

Photogenic qualities

Image libraries are giving commissioned photographers a run for their money, says **Richard Clayton**

FOR a consultancy, a well-chosen image is a badge of creative sophistication. For a client, it can distinguish a superior piece of print or packaging work from the merely run-of-the-mill.

When choosing their shots, designers are hardly short of options. Specialist picture providers now cater for every conceivable niche. In the age of ISDN and the on-line light-box, photolibraries pride themselves on their delivery as much as the diversity of their stock. According to Linda Royles, chief executive of picture library trade body Bapla, greater customisation is on the way.

But designers are increasingly seeking more exclusive and true-to-life imagery – and commissioning individual photographers as a result. Traditional photolibraries are therefore having to work harder to attract attention.

Landor Associates visual resources co-ordinator Claire Henderson feels photolibraries' output is still mostly slanted towards the publishing world. She wants a move away from 'the very staged, strongly lit, generic US-style' of photography towards a 'more realistic, European-style reportage, influenced by photojournalism'.

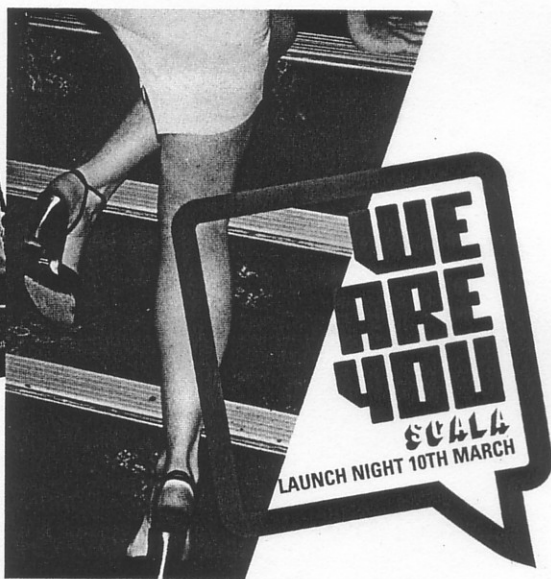
That's what 20/20 designer Douglas James was after when he asked Tom Craig, of the photographic agency Growbag, to work with shoe shop Barratts. James wanted to avoid clichéd imagery with the in-store visuals he was designing. 'Creatively, you have more control [if you commission],' he says. 'You can write a specific brief. With Barratts, we wanted a real-life fashion attitude that we would never get from a library source.'

James uses stock for mood boards and inspiration. Given the choice, most designers prefer to commission – not least because library costs include service, reproduction and hire fees. Henderson, who's worked recently with the photographer Stuart Freedman, suggests it's often cheaper to commission. Royalty-free CDs have opened a new market, but Henderson is loathe to use material that isn't exclusive.

'Photolibraries and photographic agencies offer two very different services. We'll use [the likes of] Imagebank more for reference and one-off images. We pick photographers for their creative ability,' says James.



Clockwise from top: Matches bags by Browns with photography by David Stewart; The Cornerstone Player CD box-set by US group Capacitor with photography by Neil Massey/PYMCA; Scala invite by Primetarium with photography by Alasdair McLellen/PYMCA; Meridian image by Pete Moss used in Tank-designed Penna work



Browns partner Jonathan Ellery is more emphatic. 'Only a handful of photolibraries have [any] understanding of contemporary images,' he says. 'Culturally, agencies like Magnum and Network Photographers have the high ground.'

Browns has commissioned photographers David Stewart, Jean-Philippe Default, Simon Phipps and Davey Jones. 'We'd only use stock if there was some reason why we couldn't commission,' Ellery adds. 'We've nothing against photolibraries. It's more fun [to commission] as you have more involvement.'

Ellery thinks photolibraries are paying more heed to how they present their material, but says most still lag behind Stone by Getty Images. 'The picture edit has improved and more has gone into how images appear. You're getting a collectable book that really addresses the fickle world we live in, not some piece of nonsense,' he says.

Youth-oriented archive PYMCA has a cult following, while Alamy's Magalogue tries to por-

tray its images in a more creative context. Sales and marketing manager Monica Hart says, 'Designers are looking for something a bit different, something thematic.'

Tank partner Robert Wood adds, 'Over the past ten years, photolibraries have improved tremendously. Photonica set the standard for emotive and abstract shots.' Wood commissions for in-depth corporate positioning pieces and uses stock to meet more short-term needs.

Corbis publication 46/64, themed around baby-boomers, is the first of its catalogues to be arranged by photographer. The company has just appointed David Harrigan as its first director of commercial photography.

'Highlighting photographers is not industry standard, but we want to show our support for [our] talent. The route we're going down is more considered,' he says.

It could be argued photographic agencies and photolibraries are two sides of the same coin. The latter may be adopting a more 'photographer-led stance', but, as Royles suggests, 'we're all looking for the best portfolio of work at the end of the day'. □