



How Nonprofits Can Get the Most out of Flickr

Tips for using the online photo-sharing site successfully

By Beth Kanter

[Flickr](#) is a popular online photo-sharing community that allows anyone to share and organize their digital photos with friends, family, colleagues, and the rest of the world. While many people use Flickr recreationally, it can also be a powerful tool for organizations, including nonprofits.

There are many ways that Flickr can help nonprofits share photos online and accomplish their goals. For example:

- An international organization sends volunteer doctors to developing countries around the world to perform medical services. The physicians document the impact of their work through photos that they upload to the organization's private Flickr group. Not only does Flickr help the volunteers exchange photos and information, it also creates an image bank from which the organization can select photos for its Web site and blog.
- An environmental organization that supports organic farmers had literally thousands of amazing photographs documenting the development of organic farming techniques over the last decade. Before using Flickr, no one had organized or categorized the photos, which were scattered on various hard drives in the office and on volunteers' computers. The organization uploaded the photos to Flickr and were able to enlist the help of volunteers and members to document the techniques.
- A museum was mounting a special collaborative exhibition with institutions located in five cities around the world. As the group prepared the installation, they used Flickr to share photos with one another, allowing them to see what a "textured plaster" wall finish looked like before approving the contracting work; get a visual reference of the exhibition space when selecting picture frames; and see work completed to date. Flickr provided a way for the collaborators to easily upload and share photos publicly and privately.
- An executive director wanted to use photos to make her points during a presentation, but disliked clip art and lacked the budget for stock photography. Using Flickr's Creative Commons licensing search feature, she was to find appropriate photos that she could use for free with attribution.
- Volunteers and talented photographers for an animal shelter had taken beautiful photos of some the dogs and cats at their facility. The organization wanted to create special cards featuring the pets that they could use as thank-you notes. Uploading the photos into Flickr, they were able to order cards and other items.

Flickr is a fun, creative, and very useful way to share your organization's photos and images with other people, whether privately or publically. It offers an amazing online community, and it is also fairly easy to use. Many nonprofits are discovering that Flickr can be an important part of the organizational communications strategy. Below, we'll show you what Flickr is, and how your nonprofit can best use it to share photos and connect with others.

What Is Flickr?

Anyone who signs up for a free Flickr account can upload photographs and use the site to store, share and explore photos (up to 100 MB per month). A [pro account](#) member can upload an unlimited amount of photographs.

Flickr is much more than a place to store photos or make prints, however. Members can join and create groups and participate in discussions on literally any topic. Flickr also offers social networking features that connect people and can help widen your organization's online connections through photo-sharing.

Yet what distinguishes Flickr from other photo-sharing sites is its community features, which allow members to network and extend their interests beyond their own photos. Like other photo-sharing sites, Flickr allows you to upload your photos, order prints, or make things, said Flickr's Director of Community Heather Champ, yet it also

gives you the chance to connect with others through your photos. "Like other photo-sharing sites, you can also create a one-to-one experience where you upload your photos and share them with a known set of people," said Champ. "But the essence of Flickr is more elastic. Flickr creates an environment where people come together to share their interests around photos. If you look at the old adage 'A picture is a thousand words,' that's what groups are for in Flickr. Using the Group features, people can share their photos and their thousand words. For example, like other photo sites, you can organize your photos into sets — your trip to Hawaii. But on Flickr, you can find many different groups about Hawaii, the flora or fauna, and connect to other people through their photos."

Another way Flickr differs from other photo-sharing sites is its strong sense of immediacy, giving members updates on what photographs are being taken as they happen. Each account has a photo stream, which displays photos uploaded by members chronologically. When you log into Flickr, you can see photos from your contacts' photo streams; you can also subscribe to these via RSS. Flickr also allows you to search by a common tag, which can be very compelling.

According to Champ, there are more than 2 billion photos on Flickr, with 1 to 2 million new photos uploaded every day. Flickr is a global community: more than half of its members live outside the United States, and the site is available in eight languages. Flickr community members not only participate together online, but also meet each other offline through grassroots Flickr meetups taking place around the globe, from Russia to Iraq to Australia, and all over the United States. "Flickr is truly a global community focused on photography," said Champ.

