Submittable

HOW TO RUN A (FLAWLESS) PHOTO CONTEST:

The Complete Guide

Photo contests of all shapes and sizes can drive user engagement, inspire user-generated content (UGC), and promote your brand with stunning visuals. They can also be a lot of fun. But while a well-run photo contest can help boost brand visibility and broaden your reach, a disorganized photo contest can be a regrettable waste of resources.

In this guide, we'll walk you through the entire process, from crafting the initial idea to tracking final results so that you can plan for your next successful contest.

CONTENT

EMBRACING THE BENEFITS, UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES

Whether you're looking to engage your audience, build your base, acquire a rich source of data, or leverage consumers to do a little marketing for you, photo contests are a great choice. Heartfelt and creative images generate interest when shared online and serve as authentic marketing photos, un-staged, and free from any hint of self-serving agenda. These contests make your brand feel more personal, make people feel more personally invested, and increase trust.

Specifically, photo contests can help your organization:

- Create community

- Acquire photos which can form a library of UGC

- Gather feedback about your brand

- Boost user engagement

- Discover new market demographics

- Increase brand awareness

- Launch or promote a product or service

- Create brand ambassadors

- Develop new partnerships with brands or influencers

Photo contests also come with a set of challenges you should prepare for before you jump in:

- Photos can be personal to users—and they're owned by the person who took them

- Contests can take a lot of administrative hours if not organized efficiently

- Photos can be difficult to download, display, and regulate

- Photo contests can be susceptible to fraud and cheaters

- Photo contests can be expensive, depending on your processes and prizes

RUNNING A PHOTO CONTEST:
A 12-STEP GUIDE

1 DEFINE THE GOAL
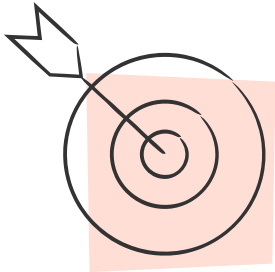
Look at the list of photo contest benefits on the previous page. Are there one or two bullets that stand out to you the most? Perhaps you're launching a new product that you'd really like to showcase, or perhaps you have an upcoming need for user-generated content. Pick one or two goals for your photo contest that will help you make the best decisions about your contest as you begin to plan, and focus you on getting specific results that fit your needs.

In addition to having a goal in mind, also consider how you're going to track the success of your goal and collect data. Especially if you plan on running a photo contest in the future—either the same contest or a different one—being able to clearly see the results of your first contest is imperative.

Finally, don't be afraid to clearly define your goal. Pick a specific number of submissions you'd like to collect, or a certain amount of social media engagement.

2 DEFINE THE THEME

Creating a theme for your contest can help steer users in the right direction, which is especially important if your primary goal is UGC. Creating a theme can also encourage higher-quality submissions. While a general photo contest might result in more submissions, a contest that lacks focus could generate too many submissions.

Consider the following theme options:

- Seasonal or holiday themes can allow you to get great casual shots. Think vacations, road trips, fall leaves, Valentine's Day, and so on.

- Related events can allow you to promote your contest on the back of trending hashtags. For example, running a photo contest during a conference, festival, or exhibition can make marketing both events easier.

- A theme related to your brand can help boost awareness and lead to amazing UGC. For example, a clothing company might ask for shots of people wearing their merchandise. Your theme could also relate to one of your core values.

- Collaborating with another brand can double your reach and bring in cross-promotion.

You can have subcategories to your contest, such as a family section, a pet category, and "captioned" images, which allow for contestants to create memes (that can potentially go viral).

