

Stock Photography Today

A Reality Check Is In Order

Many photographers wonder about the state of stock photography now and in the future. There are many questions and a good deal of controversy about the answers. Some of the big questions include: how are traditional stock and microstock competing? Is there still money to be made in stock image licensing? How tough is it to sign up with a stock photo agency? Nature and travel images were once the backbone of traditional stock, but how are these images being sold today? To create stock images for today's market, will you have to pay for your own production and sets for "lifestyle" photography? What's next in advances in technology, search, and stock photo user behavior?

These are some of the questions we posed to our panel of photographers to help guide you through today's confusing and constantly shifting stock photo market. First, though, let's define some terms.

So-called "traditional" stock photography is a term that has developed over the past several years to describe the original licensing basis of the business pre-dating "microstock" emergence. In its purest form, the term "traditional" licensing refers to Rights-Managed (RM) and traditional Royalty-Free (RF). Generally, participation in the traditional sector of the business is from professionally trained photographers who produce high quality and/or uniquely identifiable images with pricing based on individual image use (for RM) or on file size (for RF). Sales are usually handled by a stock photo agency (also known as a stock photo distributor) with a royalty percentage of the licensing fee going to the photographer.

Microstock photography is comprised of lower priced, royalty-free imagery.

Content creators of microstock imagery include professionally trained photographers, semiprofessionals, and amateurs, as well as general consumers

and even tourists. Historically, microstock has been a sector of the industry comprised of those who wish to earn additional money from their assignment



Photos © Shannon Fagan



photography careers or from their hobby interests in photography. Images are bought by clientele in the form of credits online. The manner of image agency distribution is similar to the sales channels seen on the traditional side of the business. Generally, traditional and microstock agencies uniquely position themselves competitively on the basis of price.

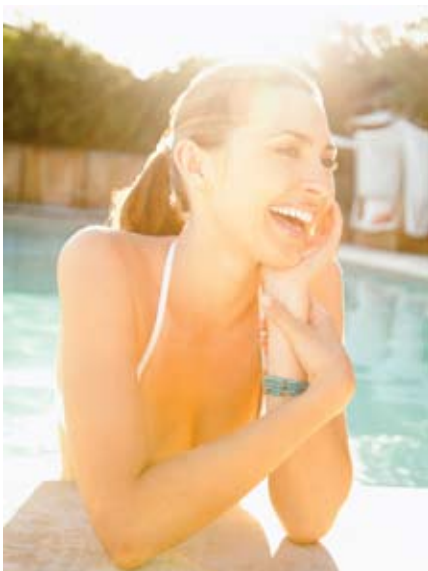
For this column we selected a wide variety of professionals with different voices and opinions and suggest you evaluate your own situation first when deciding about stock. There are no “right” answers but we do offer some thought-provoking ideas from: Sam Bloomberg-Rissman (www.sambr.com), Trinette Reed and Chris Gramly (www.trinettereed.com), Randy Plett (www.randyplett.com), Lee Torrens (www.microstockdiaries.com), Jeremy Woodhouse (www.pixelchrome.com), and Shannon Fagan (www.shannonfagan.com), who is the Chair of ASMP Stock Imaging License Committee International Business Developer for Photography in China.

Shutterbug: *What’s the best route to go, traditional stock or microstock? How do you recommend making this decision? How do you realistically make a profit in stock sales?*

Lee Torrens: For most photographers it will actually be both. Those who shoot highly specialized stock are more likely to want to choose one or the other, but there’s never anything forcing



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someone to choose. Most of the top microstock photographers have content in the traditional stock market and more and more of the top traditional stock photographers now also have content in microstock as well.

There are a large number of factors which affect the decision and it will be different for every photographer. Assuming a photographer's primary objective is maximizing revenue, it's simply a matter of looking at what they can shoot well. Some images earn more in the traditional market, while others earn more in microstock. If a photographer is better at, has

better access to, or prefers shooting one particular type of image that will likely determine which market is better suited to them. But again, for most photographers it will likely be a combination of both.