How to Use Flickr

While Flickr is user-friendly and intuitive, knowing key tips and tricks will ensure that your experience on the site is as fruitful as possible. Below, we'll show you guidelines for setting up an account and uploading, tagging, organizing, and sharing your images.

Setting Up Your Account

1. Respect Flickr's Community Guidelines.

Before you even set up your account, make sure you have read the site's [Community Guidelines](#), which clearly spell out what you can and can't do on the site. "The community really supports us in maintaining the integrity as a place for people to share their photographs," said Champ. "Therefore, don't use your account to host graphics or logos for your Web site, and don't look at Flickr as just a marketing platform to broadcast your organization's fundraising appeals. Also, don't upload photos that weren't taken by you or that violate copyright laws."

After you read them, a good idea might be to make hard copies of the Community Guidelines and distribute them to staff who will also be working with Flickr. Use these guidelines as you brainstorm about your Flickr presence to ensure that you will be using the site correctly. If you are unsure whether your plans conform to the guidelines, post a question in the [User Forums](#) or [Flickr Help/Contact](#).

2. Set up your account as an individual, but use group features as an organizational hub.

In order to join Flickr, you'll need to set up a Yahoo account and agree to the Yahoo Terms of Service, which also encompass the Flickr Community Guidelines. You should sign up for a Flickr account as an individual per the [Terms of Service](#).

Why can't you create an organizational profile? Champ explains that not only do individual profiles make it easier to resolve technical issues, Flickr offers different settings for privacy, licensing, and sharing — something a group of users might not agree on. Also, keep in mind that every account comes with a "[delete](#)" button that allows you to take down the account. "Do you really want everyone who has access to an account to have access to the delete option?" Champ asked. "It is really sad, but it has happened. Things change. We've seen some people sharing an account delete all the photos."

Despite this rule, however, you will see members whose nonprofits profiles on Flickr use the organizations' name and logos; this is fine as long as it is clear that this is an *individual* account. While Flickr has yet to delete a nonprofit organizational account, Champ said, "if it became an issue and there were other community guideline violations, we'd have to consider it. We don't actively police nonprofits, but we have deleted accounts set up by commercial brands, for example liquor or watches."

Many nonprofits are tempted to ignore the terms of service and set up an organizational account due to concerns about potential staff changes over time or for branding reasons. Yet a better way to address this is to have various

team members create individual accounts, then use the group feature as an organizational hub for sharing of photos. The group features offers a shared space where multiple users can contribute photos and participate in discussions; it can also be branded with the organization's logo, name, and other information. (For more information on group features, see Tip 9, below.)

Yet the worse thing your organization can do is open up a Flickr account for the sole purpose of using other members' photos without sharing any and without filling out a profile. An empty account can look like spam to other Flickr members and could reflect poorly on your organization.

Uploading Photos

3. Pick the uploading method that best matches your needs.

It goes without saying that you can't share your photos unless you first upload them to your Flickr account. There are different ways to do this. "You might prefer to chose one method and stick to it, or you might find uploading features that work for you in different contexts," said Champ. The easiest way to upload photos is to use the basic [upload Web form](#); if you have a Java-enabled browser, there is also a [slicker version](#) available. In addition to these Web-based options, Flickr also provides [free desktop uploading tools](#) for Macs, Windows, and Linux that are particularly useful for a batch uploads.

If you plan to share photos of your organization's work while you are away from your desktop computer, you can also upload photos via email or mobile phone. To [upload by email](#), you would set up a special email address for your account. This can be a handy feature if you're sending photos to Flickr from a camera phone or the Flickr upload tool is blocked by your network's firewall. Flickr also offers tools for [mobile uploading](#) from several third-party applications.

If you plan to upload photos by email, make it easy on yourself and add the address to your email address book. Your default settings for privacy, sharing, and licensing (which we will cover in the next few tips) will be applied automatically, but you can use the subject line of your message to give your photo a title and the body to add a description. You can also use a [tag code](#) to add tags (keywords that describe your photos) within the body of your email. More details about uploading photos can found on the [Flickr Photo Upload FAQ](#).

