

The Nonprofit Photo Fix Kit

How to Pick Photos That Strengthen Your
Story and Raise More Money



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A single image can add emotion or diffuse it.

It can pull a donor into the story...

Or quietly signal: “Nothing urgent here. No action needed.”

This kit gives you practical, emotional, and science-backed guidance on how to choose photos that *support your story*, *increase donor response*, and make your communications more powerful.

Let’s start with using photos in your appeals.

FUNDRAISING APPEALS (PRINT + DIGITAL)


GOAL: Create emotional urgency. Make the donor feel something real and raw so they want to donate *now*.

Best Types of Photos:

- **Before moments** — right *before* something changed
(e.g., a child alone in the hallway, a dog behind a kennel door, a man holding a notice from his landlord)
- **Quiet struggle** — not graphic or exploitative, but emotionally honest
(e.g., a mother looking away while her child naps in a clinic; someone with their head in their hands)
- **Moments of need, not resolution** — where something is *still at stake*

Avoid:

- Smiling faces unless they are *bittersweet* or paired with visible hardship
- Staff group shots or posed volunteers
- “After” photos—unless the appeal is framed as “This is what *can* happen, if...”

 **Pro Tip:** The most powerful appeal images often feel *unfinished*. They leave the donor with a question: *What happens next?*

DONOR THANK YOUS (CARDS, LETTERS, EMAILS)

GOAL: Make the donor feel appreciated and proud. Reinforce their identity as someone who makes good things happen.

Best Types of Photos:

- **Joyful resolution** — a child smiling with a new backpack *because* of the donor
- **Warm, relational moments** — a hug between a caregiver and client, a rescued animal curled up peacefully, a child holding a "thank you" sign written in crayon
- **Photos that show emotion returning** — safety, calm, affection

Avoid:

- Photos that are too slick or formal (e.g., a thank you banner held by staff in suits)
- Vague smiles with no emotional context
- Abstract photos that don't show *who* the donor helped

💡 **Pro Tip:** Think of the thank you photo as **emotional proof** that the donor's gift mattered.

DONOR REPORTS / NEWSLETTERS

GOAL: Show transformation and progress. Keep donors emotionally invested over time.

Best Types of Photos:

- **Before + After pairings** — but make sure they're emotionally congruent (not smiling in both!)
- **Moments of transition** — e.g., someone learning a new skill, reuniting with family, or walking through the doors of your program for the first time
- **Small, human details** — hands receiving a meal, eyes lighting up during a class, a personal memento in the frame

Avoid:

- Collages that lack emotional clarity
- Photos taken too far from the subject (zoom in on *feeling*)
- Generic program shots with no focal point or narrative

💡 **Pro Tip:** Use photos that feel like a *story snapshot*, not just an illustration of a service.

WHY PHOTOS WORK: THE SCIENCE BEHIND DONOR IMPACT

- **Faces capture attention.** Eye-tracking studies show that we instinctively look at faces first, especially when there's just *one*.
- **One face is better than many faces.** The “Identifiable Victim Effect” shows donors give more when they see *one specific person in need*, not a group.
- **Emotion is contagious.** Mirror neurons help us “feel” what someone else is feeling even in a photo.
- **Photos bypass logic.** The *right image* makes the donor feel urgency before a word is read.

Your photo sets the *emotional tone* and that tone drives donor response.

Photo Captions: The Smallest Words with the Biggest Impact

Include a caption with every picture.

Most donors read captions before they read body copy. Captions aren’t optional. You should add a caption to every photo you use.

A Great Caption Should:

- Anchor the photo in the story
- Spark emotion or curiosity
- Reinforce the donor’s role
- Help the donor know what to *feel*

Examples:

Use these examples as templates to help draw your donor’s eyes straight to the emotion in your photo.

For Appeals:

- “She waited in this hallway for 3 hours, hoping someone would see her.”
- “He was still holding on but barely.”

For Thank Yous:

- “This is the first real smile we’ve seen in weeks. You did that.”
- “Because of your gift, he made it through the night—and the week.”

For Reports:

- “You didn’t just help her survive. You helped her *begin again*.”
- “Every stitch in this quilt was sewn with pride. Your support made this possible.”

FINAL 3-SECOND TEST

Look at your photo without reading the story.

Ask yourself:

“Would someone *feel something* just from seeing this?”

“Would they feel the *right* thing?”

If not, swap it for a different photo.

Because when a photo and a story pull in the same emotional direction, your donor feels something deeper, faster, and stronger.

QUICK REFERENCE: THE FIX KIT MINI CHECKLIST

Use this before you hit “Send” or “Print”:

- ☐ Does the photo show one person or focal subject?
- ☐ Is there visible emotion (not just a smile)?
- ☐ Is the image aligned with the emotional tone of the message?
- ☐ Does the caption reinforce the donor’s role?
- ☐ Would you stop and feel something just by seeing it?

Want to get better at choosing images *and* crafting stories that turn emotion into action?

Come to the [Nonprofit Storytelling Conference](#)

You'll get hands-on training in how to build high-impact storytelling moments.

You'll leave knowing how to make donors feel proud to give and excited to keep doing it.

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Get help raising more money. Come to the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference. For more information, go to:

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