



The specialists

An ever-growing number of specialist photolibraries are dab hands at dealing with bizarre requests from designers. Lakshmi Bhaskaran finds out more.

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Not so long ago, the process of sourcing an image both began and ended with the one-stop shopping experience that was the Picture Library. I say 'the', because that is exactly what it was – a quick-fix, everything-under-one-roof, pictorial department store. Today, however, just as the vogue for convenience shopping has dwindled, the need for more specialist imagery has spawned a whole new breed of picture library: that whose job it is to guide, and provide us, not only with the perfect picture, but also the equally specialist knowledge that accompanies it.

"Sometimes you don't just want an image, you want expert knowledge, says Linda Royles, chief executive of BAPLA, the UK trade association for picture libraries. "So rather than just having a straight stock shot, you get something much more specific and learned that will be of use to a readership who know about the subject."

For anyone unsure of quite where to begin, BAPLA is an excellent first port of call. With 400 member companies, most of whom are specialists in their field, BAPLA offers a free referral service to all its clients. "Sometimes it's quite difficult for a publisher to know where to start," continues Royles. "They may have a brief but haven't fully understood it, so it's a matter of establishing what it is they actually want to achieve and then helping them to find it."

Expert knowledge is clearly a prerequisite for all specialist libraries, but the number of practising professionals working in the industry is still impressive. While Mediscan have no fewer than

four GPs to their credit, Firepix International is owned and run by Merseyside fire officer of twenty-eight years Toni Myers. Similarly, Ecoscene's Sally Morgan is an environmental specialist and author of more than seventy books covering science and natural history. "Because we know so much about the subject matter, we can offer that added level of service," says Morgan. "And where a bigger library may not be able to adapt their workflow in order to accommodate a client, we can stop what we are doing and scan on demand."

The development of the internet has also proved fruitful for Ecoscene, both in the UK and overseas. "The internet has made us far more global, and because UK reproduction rights are slightly cheaper than in America, clients save money by coming to us. Also, we are not sending out originals, so we can email a selection of images to a client within half an hour, they can choose a picture and have it in their article within the hour, if absolutely necessary. There's no risk factor for us and it's a convenience for them."

With so much business now being conducted digitally and via the internet, BAPLA's Picture Buyer's Fair (29-30 April) is an excellent opportunity for professional image-buyers to meet face to face. "The industry is moving forward at great speed, adapting to the dictates of technology and the needs of clients," says Linda Royles, "so this is an opportunity for those in the industry to meet top UK suppliers and keep their skills and knowledge fresh by attending specialist seminars

on industry developments."

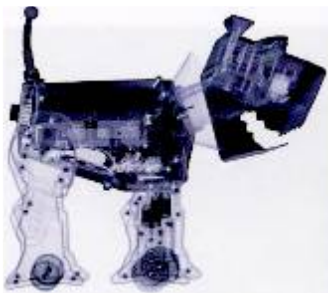
Although larger libraries may not offer the same level of expertise as their specialist colleagues, for some, being part of a larger operation can work to their advantage. As part of Rex Interstock, the Organic Picture Library is one such company. "Being a specialist, overheads are very high but coming off the back of another library means we can keep costs down, as well as offer our clients all the services that a larger library has," says Paul Brown of OPL. "We can supply images digitally in any form, as well as offer full scanning and duping services as necessary, all with a very fast turnaround."

For Sophie Napier, director of Ardea Wildlife and Pets, personal service is another added benefit. "We speak directly to the person who has the brief, discuss it with them and then offer ideas and suggestions," continues Napier. "This way they can get something over and above their initial thought, which is limited by a lack of knowledge about that particular subject."

