD.church. We hope today's insights left you feeling inspired and propelled towards your greatest potential. Thanks again for joining us for another episode of the PD Podcast. Until next time.

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