3 CHOOSE THE GIVEAWAY

While a TV, iPad, cruise, or cash prize can generate lots of entries, consider giving away your company's own products or services to keep the contest centered on your brand and keep costs low. You can combine giveaway items if it makes sense. Consider having tiers of giveaways, with a big item going to the contest winner and ten smaller giveaways going to randomly selected entrants.
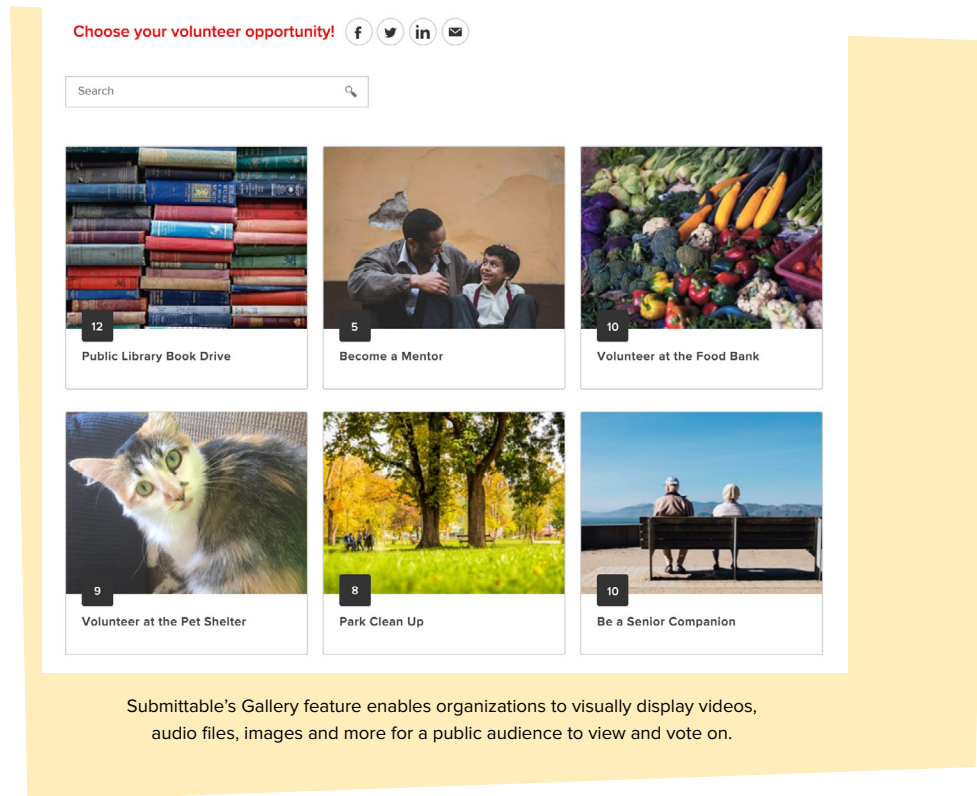
4 CHOOSE A PLATFORM

Different digital tools have different advantages when it comes to photo contests. A centralized platform that gathers all entries together in one place is the smartest, most efficient approach. This allows you to share photos and tag the image owner on different social platforms, on your blog, and elsewhere.

By funneling all images through a single [submissions platform](#), you can collect entrant information at the same time as the photo. From there you can disseminate the photos across various channels while keeping entrants engaged and looped in. A submission platform also removes the need to download photos—a process that can consume both time and space when large photo files are involved.

If your contest involves public voting, allow voters to filter and search for their favorite submissions quickly. Having entries that are publicly searchable by submitter name, title, or label means voters can select and search in a way that is comfortable for them. Engagement increases when you provide an opportunity for voting according to personal preference.

Submittable's Gallery feature enables organizations to visually display videos, audio files, images and more for a public audience to view and vote on.

Anonymous voting can be another excellent tool for increasing engagement with your photo contest audience. Providing interested readers an opportunity to vote without signing in or creating a free account reduces potential barriers, encouraging broader audience participation.

5   SET THE RULES

Poorly defined rules for your photo contest can potentially result in lawsuits and bad press. Don't be afraid to spend a few bucks getting help from a legal professional—it can save you a lot of time and resources in the long run.

To avoid trouble from the outset, your contest terms and rules should include:

- Who can enter
- How to enter
- Alternative ways to enter
- Dates of the promotion
- Maximum number of entries
- Violations or abuses that lead to disqualification

6   CREATE A UNIQUE HASHTAG FOR THE CONTEST

Select a unique, relatable, and easy to type hashtag to use as a promotional tool. This can help you measure engagement and reach by simply searching your hashtag on different social platforms and reviewing posts. Anyone in the contest can also search the hashtag and see how fast and far the contest is spreading.

Hashtags can increase brand awareness and grow your social media following. You may even invent a high-quality tag to use long term. Not feeling creative? You can use a hashtag generator to help you develop a contest hashtag. Don't forget to check online and make sure someone else isn't already using it. It's also a good idea to type your hashtag out in all lowercase letters and divide it into different letter groupings to make sure there's not an accidental alternate meaning. Then, capitalize the first letter of each word when using your hashtag online.

7 SELECT A WINNING STRATEGY

There are several ways to identify a winner for your photo contest, and you should be clear in the contest promotions what that process will entail. You can:

- **Set up an impartial judging panel.** This can be expensive if your judges are paid, but can often be the best way to determine a winner. A formal review process allows you to immediately discard inappropriate or non-qualifying photos, and elevate high-quality submissions quickly to the top of the list.

- **Allow voters to choose a winner.** This option is more interactive but leaves your contest vulnerable to individuals potentially gaming the system. It could also result in a ridiculous photo gaining the favor of the masses. You can avoid fraud by having multiple grading systems that evaluate submissions based on several characteristics—with the number of votes being just one piece of the decision-making process. Choose an application that identifies participants and voters by IP address, limiting the number of votes per day from user or locations.

