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When disaster strikes, you can't afford to lose your clients' precious images. Here's a foolproof guide on how to keep your photos from disappearing forever.

As a photographer, losing your client's photos is not an option. That's why ample storage and a good backup system should be established before you ever click the shutter. Wedding, engagement, and portrait photographer Dale Benfield of Benfield Photography explains how he backs up his files and why it's vital for photographers to establish a good backup system.

My job as a wedding and portrait photographer is to capture images my clients will have for life. There's no such thing as redos on their big day. That's why I vowed early on that I would do everything in my power so I would never have to tell a bride that I lost her images. It would be a crucial blow to my business, and others' confidence in my business. So I decided to implement a backup system to ensure I never lose an image, no matter what—image safety is my no. 1 priority. To make sure your images are safe, it's important to first choose a backup system.

Step 1: Create a system, and make it a routine

I have two kinds of backup systems: an online one and an external hard drive. It's good to have more than one option, to further ensure photo safety. But it's extremely important to have one online, so that if your external hard drive gets damaged or lost, your online images will forever be there (and can be accessed anywhere). Once you have your device or online backing system, don't forget about it. Implement it into your routine; the best time is right when you come home from shooting.

After a wedding (no matter how late), I come home and download our cards to our computer to our server. After having three copies (original card, computer and server), I feel safe for the night. The next day I cull the images and create a new backup. I then Photoshop anything that needs it, batch rename the event, and upload it online. After the upload is complete, we make a backup on our server of the finished images. Then, and only then, do I reformat my original cards.

Step 2: Choose a web-based system

Make sure the program you're using can be accessed remotely. I use an app so I can access my images from anywhere in the world. Because of my crazy travel schedule, it's crucial. If a bride needs a portrait ASAP and I'm in another country, I can log on and take care of her without being in my office. It's crucial that you have a system that is web-based so you can access it from any computer or device with an Internet connection—your hard drive may not travel well. This also doubles as in-person proofing and marketing, which is great for showing your work no matter where you are.

Step 3: Have a plan of action in case disaster strikes

It's essential to have your photos safely stored in a data center somewhere, because your devices may not stand the test of time. When I was done shooting a wedding in California and was headed home, we noticed that my backpack got through security with a Red Bull in it, and it blew up on the flight, drenching my Macbook Pro to the point where it needed a new, well, everything. It came back as a new computer, with all data on it gone. For destination weddings, we explain to our clients that we will upload all the wedding images to our Zenfolio account before we head home. What could have been a devastating and terrible situation for me (but more importantly for our bride who flew us out to California on top of spending thousands on a wedding photo package) turned out to have a really happy ending.

And in even bigger disasters, like your home being blown away in seconds, it's important to have your files stored. I'm from Joplin, Missouri, which was destroyed by a tornado. To those photographers who think making multiple copies keeps them in the clear, they're wrong. An entire bank blew away in Joplin. Houses burn, tornados hit, as sad as it is—and we as business owners need a better way to keep images safe. As inexpensive as data storage is, there's no excuse to not have your entire library of images backed up online.

Dale uses Zenfolio as his online and mobile backup system. "I have every event and session backed up on Zenfolio," he says. "I've even gone back through our archives and uploaded weddings from previous years (before ever using Zenfolio) to our account so that I feel safe in the event of losing discs, computers, or worse, my home. I can access my images from anywhere in the world with the Zenfolio app. This is one of the many reasons why I chose Zenfolio as my backup company."

*To learn more about Zenfolio, the all-in-one photo hosting and e-commerce website, visit **www.zenfolio.com** and sign up for a free, two-week trial today.*