Organizing

4. Use tags, titles, and descriptions to make your photos easier to find.

As your account starts to accumulate photos, it may become impossible to locate what you are searching for unless you use Flickr's organizing features. To make your photos findable, be sure to accurately annotate your images using the Title and Description fields. Doing so will not only make it easier for you to search through your photo stream later on, but it will also help other people find your photos through Flickr's powerful search tools and tag-based navigation system.

Each of the uploading tools described above allows you to add a title to your photo at the same time as you upload it. Keep in mind that when you take a photo, your camera gives it a name — perhaps something like `img_24`. If you don't change this name, Flickr will use it as the title. Needless to say, titles like this are not very useful. You are free to title your photos in whatever way you wish; if you browse through photos on Flickr, you'll quickly see a wide range of styles and approaches, from humorous to descriptive. (In fact, there is a Flickr group devoted to [photos with clever titles](#) that has over 10,000 entries.)

The description field lets you add text limited hypertext to your photos. If you don't take the time to provide good descriptions of your Flickr photos, you're missing an opportunity to tell your organization's story. Take for example the compelling descriptions on [Pearl Children Care Center's photo set](#).

Tagging is very important in Flickr because it forms the basis of Flickr's powerful search features. Tags are keywords that help describe a photo — both the type of image and its contents. Tagging your photos in Flickr will provide the easiest way to search and find particular photos in your photo stream as well as help you connect people with similar interests to yours. While the uploading tools offer tagging features, you can also add tags later by clicking the "Add a Tag" link on the photo page. Depending on how you set your privacy settings, other people may also add tags to your photos, making it a communal activity.

Last month, Flickr launched a pilot project with the Library of Congress called [The Commons](#) that invited community members to tag selected photos from the Library of Congress archive in order to increase exposure to the Library's content and draw on community knowledge to enhance the catalogues, making them, in the words of

the [Flickr Blog](#), "easier and richer to search."

Tagging is not the only way you can add information to photos, however. Flickr also offers a nifty "Notes" feature that allows you to add text to the photo itself. This can be useful for [instructional purposes](#) or for documentation (for example, capturing details or notes from meetings). The possibilities are endless.

5. Use sets, collections, and archives to keep your photos organized.

Sets are a way to organize your photos into smaller groups of photos with a common theme, story, or feeling. Collections are made of sets. For example, the Library of Congress project has several sets, including [News of 1910](#) and [1930s-40s in Color](#). Both of these sets are part of the Library's [Pilot](#) collection. Likewise, the American Cancer Society organizes its sets are organized [by event](#).

There's no one right or wrong way to organize your photos into sets or collections. Create an organizing framework that will be easy to follow, and that will help you and others retrieve or browse photos easily. Flickr's [upload tools](#) let you create sets during the uploading process, and you can use the Organizer tool in Flickr to create, edit, or delete sets and collections anytime. The Flickr FAQ offers good tutorials on how to use the organizer to create [sets](#) and [collections](#).

Once you've annotated your photos and added tags to them, you'll find Flickr's Search My Photos feature to be a powerful tool for zeroing in on what you're looking for. If that fails, sets may also help you locate photos. Your Flickr archive (found in the "You" tab on your profile page) will also let you explore your collection using dates, as Flickr offers the option to automatically add the date a photo was taken and uploaded.

6. Use the Mapping feature to show where your photos were taken and to find photos of places near you.

Flickr allows you to literally put your photos on a map — or search public photos based on location — using geotags consisting of the latitude and longitude codes for where the photo was taken. "Geotagging puts a face to a map where something is happening," said Champ. "Where this becomes very interesting is to go to the [public Flickr map](#) and start searching a city or location you plan to visit. You can see photos and do advanced research on a trip. For nonprofits, we have agencies and nonprofits post-Katrina or even post-Tsunami sharing photos with geocodes to show the impact of their programs or work."

Be careful about what geographic information you show in public. For example, if you are posting photos of a women's shelter for domestic violence victims, you obviously would not want to share the location information with just anyone. A good rule of thumb is to provide geotags for those photos for which you'd feel comfortable sharing the physical address.