Making a profit, like anything, comes down to smart business. There are still many people who report being profitable in the traditional RM and RF markets, so it can be done. In my experience, those people are smart in leveraging their assets, travel to stock production hotspots in different parts of the world, have drastically downsized their productions, or live in cheaper countries



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that still have great locations and models. It's no longer realistic to have large productions in the more expensive countries such as the United States.

Shannon Fagan: Because of the narrowing profit margins for stock recently, it is advisable that the business owner/photographer take a long look at their personal (non-financial) interests for shooting stock. Make sure that one is in love with and passionate about the business. Have fun with it! It would not be a bad thing to make a list of the pros/cons of operating under different methods; perhaps one for a custom assignment take on the business (RM), and another for a catalog take on the business (microstock). Highly creative pictures are required in both models of operation, but the "how to" for achieving them is completely different.

Making the business models into profit centers is about regular calculated submissions of diverse material over time. It's ideal to also submit diversely to a variety of high-profile stock agencies. Realistically, to make a secure living in stock, it is a full-time endeavor because of the tediousness of the submission process, the planning process, the learning curve, and the time to break even for the investment made. It can

supplement an assignment business, but shooting stock should continually be on the contributor's mind.

Trinette Reed & Chris Gramly: Our hope is that eventually these distinctions between traditional stock and microstock will cease to exist and that there will be agencies that have both traditional stock and microstock and RF and RM all in one place, with different price points based on quality of production, casting, and/or concept.

This is already starting to happen, but it's been a very slow process of change. Image buyers have moved over in droves to microstock and the quality of microstock now (in our opinion) equals and often surpasses that of traditional stock, so now the only distinction between the two is price. When you look at a high-quality image on a microstock site that is selling for \$10 versus the same quality level of image and production in RF that is selling for \$350, it just doesn't make sense and this is confusing to buyers and to photographers.

We think what needs to happen in the industry is for content to be priced on quality and production level, not on whether the image is microstock or traditional stock, labels which no longer make sense. There are buyers coming to microstock sites that are not price sensitive and are willing to spend more money for the right image. Unique images or high-quality productions may sell less in volume, so it doesn't always make sense for a photographer to take the risk to spend a lot on production if the image is selling for microstock prices. If a photographer spends money on an image that is difficult to produce, that image should cost more for the buyer.

If this doesn't happen, the end result is that photographers end up shooting low hanging fruit—images that are cheap to produce that they know can sell hundreds or thousands of times. The result is that the collections end up all starting to look the same and holes develop in content.

It is almost as if entire collections need to be re-edited and images need to



Photos © Randy Platt



Continued on page 146

Stock Photography Today

From page 119



Photos © Veer/Lee Torrens

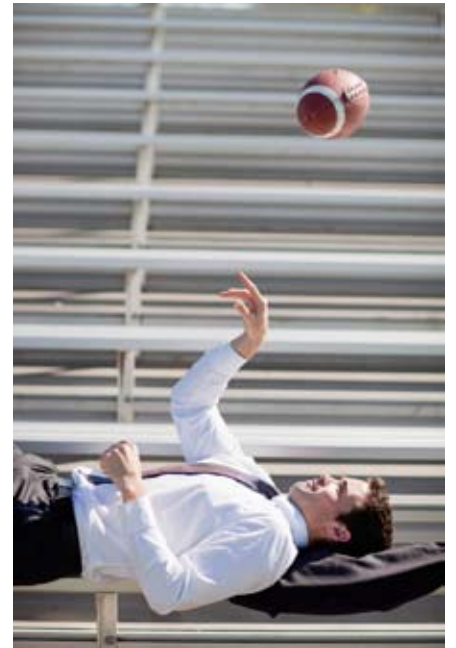


be placed in the right price points based on quality. There are many traditional stock RF images that have stopped selling that should be in microstock at a lower price point and would probably sell well there. Conversely, there are many microstock images that should be selling at traditional stock prices. Obviously this is a huge undertaking, but right now the way collections are randomly priced based on the traditional stock or microstock label and not based on quality/level of production does not seem sustainable.

