



International **Photography** Assoc. Festivals

Practical Guide for Emerging Photography Festivals (2026)

This document is presented as an open draft intended to encourage collective reflection on the principles that should guide the modern management of photography festivals. At the **International Photography Festivals Association (IPFA)**, we believe that the professionalisation of the sector depends on sharing experiences, debating models, and collectively building common standards of quality, transparency, and professional commitment.

This manual is not intended to be a closed or exclusive set of rules, but rather a collection of **recommendations and guiding objectives** that each festival can adapt to its own reality and context. We recognise that every organisation has its own goals and particularities, and this diversity should be respected; we simply propose a **shared path**, offering ideas and principles that can guide the necessary modernisation of how we work together. We aim to initiate a dialogue among directors, cultural managers, curators, artists, and audiences to identify best practices that promote sustainability, equity, and international cooperation in the field of photography.

We invite all IPFA members to read, comment on, and enrich this document by contributing their experiences and perspectives. The conclusions and contributions arising from this discussion will help build a collective and consensual version of the **Practical Guide for Emerging Photography Festivals**, representing the shared values and aspirations of photography festivals worldwide.

This guide does not stem from an ideal of perfection, but rather from **the real-world experience of many festivals that began with doubts, mistakes, and limited resources. Making mistakes is part of the process** and does not invalidate the project; on the contrary, it's an essential source of learning. All established festivals went through an initial stage of trial and error, adjustment, and survival. This document

does not aim to impose rigid models, but rather to accompany, guide, and offer tools to navigate that path with greater clarity and care. **The most important thing about a festival, regardless of its limitations, is that it begins and takes place every year!**

1. Clear definition of identity, mission, and scope

In the early stages of a festival, clearly defining who we are and what we aim to contribute is more important than rapid growth. The identity of an emerging festival should respond to its context, its real motivations, and its actual capacities. Having a clear mission enables **coherent decision-making and helps avoid the dispersion of resources and efforts**. Not all festivals need to aspire to be large or international from the beginning. A festival can be small, local, and deeply relevant. It is important to keep in mind that in medium-term planning (five years) many things can change in the social, political and economic context and some of them will favor the festival and others will not; you have to be prepared for everything.

→ **Clarity at the starting point allows for the construction of coherent and sustainable growth.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Draft a short internal document (1–2 pages) outlining the festival's mission, vision, and values.
- Define the real scope of the project – local, regional, national, or international.
- Identify what differentiates it from existing events (theme, approach, format, audience).
- Review and adjust the mission after each edition.
- Formulate realistic and measurable objectives for each edition, rather than abstract ambitions.

2. Planned management and clear distribution of roles

Although an emerging festival may begin as an individual initiative or a personal idea, its development and sustainability depend on **building a working team, even at very early stages**. Before attempting to produce a festival alone, it is essential to involve other people – friends, collaborators, professionals, or like-minded associations – who can offer support, complementary perspectives, and specific technical skills. Even if some of your collaborators know nothing about photography, they have a lot to contribute if they know about cultural management, economics or communication in other projects. Professionalisation does not mean doing everything individually or having extensive resources, but rather **being realistic about what can be achieved and organising the work collectively**. Thinking about how to improve the experience

of artists, audiences, and collaborators requires distributing responsibilities, taking care of processes, and avoiding personal overload. Defining clear roles from the outset helps prevent conflicts, improve communication, and ensure that each area of the festival receives adequate attention. A simple but well-defined organisational structure is a form of care for both the project and the people who make it possible.

→ **Working as a team is a basic condition for professional and sustainable management.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Build a minimum team before starting festival production, even if collaborations are initially informal.
- Identify the basic profiles required – general coordination, production, communication, and programming.
- Distribute tasks clearly and realistically according to available time and capacities.
- Formalise basic agreements in writing, even at early stages.
- Acknowledge and make visible the work of everyone involved.
- If you don't live in the city where the festival takes place, it's very important to build a local community, with local workers and local institutions that can sustain the event all year round.

3. Collective construction, equality, diversity and care from the beginning

Incorporating principles of collective organization, equality, diversity, and care from the early stages of the festival facilitates its long-term structural integration. These values should not be added at a later stage, but embedded in the project from the beginning through an **inclusive and responsible organisational structure**, where important decisions are made collectively and participatively, and where working teams reflect balanced gender representation. Promoting horizontal, transparent, and gender-balanced structures contributes not only to greater internal fairness but also to higher-quality processes, a more equitable distribution of responsibilities, and the long-term human sustainability of the cultural project.

