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Special report

7 January 2009

How to beat the credit crunch

Short of selling up all your remaining assets and moving abroad, what can you do to survive the economic downturn? Diane Smyth asks photographers and industry experts for their advice



© Roger Bamber/Alamy

Multiply your sales, Pete Jenkins, photographer

Editorial photographer Pete Jenkins has resold his images to Alamy for stock for many years and, he says, photographers who don't are missing a trick.

'The days when editorial photographers could survive on four commissions a week from the press are long since gone. Since its launch in 1999, Alamy has become an important part of many photographers' output. With more than 14 million images online provided by 14,000 photographers, it is increasing its turnover and making money in a market under ever-increasing pressure.

'Every job an editorial professional undertakes is likely to produce images that can be made available to a greater market - secondary editorial, that is to say, (primarily) books and magazines. But in most cases lone professionals will not be able to gain access these markets individually.

'There is an argument that every professional editorial photographer should be using people such as Alamy as part of their marketing strategy, yet a great many hard-working professionals simply don't bother. Some believe there is too much extra editing involved, some fear the draconian 'quality control'. 'Yet feeding a selection of material to a stock portal can easily earn an extra income of £50, £100, maybe much more, every week. So while some extra work is involved, this work is repaid many times over by the extra sales it produces.

With many editorial outlets still paying the same fees as 15 years ago, and photographers' overheads increasing every year, we need to make the most out of every job undertaken. Stock is now becoming an essential part of many professionals' workflow and Alamy is the easiest-accessed, and best-marketed editorial stock library in the UK. How can you not contribute and access that kind of marketing potential?

Visit petejenkins.co.uk/alamy.com.

Keyword effectively, Sarah Saunders, director of Electric Lane

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'As with all businesses, photographers need to ensure that they don't put all their eggs in one basket. Selling images into stock is one way of diversifying, and even then you need to ensure you're submitting images across the broadest range of subjects.

'Keywording is essential. It's about ensuring that you stay in the game by tagging your images with effective and relevant words. However, be warned that search engines are becoming increasingly intelligent, and will start to penalise photographers who include irrelevant keywords simply to increase hits.

'Photographers must make keywording part of their workflow, and they must automate. We all deal with far too many images to deal with them individually. But, whatever happens, photographers must ensure that their images are labelled - even lo-res images, because they can be used online. Allowing your images to become orphan works, whose owners can't be traced and therefore can't be paid, is just not good enough.

'You really need to understand keyword systems. Getty and Corbis have very specific guidelines, which they make available to photographers. And trainers such as Liisa Kaakinen, who is leading Electric Lane's course and who has worked in keywording for many years, have the experience to talk photographers through these systems.'

Electric Lane is a specialist photographic training company, accredited by Skillsset. The company is offering a specialist course in keywording this January. Visit electriclane.co.uk.

Lease your kit, Doug Fisher, photographer

Specialising in the field of advertising and still life, Doug Fisher uses top-of-the-range kit for his work, so he mitigates the investment costs by leasing.

'I've used Photolease for the last 15 years, if not longer. The main reason for doing so is that it allows you to spread the cost of buying expensive hardware over a period of time, but it's also more tax efficient than buying equipment outright, because Photolease still own it until the lease has run its course.

'You can pay a small amount at the end of the lease to make the equipment yours outright. I tend to do that because the residual value at the end of the lease isn't much so it's very reasonable. I've used it to buy kit such as the Hasselblad H39. With digital kit I don't want to hire, because I don't want to use kit that's been around the block.'

Visit dougfisher.co.uk/photolease.co.uk.

DIY marketing, Phillip Toledano, photographer

American photographer Phillip Toledano has used the internet very successfully to market his work, which includes fine art projects alongside fashion and editorial. He's very much involved in the publicity and dissemination of his work, and his websites have generated articles in the New York Times and BJP, helping him connect with a more international audience, supplementing the work of his commercial agents and the publishers and galleries that show his personal work.

'The first thing to say is that although the internet is a great tool to market your work, it's only useful as long as it's interested in you. I set up separate microsites for each project. I shoot my projects in different styles, according to what suits the subject matter, so it seemed appropriate to do the websites in the same way. My main site, Mr Toledano, is the umbrella, so the microsites and the main site all feed into each other. My main site opens with a front page, which welcomes you with 'Mr Toledano will see you now'. 'People don't make their sites personal enough. It's your presence on the web, so it should represent you.

'Find out the top 10 feeder sites in your region; sites such as boingboing or coolhunting. You are just as important to them as they are to you because they need content, so get in touch. I send them a mail saying 'What do you think?' You also need to mail your contacts, although bear in mind that when you send unsolicited mail, you're basically a gatecrasher. As with all gatecrashers, you need to be charming and entertaining enough to justify your stay.'