You can set a [default privacy level](#) for any photos you add to the map, and you can change the location privacy per photo as well. To change the settings on a photo, double-click it in Organizr, linked to from your photo page. Click the Location tab and you'll find the privacy setting, as well as the latitude and longitude of your photo. Flickr's [Mapping Features FAQ](#) will bring you up to speed pretty quickly, and if you're a visual learner, check out its Map Screencast 1 <http://www.flickr.com/help/screencasts/vol2> and [Map Screencast 2](#). There's even a [Flickr Geotagging Group](#) devoted to the topic.

Sharing

7. Use Creative Commons licensing to extend the distribution of your photos.

In most parts of the world, you are automatically granted a copyright on your photos. Yet what if you'd like to allow others to use or modify your photos? Flickr provides a unique feature that allows anyone to do just that, by giving them the option to post their photos under a Creative Commons license.

The default license for all Flickr photos is All Rights Reserved, meaning that others cannot use them unless given permission by the author. Yet you can also [change your default license](#) to any one of the Creative Commons licenses that will be applied to any public photos you upload. Alternately, you can select a license for a specific picture by clicking the "Change" link next to your current photo license near the bottom of your photo page.

Before setting up your Flickr account, visit the [Creative Commons Web site](#) and educate yourself about the different licenses so you can choose the one that best suits your needs. If you're not sure which license is right for your organization's photos, the Creative Commons Web site provides a handy [wizard](#) that walks you through choosing a license that best supports your goals.

It is important to note that if you use a Creative Commons license on your photos, they can be downloaded by anyone. If you don't want others to download your photos, remove the Creative Commons license on your licensing settings page. By the same token, you should also make sure that you only use other people's Creative Commons images in the way specified. "Some people want to receive payment for their photos — professional photographers for example," said Champ. "Other people just want their photos used. Creative Commons helps define that. But, be sure you are using the license correctly because you can bring the wrath of the community down on you and that has happened. If you think you can use an all rights reserved photo and no one will know, you're wrong. People are pretty good at finding their photos." (You can monitor the use of your photos on [Technorati](#), by setting up a Google Alert, or by using [Flickr Stats](#).)

While the Creative Commons licenses means that you don't need to formally ask permission, it's a good idea to contact people through the system to ask them how they would like to specifically be attributed. Do you want your real name or screen name? Do you want it to link back to a particular page? It isn't necessary given the way the license is. "It is a good thing to communicate, if there is time. There should be no problem," said Champ.

Getting permission is especially important when using photos of children. If your organization plans to share photos online that depict minors, Champ said, it is essential that you seek consent from their parents first. "It could be potentially very problematical if an organization posted photos online without the parents' knowledge."

8. Use the privacy settings and filters to share appropriate photos with other users.

Most organizations use their Flickr accounts to share public photos, but what if you don't want the world to see all of your project-planning shots, or the ones from the staff holiday party? That isn't a problem if you use Flickr's privacy settings, which allow you to make a photo available to the public, includes non-Flickr members); make it visible only to your friends, your family, or your friends and family; or keep it completely private so only you, the account holder, can see it. Privacy settings also control who can tag, comment on, or add notes to your photos.

If you wish to share photos with friends or family only, they must set up a Flickr account so that you can add them to your Flickr contact list. The [Flickr Contacts FAQ](#) will walk you through the process of adding people to your contact list and designate them as a friend or family member.

When you upload a photo, you are prompted to fill out the privacy settings. These can be edited at any time, one by one, from your photo's home page, or you can use the Organizer to batch edit your settings. Flickr assumes that you want the world to see your photos, so Public is the default privacy setting. If you prefer, you can start with the opposite intention, keeping your photos private unless you decide otherwise. Simply edit your account default settings in the Account Privacy & Permissions tab on your account management page.

Bear in mind that if you've posted a photo to your blog or Web site (or anyone else has) that was set to "public" and you decide to change the privacy settings, that picture will no longer be available. You can find more about the Flickr's privacy settings and how to use them on [Flickr's Privacy FAQ](#).