→ **Internal processes are just as important as the visible content of the festival.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Aim for gender balance in teams and programming.
- Avoid exclusionary or elitist dynamics.
- Create respectful and safe working environments.
- Ensure basic accessibility whenever possible.
- Establish clear codes of conduct.

4. Basic legal framework, permits, and responsibilities

Many emerging festivals begin without a clear legal structure, which can lead to difficulties over time. Understanding basic legal aspects does not require becoming an expert, but knowing which responsibilities exist, what risks are involved, and when to seek advice. Issues such as insurance, permits, contracts, copyright, and civil liability form the minimum foundation needed to protect the team, the artists, and the public. Addressing these matters from the beginning is an act of professionalisation and collective care.

→ **Legal security is a form of protection for both the project and the people who make it possible.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Explore the most appropriate legal structure for the festival (association, collective, partnership with an existing entity).
- Identify the permits required according to venues and activities.
- Take out civil liability insurance appropriate to the scale of the event.
- Formalise basic agreements with artists and collaborators in writing.
- Consider copyright and image rights in exhibitions and public activities.
- Include details about copyright and image rights in open calls.
- Include detailed terms and conditions (reshipment and refund policies, among others) when selling products.
- Seek legal advice when needed, even on a one-off basis.
- Store and archive all legal and administrative documents related to the festival.

5. Basic and realistic economic sustainability

Economic stability is one of the main challenges for emerging festivals. From the outset, it is essential to work with realistic, transparent budgets aligned with the actual scale of the project. A small, clear budget is preferable to an inflated and unachievable one. Honesty and economic transparency among all stakeholders (managers, teams, workers, volunteers, artists, exhibition spaces, etc.) are fundamental to **creating a relationship of trust that can sustain the festival for years.**

→ **A sustainable festival is not the one with the most money, but the one that manages what it has honestly and with foresight.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Prepare a detailed budget before publicly announcing the festival.
- Clearly distinguish between fixed and variable costs.
- Prioritize fees, even if minimal, for artists and collaborators from the beginning.

- Diversify income sources – local, nacional and international grants, in-kind support, private institutions, open calls, ticket sales, workshops, etc.
- Avoid structural debt between editions.
- Document all income and expenses from the beginning.

6. Appropriate scale and gradual growth

One of the most common mistakes made by emerging festivals is trying to do too much too soon. Growing sustainably means adjusting programming, venues, and activities to the available human, financial, and time resources. A small, well-organised festival can have more impact than a large, poorly managed one. Growth should be progressive, organic, and based on real learning from each edition. In this process, it is normal **to make mistakes, change course, and adjust decisions on the fly**; these lessons are a natural part of the growth of any emerging festival. In the initial stages, the primary objective is not rapid growth, but rather **ensuring the project's continuity**. Conceiving the festival with a **five-year horizon** allows this period to be understood as a phase of conscious survival, in which decisions must be geared towards stability, learning, and the consolidation of solid foundations before aspiring to long-term expansion and relevance.

→ **Sustainability begins with respecting one's own limits.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Start with a short duration (1–3 days) and a limited number of well-developed activities.
- Prioritise quality and coherence over quantity.
- Evaluate each edition before expanding programming or formats.
- Avoid committing to activities without guaranteed resources.
- Plan the growth and activities you want to develop over 5 years, not everything in the first edition.

7. Coherent, open, and accessible programming

The programming of an emerging festival should be coherent with its identity and resources. It is advisable to prioritise flexible formats, open calls, and transparent processes that facilitate participation and reinforce the project's credibility. The value of an emerging festival does not lie in well-known names, but in **its ability to create real opportunities and meaningful contexts for encounter**. We need to leave a mark, create community, transform the way photography is viewed, and that requires patience and years of work.

→ **Curatorial coherence is more important than prestige.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Launch open calls with clear selection criteria.
- Include emerging artists and innovative projects.
- Clearly explain how selection processes are carried out.
- Maintain a balance between local and external artists.
- Adjust production levels to the festival's real capacities.

8. Communication, visibility, and narrative building

For an emerging festival, communication is not only about promoting dates and activities, but about clearly explaining what the project is, why it exists, and who it is for. Coherent communication helps artists, audiences, institutions, and collaborators understand the festival's purpose and engage with it in a realistic way aligned with its values. From the early stages, it is essential to build an honest and understandable narrative, avoiding promises that cannot be fulfilled or overinflated discourse. Large campaigns or complex resources are not necessary; what matters is constant, careful and coherent communication with the project's identity. Clarity builds trust, and trust enables growth. Today, many festivals communicate directly through social media accounts and websites that have a **very low cost**; you just have to dedicate time, care, and commitment to building a community.