We believe there is still money to be made in stock, but right now it's

not simple or straightforward and the industry is still very much in transition. We do think that if these above issues get worked out there is hope for the professional photographer to continue to make a good living shooting stock. RM still has its place; in our experience, sales have remained strong for very high-quality production shoots and very unique images.

Jeremy Woodhouse: If you can get a traditional stock contract this is still the best way to go. With the proliferation of low cost microstock in the market it will be hard to be "seen" and unless



you are sending in 1000 plus images per month you will not earn enough to make a living.

As far as the traditional stock market goes, the line between RF and RM is so fuzzy now that, apart from the restriction placed on usage, there is little difference in quality (or earnings). The big problem is that I am seeing many sales in both RM and RF for under \$5 per image. Agencies are rewarding their big clients with package deals where they can get traditional stock images at microstock prices and we as photographers, who are at the bottom of the food chain, pick up the scraps. On the positive side, I would like to think that the secret to any level of success is to think outside the box, fill in the holes, and create good, unique content and lots of it.

Randy Plett: It depends on what you shoot, but I'm leaning toward microstock. I'd say if it's very location specific or highly specialized images with a limited audience, go with the higher-priced RM or RF models. Microstock images are more generic and reach a much larger audience because of their lower price point.

The price of an image should be determined by its actual market value. The value of an image is becoming less these days as a result of supply and demand (do you know anyone who doesn't have a digital camera?). Some

of the agencies are adjusting, and some aren't. The newer microstock agencies are inflating their price points because they can. That is, the market will bear the higher price because it still seems fair. On the other hand, it appears that many traditional stock agencies don't want to budge—and rightfully so in some cases. However, in most other cases their search results show bland, outdated images that can't compare to the newer, fresher work coming out of microstock agencies. So unless you shoot some very unique images, most of them should be submitted to microstock agencies. And quickly, before their value goes down further.

SB: Are stock agencies still an option? How tough is it to get into one and how do you find one?

Shannon Fagan: Until the direct licensing realm takes off, agencies are absolutely the way to go for making money in stock. It is currently easier than in the recent past to obtain contracts to contribute to most agencies, given that submissions and the number of photographers participating are on the decline. "Crowdsourced" appeal for submissions in microstock have made it vogue so that anyone can participate and be given a contract. The best research as to which agency is ideal is done by reading the forums, the blogs associated with the business, and meeting the photographers associated with the agencies.

Lee Torrens: Unless you have extremely unique images or a sought-after brand, stock agencies are the only option for those who want to achieve a decent sales volume. The alternative, selling direct, requires a lot of work for even minimal sales. Stock buyers know they can get a larger variety and a better user experience from agencies, so it takes something very unique to get them to use the site of a single photographer. Getting into a microstock agency is usually very simple and easy. Just sign up and start uploading photos. Two of the most lucrative agencies require a test submission so they can see that you're able to produce the kind of imagery they're seeking, which presents



Photos © Sam Bloomberg-Rissman/Blend Images



a significant barrier to those without stock experience.

Getting into a traditional stock photo agency is usually more difficult. They're not set up to deal with a large quantity of submitters, so they need to be selective about the photographers they use. They will require you to demonstrate appropriate images you've produced in the past and they'll want to know that you intend to produce appropriate content on an ongoing basis. Those at the very top aren't even taking on new photographers directly any longer.



To get into those agencies today, you need to go through an intermediary agency. However, there are lots of open opportunities for stock photographers to get traditional RM and RF contracts. Interested photographers just need to seek them out.