At the Mary Evans Picture Library, specialists in history and the paranormal, clients deal with the same person from their initial enquiry to the receipt of their final invoice. According to Mark Vivian, MEPL's Picture Research Manager, this element of continuity is one of the most important factors for both staff and client. "It increases the level of job satisfaction for a researcher to see the whole job through, and from the client's point of view, it helps that they know exactly who they are dealing with, rather than being passed around →



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Alamy Images
www.alamy.com
Ardea Wildlife & Pets
www.ardea.co.uk
BAPLA
www.bapla.org.uk
Christie's Images Ltd
www.christiesimages.com
Ecoscene
www.ecoscene.com
Mary Evans Picture Library
www.mepl.co.uk

gather:no:moss
www.gathernomoss.com
Organic Picture Library
www.rexinterstock.com/opl
PYMCA
www.pymca.net
Picture Buyer's Fair
www.pbf.org.uk
Untitled
www.untitled.co.uk
V&A Picture Library
www.vam.ac.uk

from department to department." And if it all gets too much, a quick scan through MEPL's list of more 'obscure' requests is sure to raise a smile. Ranging from the bizarrely specific to the historically confused, recent additions include 'Jesus looking like a bit of a raver', 'Norman the Conqueror', 'a German nutcracker in the shape of a person' and 'a picture of the Greek god, Atlas; we think his first name is Charles'.

Focusing on British and global youth culture, PYMCA was set up three years ago by owner Jon Swinstead and Steve Lazarides. The library now holds some 50,000 images covering 'youth in all its guises'. "Most of the people we take on have been involved in the actual scenes they shoot," says Lazarides. "And it's all quite documentary-led... real-life images of real-life people." As well as representing a number of photographers, "which covers the commissioning side of things", PYMCA also produced and edited the recently published SEEN: blackstyleUK, looking at British black youth culture.

Leading the field in abstract imagery is gather:no:moss, a specialist in the production of quality abstract and ethereal images, and Untitled, best known for their X-ray photography. "A lot of designers use us as a starting-point, because they can go to the website and take something that has the mood of what they are trying to say," says Tom Sutton of gather:no:moss. "And because designers tend to think in moods, they can search the website using more abstract keywords." In keeping with the ethereal quality of their pictures, keywords include

everything from 'side to side' and 'scratchy' to 'full on' and 'fiery', as well as standard shapes and colours for less 'creative' thinkers.

Mainly serving the advertising and design communities, Untitled's fully searchable website uses a similar approach with its three search options - Emotional Attributes, Formal Attributes, and Techniques, which include X-Ray Photography, Pop Art Illustration, Photograms and Chemistry Experiment Photographs. "We mainly direct people towards the website, which is fully up to date - we upload new images every fortnight," says Katie Jarvis of Untitled.

Another excellent source of specialist imagery not to be overlooked is the various picture libraries affiliated to museums and galleries. Christie's, the Tate Gallery, the V&A and the Museum of London all have affiliated libraries offering their own source of unique material.

For all picture libraries, whatever their size, offering clients a fully downloadable website is clearly the way forward. "The future is definitely to have a fully searchable site from which clients can download images," says Sophie Napier, "and I think once that happens, it will make it more of a level playing-field with the bigger libraries." This may seem like both an expensive and time-consuming task, but companies like Alamy offer a viable alternative for those lacking the resources to fund such websites independently.

Describing itself as 'the image broker', alamy.com offers both specialist and general images for online purchase at one destination.

Launched only a year ago, the company has already signed up an impressive number of specialist libraries including Mary Evans (historical), Arcad (architecture and design), Anthony Blake (food and drink) and Robert Harding (travel and the natural world). gather:no:moss is also in the process of signing up.

There is also the Agent 1.0 service, enabling individual agencies to offer their customers full e-commerce capability - including their own website address where customers can search, purchase and download images. Full contact details are also included on each agency's home page so they can negotiate directly with their customers. "Agent 1.0 is an effective and secure way for agencies to take their first step into the digital future," says James West, CEO of alamy.com. "And by having no upfront costs, libraries can also invest more in marketing and focus on delivering value to their customers." By acting as a "route to market" for both agencies and individuals, the company aims to create "a central marketplace for all professionals involved in the imaging industry". This may sound like the very antithesis of the specialist library as we know it today, but with individual agencies negotiating directly with their own clients, in theory, there is no reason why the level of service should be affected. In reality, only time will tell. □

The Picture Buyer's Fair runs from 20-30 April 2002. Tickets (worth £25) are available free to delegates who pre-register at www.pbf.org.uk