

Nailed it! **Pawtastic Holiday Card**



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The perfect holiday picture of your pooch? Yes, please! With treats, training and practice, you can create a very merry card to wag about.

BY MARY SCHWAGER

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Before snapping away, think about what your vision is for the most touching, hilarious or memorable photo. Decide where your shoot will be, what your dog will be doing and what she will wear.

“Plan every detail,” says certified professional dog trainer Joan Hunter Mayer (inquisitivecanine.com). Questions to consider: Is the photo only of the dog, with the pet parent out of frame? Or, will the picture include the entire family? Will everyone, including the dog, be dressed up?

Joan surprises her friends and family each year with holiday cards featuring her husband and their dog, Ringo Starr. They have dressed Ringo as a secret agent, a rabbit in a magician’s hat and a cub scout.

They hire a professional photographer to shoot in their home but strategize in advance.

1st step: train

Whether your dog is wearing reindeer antlers or is simply supposed to sit during the picture, train your pooch before the photo shoot.

Joan buys Ringo’s costumes ahead of time so she can use rewards to condition him to be happy in his attire.

“You want the dog to like the outfit, so every time it appears, give your dog a high-value treat,” Joan says.

“Then gently touch your dog with the costume, then treat. Start to dress him, then treat. Gradually get him fully dressed, then treat.”

Certified integrative pet behaviorist Rona Distenfeld (gooddogtraining.biz) recommends teaching your dog how to remain calm, so he can sit or hold the down position in a relaxed way.

“This allows you to move around with the camera,” Rona says. “These should all be taught through positive reinforcement without using any kind of restraint or aversive response for mistakes.”

camera = cookie

Keep those canine cookies handy and use them to get your dog acquainted with photo shoot equipment.

If you’re using a smartphone, your dog is likely used to the device, as you probably have hundreds of pet pictures saved on it. But if you use a camera that makes noises, be careful to not startle your pup.

“Allow the dog to smell the camera while you practice taking shots with

it,” says Natalie Hay, creative director at Alpine Dog Co. (alpinedogco.ca). Natalie photographs dogs who model the company’s pet gear. “Have treats to reward them each time you take a photo — they will learn that staying for a pose means they get goodies once they do,” she says.

Tripods and light stands can be scary for some dogs, so let your pup check them out with — you guessed it — treats.

Lighting makes it pop

Great lighting is key to professional-looking photos. If you are shooting inside, avoid having your photo subjects stand in front of a window, which can make them look like silhouettes. Instead, have the natural light shine on the front of your dog and family.

Kelly Mondora, a photo expert and founder of Ilios Lighting, (ilioslighting.co) says, “Smaller ring lights are great for small pets, while larger ring lights can be used for larger pets.”

Ring lights typically come in different colors, so you can choose one that will complement your pet’s fur color, Kelly adds.

If you take the picture outside, avoid direct sunlight so your subjects are not squinting. “On a sunny day, choose an evenly shaded spot, so trees



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don't dapple the light," says Cheryl Ritzel, a photography instructor and owner of FocusEd Camera (focusedcamera.net). "If it's overcast with even cloud cover, you can set up almost anywhere. Shade or overcast skies are all indirect light, giving the most flattering look to portrait subjects of all kinds."

Be cautious using your camera's flash, which can cause your dog's eyes to light up with that demon-like glow.

practice, practice, practice

The cliché practice makes perfect (or at least makes great bloopers) applies here. "Dress rehearsals are key to a successful photo shoot," Joan says.

Bring your pup to the place you are going to take the picture.

"Familiarize your dog with the location you're taking photos, so they have less need to sniff out all the new scents," Natalie says.

Of course, bring that bottomless bag

of treats! "You will need to be patient and reward your pet for good behavior," Cheryl says. "Take breaks if things aren't working. Never scold your pet. They will be less cooperative if they learn that portrait time is stressful."

time for pup's closeup

How can you get your pup to look at the camera and strike a pose?

Dog mom Lynn Julian has a secret weapon. She uses a treat holder that mounts on top of her smartphone. "It is an inexpensive, silicone clip that sells for only a few dollars," Lynn says. "The dog looks at the treat and unknowingly looks at the camera."

"Move around your pet to get shots from different sides and angles," Cheryl says. "Move with your feet if you want to get closer or farther away. Don't rely on the zoom of the camera lens or phone."

Cheryl recommends the camera be level with your dog's face and focused on the eyes. "This perspective will be the most effective," she says.

If your dog is low energy, Sarah Dyer, the founder and chief photographer of Chuckle Hounds pet attire (chucklehounds.com), suggests exercising your dog before the shoot. "A panting dog looks happy," she says. "A lethargic dog looks sad."

Don't hold back on the number of pictures you take. That one out of 100 shots might be the headliner for your photo card.

ready? get settings ...

Many DSLR cameras have pet, wildlife, sport or action settings.

"In these modes, the camera will automatically select faster shutter speeds. A fast shutter speed will stop motion and get a shot where the pet isn't blurry," Cheryl says.

Some cameras have a burst mode that takes many photos quickly, while

Quick tips

Ready for your shoot? Review these do's and don'ts right before you start.

DO:

- * Exercise high-energy dogs before the photo shoot.
- * Have someone help or take the photo.
- * Use a light ring for indoor photo shoots.
- * Remain calm and collected but have fun.
- * Reward good behavior with high-value treats.

DON'T:

- * Schedule the shoot for when your dog usually naps.
- * Use startling sounds to get your dog's attention.
- * Put your dog in uncomfortable outfits.
- * Scold your dog for not cooperating.



Want your pup to look right at the camera?

Try these camera phone treat holders:

- * \$9.99. The Flexy Paw; amazon.com
- * \$5.50. The Dog Treat Selfie Clip; kikkerland.com
- * \$6.99. The Woofie; modelcitizenpet.com



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other devices have animal eye detection autofocus.

If you're the photographer and in the photo, Sarah recommends using an inexpensive Bluetooth remote so you can snap shots with the click of a button. "It's way better than trying to angle your selfie stick to hide your arm," she says.

don't forget to edit

Enhancing your photos after the shoot is OK.

"Professional portrait photographers always edit their photos," Cheryl says.


Sarah says it's rare that she gets the perfect shot, so she combines and crops images, adjusts the light and even adds snow. "Trying to shoot with snowflakes melting on your camera is a mess," she says. "I use an app called *Just Snow* to make some pictures look like a winter wonderland."

Other photo editing apps let you cover blemishes, whiten smiles and even make people look thinner.

let's hear it for bloopers!

Be flexible with your vision of the perfect photo and review your bloopers. They may not be what you planned but could be the hilarious holiday photo card everyone hangs on their fridge.

Joan has thousands of photo outtakes from over the years. "The entire experience may be the best memory you'll ever have," she says. "No matter how much you strategize for plan A, your dog will make it plan B. But that plan B may end up being the funniest image you'll ever capture — or the best story you'll get to tell your friends and family." 🐾

 **Mary Schwager**, "Watchdog Mary," is a television and print journalist. She has won 17 Emmy awards for investigative and consumer reporting and several honors from the Dog Writers Association of America. You can find her at watchdogmary.com.

GOT THE PERFECT PIC? NOW WHAT DO YOU DO?

Keep it simple by uploading your photo into an already designed holiday card template at an online store specializing in cards and invitations. Here are few new ones for 2022 from the artists at Minted.com.

1. Unleash the Joy, by Sandra Picco
2. Paw-La-La, by Erica Krystek
3. Dog Wishes, by Jessica Blakeman