Sam Bloomberg-Rissman: For me, stock agencies are the only option. I do not have the time or the desire to be a marketer. Other aspects of my life take up a large part of my time and do not

Continued on page 153

Stock Photography Today

From page 148

allow me the ability to do the hard work necessary to sell my images on my own. Agencies are able to get my images in front of buyers who would never see my images otherwise.

Agencies are tough to get into, especially the big ones like Getty and Corbis. That doesn't mean it's impossible to get into one. Evaluate your material. Look for agencies that sell similar work. The smaller agencies like Blend and SuperStock are more likely to be open to taking on new talent. I also suggest diversifying. Don't put all your eggs into one basket, and that also means don't put all your eggs into the stock basket. The unpredictable marketplace signals to me that you need to hedge your bets. My income from stock fluctuates drastically. This is not an industry for someone who needs the comfort of a steady paycheck.

SB: Is there anyone selling traditional stock of travel and nature or have those images gone?

Sam Bloomberg-Rissman: Travel images are a tough sell in today's saturated marketplace. I began shooting travel imagery but had to move to lifestyle stock because I could see the market drying up. Yes, it is still possible to sell traditional stock travel images, but it's getting harder and harder. The problem isn't one of microstock versus traditional stock. The real problem is that there are now millions and millions of images that are easily accessible to consumers. This isn't a problem for buyers; in fact it's an amazing time for image consumers. Making a go of it as an image producer on the other hand is harder and harder. I personally have taken a step back from stock as my main source of income.

Jeremy Woodhouse: I guess there are still a few of us out there. I still make almost all of my living out of travel and nature. However, I have seen a 60 percent drop in income over the past three to four years, but, granted, I was around during the time when we were making big bucks—a time where we

thought (and hoped) the party would never end.

I was one of the first Photodisc photographers when RF went online in the early 1990s, so as such I was the pariah among the old-school RM shooters, much as the microstock guys are among both RF and RM shooters today. I never compromised on my nature or travel imagery and always sent my agencies the best work I knew how to produce so my RF work could compete with the best of the RM images out there.

As the market changed I moved more into RM and today out of the some 9000 images that I have in stock at least half are RM. I am hoping that there will be a shift back toward more exclusive imagery where we can make hundreds of dollars per image rather than hundreds of cents.

Randy Plett: Travel photography, for the most part, exists in the realm of lower value pricing. Why? Because millions of people love to travel, see new things, and take lots of pictures along the way. Thus a photo of the Eiffel Tower may be virtually worthless as a result of the already large supply.


There are obvious exceptions, but you must be willing to pull something out of your hat creatively, or take some serious risk getting to those places that other people won't go. I recently went to Somalia in search of unique content. The few images I got will not even come close to paying for the trip, but they are doing well under iStockphoto's *Vetta* collection.

There is other value that I receive in the form of a unique experience. Generally, my attitude is that if I break even while traveling, then I am happy. So unless that amazing photo of the Eiffel Tower that you got is really, really good... get it printed and hang it on the wall.

SB: What does the future hold? What specific advances in technology has created opportunities for stock photography?

Shannon Fagan: A significant advancement in technology that should be mentioned here is the allowance of crowdsourced material on the Internet. These online platforms allowing users to do their own work to submit and upload

have clearly revolutionized the business.

Probably the single most significant advance is the developments we've seen for the ability to direct license affordably. The catch to this advance is that despite the technology change and drop in overhead cost to direct license work, the user base to buy direct is still quite minimal and discouragingly nonexistent. This advancement is still awaiting the continued erosion of the agency model and further development of search technology to allow faster, easier, and more defined access to the images that buyers want...and can get directly from the photographers. Direct licensing adoption by photographers, naturally, is also slow to take off for financial reasons. It's difficult to make money in direct licensing unless one's subject matter is very niche, rare, and difficult to obtain within the vast amount of agency options available. However, expect this to be a growth area in years to come. 

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