Flickr is a global community made up of people from different backgrounds and customs. While certain photos may be appropriate to some cultures, they could be insulting or inappropriate to another. Flickr Community Guidelines places the responsibility of categorizing photos on its members, offering various [levels of filtering](#) for safety and content type. How you flag your photos will determine what shows up in the public searches.

Content types help differentiate between photos, illustrations, and screenshots. For example, if you want to upload a screenshot of your computer desktop, you need to flag it as a screenshot. Options for safety levels, meanwhile, include safe, moderated, and restricted, and help determine who will see your photos. See the [Content Filters FAQ](#) for additional information.

9. Use Groups to share your photos with others.

Once you have set up an individual account, you may wish to connect with people at your organization — and invite others to join you — by setting up a group, a shared space that includes a photo pool and a discussion board. In addition to serving as a "hub" for their organizations, you can also use a private Flickr group to share photos with specific people.

Flickr's private groups are only visible to those invited to join. Public groups allow Flickr members to share thoughts, ideas, questions, and photos with one another. There are two types of public groups: invitation only and open membership (meaning anyone can join). There are thousands of existing groups on Flickr covering every topic imaginable. This includes over 150 nonprofit-related groups about nonprofits ranging from a [general nonprofit photo-sharing group](#) to specific groups for nonprofits like [The Nature Conservancy](#) and [Pink for the Cure](#).

While you will most likely consider setting up a group with your organization's name and logo, it is well worth searching to see if anyone else has started a group on a topic related to your organization's programs. If you decide to set up a new group, you can do so using the Groups tab at the top of your profile page. First-time users will be prompted with a screen that walks you through a step-by-step procedure for setting up a group.

Whether you are setting up a new group or joining an existing one, etiquette rules apply. "Be respectful. Don't spam other Flickr users," said Champ. "We have people come in and create a group and run around to 100 other groups and post on a messaging board, 'Come and see my group.' That type of behavior does not work for community building. You have to build interaction in your group naturally and slowly over time. If you plan to invite people beyond your known members and venture into the Flickr community, it is important to be clear with expectations, particularly how people's photos will be used. There shouldn't be an unarticulated expectation that if Flickr members add their photos into group pool that the organization can do whatever they want with them. If you want to use shared photos on your organization's Web site, you need to clearly lay out in writing in the group description."

Do not use the group feature to raise funds or to recruit new members, Champ says. "We expect that nonprofits may be using Flickr to feature photos about their organization's program and may be reaching out to their existing members who may not be Flickr members as opposed to reaching out to Flickr members," said Champ. "Flickr should not be thought of as a place to do fundraising or prospect for new members."

"We started the group in the summer of 2006, and have 6,400 members and 64,000 images submitted as of this morning," said Evan C. Parker of The Nature Conservancy, which maintains a large and successful group on Flickr. "The group takes in about 80 percent of the images for our annual photography contest, with the rest coming via email. We could have run the photo contest without Flickr, but we really wanted to give our existing members another way to interact with us. We have had really great success on both fronts." Parker added that the organization is very clear about the how the photos will be used. "Each time we ask for people to submit photos, we tell them how they are going to be used as part of the announcement," said Parker.

10. Make things.

"There are many ways to get your photos out of Flickr as there are ways to get your photos into Flickr, said Champ. "And because of Flickr's API, we work with many third-party partners who can extract your photos and put them into things — business cards, mugs, journals, calendars, and stickers." These are all ways to extend your organization's photos, whether making thank-you cards for volunteers or books for special donors. You can learn more on Flickr's [Do More with Your Photos](#) page.

You can also use Creative Commons–licensed photos on Flickr in your presentations and other internal documents. Use the Creative Commons search criteria in the Flickr search (found at the bottom of the [Advanced Search tool](#)). The best way to find the least restrictive photos is to search only Creative Commons–licensed photos, checking the options "Find content to use commercially" and "Find content to modify, adapt, or build upon." Be sure, however, not to sell any items made without the full disclosure of the artists, even if the photographs are Creative Commons licensed.

Additional Flickr Resources

The following resources are useful for learning about and staying up-to-date on Flickr:

[The Flickr Blog](#)

[The Flickr FAQ](#)

[The Great Flickr Tools Collection](#)

[Nonprofits and Flickr Wiki](#)

About the Author

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