- **Randomly draw a winner.** This approach is entirely impartial, but a substandard photo might win. To avoid this, you could institute a round of filtering to help raise the bar and randomly draw from the pool of top candidates.

- **A multiple-round combination.** Some contests blend strategies on choosing a winner to better meet their goal. For example, you may have a round of judges choose a pool of finalists and then have the public vote from there. Or vice versa.

- **Choose the photo you like best.** This strategy involves personal bias, but as long as you don't select a photo submitted by a friend, family member, or co-worker, it's another viable option. Be ready to explain your choice and provide judging criteria.

8 CONSIDER USING SOFTWARE TO STREAMLINE YOUR CAMPAIGN

Running a photo campaign can require significant effort. With a centralized platform, the entire process can be much simpler. A photo contest management platform like Submittable can:

- **Make it easy to enter your contest.** You'll need a platform that includes a simple photo upload option and the ability to create a short form that collects the information you need —a contact email, the user's social media handles, a caption if needed, and the entrant's name (and age if required in your state for contests.) Don't forget that social media users spend 80% of their time on a mobile device. Whatever platform you choose should be easy and intuitive to use on mobile.

- **Keep things organized.** If your contest has subcategories, include a drop-down field so entrants can select the correct one. Sorting photos will be easier that way. If multiple submissions are allowed, decide if you want users to be able to submit more than one photo at a time. If so, you'll need to manage your fields and uploads accordingly.

- **Obtain acknowledgment and consent.** Don't forget to have rules, regulations, and consent that participants must check off before an entry is submitted. Otherwise, you can wind up in hot water legally, especially if you use submitted photos in future campaigns. Have a lawyer help you draft contest rules and require that entrants check a box giving you permission to use their images (as well as affirming the images are their own) to shield you from liability.

- **Prevent lost submissions.** Using a management platform prevents entries from falling through the cracks and makes communicating with entrants very easy and easy to track.

- **Collect submission fees.** In some circumstances, and depending on your photo contest goals, having a submission fee can be a great idea. A contest platform can make it easy to collect these fees without a headache.

9 PROMOTE YOUR CONTEST

You can easily promote your contest by leveraging your online social channels, blog, email list, and any partnerships you may have with other brands or social influencers. Share top quality photos daily and tag entrants so they can share to their own networks. Post on as many platforms as possible and if you are using a voting system, remind people to vote often, via social posts and email. If your submission platform offers marketing services, this can be an excellent addition to your own efforts extending your reach and engaging your base.

You may wish to run a simultaneous promotion for your product or service during the contest. Use a specific call to action and a specific link or promo code to track sales related to your contest efforts.

10 ANNOUNCE THE WINNER

Make sure you close submissions precisely at the deadline and send an email informing all entrants that the selection of the winner(s) is in progress. Whatever selection method you use, make it as swift as possible, and then prepare to announce the results. Reach out privately to the winner(s) to ensure you have the right contact information—then immediately release the winner's names and tag them on social media in a post that includes their photos.

Send out giveaways immediately, and ask winners to post a picture of themselves with their prize on one of your social media pages, if applicable. This can provide proof that your contest was legitimate and help you run a more successful campaign in the future. Don't forget enlist winners to be brand ambassadors as well. You can also release a discount code to thank all participants who entered or interacted with your contest, further extending your photo contest reach.

11   TRACK RESULTS

Measure the impact of your campaign using the following metrics:
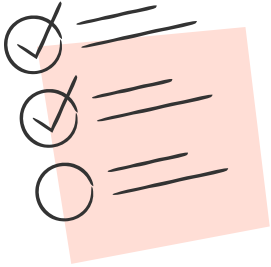
- The gross number of submissions
- Total number of eligible entries
- Total number of unique participants if you allow multiple submissions
- Votes per submission if using voting as a scoring metric
- Engagement per submission to identify images that resonate with your audience
- Growth during the campaign (new social media followers/email list subscribers)

12   RINSE AND REPEAT

The best thing to do after a photo contest is to start planning your next one. Use what you learned from your first contest to make the next one even better. When you use a platform like Submittable to accept, organize, and manage entries and entrants, collecting UGC can be an easy, fun experience for everyone involved. Find out more about Submittable and how we can help you successfully manage your next flawless photo contest today.

Submittable ⬡

Submittable is a cloud-based submission management platform that makes it easy to accept, review, and select any kind of content, no matter where you are. Since 2010, Submittable has helped organizations collect more than 10 million submissions for thousands of customers all over the world.