Visit mrtoledano.com.

Sell prints online, Paul Avis, photographer

Paul Avis recently launched a company, One of Editions, specialising in online print sales, aiming to give art and documentary photographers a new venue to sell their work. They can sell in limited editions to a public looking for an affordable entry into collecting contemporary photography, so many of the works are sold in two sizes, with smaller print sizes available in larger editions of around 50, alongside full-size prints in smaller editions that come at a premium. As the editions sell, the price rises according to availability, as has become standard practice in print galleries.

For the photographers involved, there's no cost to join, and as master files are handled by Spectrum Photographic, the print ordering is automated. Avis negotiates an agreement with the photographers (which, he says, is photographer-friendly), who he invites to join.

'Our objective is to offer a comprehensive overview of contemporary photography and 24 photographers have joined so far, including established names such as Dennis Gilbert and Clare Richardson, alongside younger talent such as Huw Alden Davies. In future, design professionals will also be able to search the site.'

Photographers interested in joining should have exhibition experience and a good CV. Visit oneofeditions.com for submission guidelines.

Team up, Mike Diver, photographer

Mike Diver set up Diver & Aguilar a couple of years ago, teaming up with retoucher Pedro Aguilar to produce high-end still life and jewellery images.

'Having someone else to work with during tough times is much easier. Nothing is recession-proof, but for us, editorial is much safer. With advertising, the client can always disappear, but with editorial, if they have committed to producing a regular magazine, they will always need content for it. They can reduce the budgets but, as long as the magazine exists, they can't disappear altogether.

'In stills photography you can no longer get away with being middle of the road. You need to be working either at the bottom of the market producing volume, or you need to be a name.'

Visit mikediver.com.

Rethink your business plan, Catherine Connor, managing director of Annabel Williams Contemporary Photographic Training

Starting out in weddings, Annabel Williams moved into portrait photography a few years ago and now combines this work with commercial commissions and photographic training, headed up by Catherine Connor.

'January and February are the quietest times of the year for wedding and portrait photographers, so take the opportunity to take stock. First, and most importantly, you need to sit down and evaluate the figures. If you feel the tiniest bit out of your depth, call in an expert - an accountant or a bookkeeper. Businesses that slide under do so because of cash flow.

Break down the different market sectors. Are you making more money from large weddings or small, from family portraits or baby shoots? Start to see the potential and work out which areas could be developed. Businesses need to have several arms so that you aren't dependent on any one area.

Second, look at your marketplace. You may think you have your flyers with x number of salons, florists and caterers, but do you really? Are they really on show? Check that these outlets know who you are and boost your marketing. Marks & Spencers has the luxury of knowing its ads will be on TV every night; professional photographers do not.

Third, research your market. Read the magazines read by your target audience, and look at what's in fashion. Go to the SWPP conference in January - it gives you the opportunity to get an overview of the whole industry under one roof, and look at the latest albums and frames. Go to the Designer Wedding Show in Battersea and look at what dresses and flowers are being attracting clients. Work out what people want and make sure you are offering it.

Four, ask for advice. If we are about to make a big change (at Annabel Williams), I often ring a few contacts and ask what they make of it. People are usually willing to help; you just have to be willing to ask.

When you've done all that, draw up a list of objectives and a timetable in which to achieve them. That way you can achieve your long-term aims.

Visit annabelwilliams.com.

Get frugal, Brian Griffin, photographer

Brian Griffin started his career in 1972 and has weathered several economic storms in his time - and lived to tell the tale.

'When I left college in the early 1970s, we were working the three-day week. You find that projects, or certainly the projects you really want to do, start to get cancelled. The only advice I can offer is, "Don't spend money". Hold onto your cash - don't buy new kit and be very, very careful with what you have.

'Live a simple life, don't buy luxuries, don't even buy a car - keep everything for the camera gear and the best computer you can get. I have very few outgoings - I don't even have an agent, so I keep 100% of what I earn. And I also spread what I do over lots of clients and lots of different types of photography.'

Visit briangriffin.co.uk.

Minimise the extras, Thea Cooper, agent at Jackie Gibbs

The photographers that Thea Cooper represents shoot high-end editorial and advertising for a broad range of clients. Hiring kit is the norm in these markets, but that may be changing.

'Hiring kit and studios saves on large overheads, and traditionally they could be charged to the client. But we are finding that clients are now looking for photographers who have their own kit, or they're paying one flat fee, out of which the photographer has to absorb any hire costs. It's smaller clients at the moment, but it's percolating into the industry as a whole.'

Visit jackiegibbs.com.BJP.

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