→ **An emerging festival needs to be understandable before it can be visible.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Write a basic text for the festival's presentation that can be reused and adapted for the web, social media, dossiers, and institutional communications.
- Prioritise communication channels that can be sustained over time (a simple website, basic social media, a newsletter).
- Use clear, accessible, and approachable language, avoiding unnecessary jargon.
- Properly document each edition (texts, images, videos) to build long-term memory and narrative.
- Communicate processes, learnings, and values, not only final results.

9. Community engagement and audience development

An emerging festival grows through its community. Artists, neighbours, students, cultural spaces, and local audiences are fundamental allies. Building real and lasting relationships is more important than achieving high attendance figures. Cultural mediation and accessible communication help ensure that the festival is understood, embraced, and sustained by its surrounding environment.

→ **A festival with a community is a festival with a future.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Collaborate with local spaces and collectives.
- Organise informal meetings between artists and audiences.
- Generate communities (WhatsApp groups, for example) and online meetings with the artists and participants before the event.
- Include educational or participatory activities for local communities.
- Use clear and approachable language in communication.
- Create a database, based on registered events or webinars, to send newsletters.
- Maintain contact with the community between editions.

10. Relationships with institutions, public authorities, and funders

For many emerging festivals, engaging with public authorities, cultural institutions, municipalities, or potential funders can be complex and unfamiliar. However, learning how to navigate these relationships from the outset is key to the festival's sustainability and consolidation. Building institutional relationships does not mean losing independence, but **learning how to present the project clearly, honestly, and in ways that align with existing frameworks**. Understanding administrative timelines, institutional language, and mutual expectations helps reduce frustration and fosters more stable and realistic collaborations.

→ **Working with institutions is a process of mutual learning, not an obstacle.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Identify relevant institutions within the local context (municipalities, cultural centres, universities, foundations).
- Request introductory meetings before applying for financial support.
- Present the project clearly, concisely, and tailored to each interlocutor.
- Be realistic about what the festival can offer and what it needs.
- Maintain respectful and consistent communication, even when support is not granted.
- Understand administrative calendars and decision-making timelines to plan more effectively.
- Document all collaborations and support received to facilitate future applications.

11. Evaluation, learning, and documentation

Evaluation is not only about measuring results, but about learning from experience. Documenting processes, mistakes, and successes allows each edition to improve and

supports the continuity of the project, even when teams change. The festival's memory is a strategic tool for growth.

→ **Each edition should be a source of learning.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Collect feedback from artists, audiences, and the team.
- Hold an evaluation meeting after the festival.
- Archive budgets, agreements, images, and texts.
- Create a basic festival archive.
- Adjust objectives based on lessons learned.

12. Networking, collective learning, and growth through collaboration

No emerging festival grows in isolation. Active participation in networks, meetings, and other festivals is a key tool for learning, solving practical problems, and opening up new opportunities. Attending other festivals, observing how they work, engaging with their teams, and sharing experiences provides hands-on knowledge that is difficult to acquire individually, while also helping to build valuable professional contacts. Networking not only facilitates the circulation of ideas, artists, and resources but also **helps festivals find support when facing common challenges, identify potential funding opportunities, and discover management models that can be adapted to different contexts.** Seeing how other festivals operate often sparks ideas for improvement, encourages critical reflection, and fosters innovation grounded in shared experience. Joining professional associations and networks offers emerging festivals a structured framework for collective learning, mentoring, and opportunity-building. These platforms enable the exchange of best practices, the development of collaborations, access to accumulated knowledge, and a sense of belonging to a broader, supportive cultural ecosystem.

→ **Sustainable festival growth is strengthened through exchange, cooperation, and mutual learning.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

- Regularly attend other festivals to observe working models, programming approaches, and management structures.
- Build relationships with directors, producers, and curators who can offer advice or collaboration.
- If you want to organize a festival, you can be part of another festival as a volunteer; it's the best way to learn from the inside how they work.
- Share common doubts and challenges to find collective solutions.

- Join professional networks and associations such as IPFA to learn from other experiences and generate opportunities.
- Maintain an open attitude towards continuous learning and adapting ideas observed in other contexts.