

thirst for imagery

For years the picture library business has been calling itself an industry. Now, argues **Carrie Blackford**, it's finally behaving like one. It's increasingly globalised, digitised and consolidated – but does the picture buyer benefit?

I'd like you to think about beer. There is, I would argue, a real parallel between what's happening in the image world, and what has happened to the brewing industry. Stay with me, it's a useful analogy.

Roger Protz, editor of the Good Beer Guide, is a long-time fighter of rearguard actions against all forms of monoculture: "The 1970s saw the culling of some fine family-owned breweries, until eventually the 'Big Six' national combines were accounting for 70 per cent of all beer brewed in Britain." Now those nationals have become internationals, and today: "Eight out of ten pints downed in this country are made by the four biggest brewers," he says.

This magazine was launched five years ago, but the very title – Light Box – now seems an ironic nod to the pre-digital age. Every picture submitted for that first issue arrived on the editorial desk in the form of a transparency.

Then, there were lots of small libraries, some of them specialists in a particular subject area – food, gardens, mountains. Many collections were based on the work of one or two photographers. And while there were a few giants, general libraries with a particular eye on the commercial worlds of advertising and design, there was never a suggestion that the two could not coexist.

Sal and Brian Shuel's fiercely independent Collections library continues to provide personal knowledge of the pictures and photographers they represent. Sal Shuel recently rediscovered some of the letters she received as she stepped down from the BAPLA hot-seat less than a decade ago.

"It shocked me, reading the letters again, how many of those libraries no longer exist. Not just small companies. Big names, successful businesses, like The Image Bank, The Telegraph Colour Library. They're all now part of other empires."

The business, it seems, is increasingly dominated by a small handful of giants: globalised, digitised and consolidated.

What drove the market in beer, also drives the market in pictures. Profit. Now I can

imagine picture library folks falling off their chairs laughing at the idea that there is substantial money to be made these days.

"We're not making any more money than we were four or five years ago," says BAPLA's President David Redfern candidly. As owner of Redferns Music Picture Library, he has first-hand experience: "Keeping up with technology is so expensive. It used to be the client who paid for delivery – they'd just send a bike – now it's us. ADSL lines, high-resolution scanning, the IT expertise to keep the place running; three quarters of all submissions are now digital."

As a specialist music photographer with a unique and unrepeatable archive, Redfern is in a strong position. In real ale terms, he produces Doris's 90th Birthday Ale. His is the kind of collection where you can get a picture not just of the Rolling Stones, but of the Rolling Stones at a particular gig on a specific night.

"You've either got to be big, or you've got to have things nobody else in the world has got and for which there is no substitute." You also need technology. "I'm an eternal optimist, but if you haven't got your pictures online in a year or two, you're going to be dead in the water. It's choices time."

At first sight it looks as if technology itself is the driver of change. Martin Dives is CEO of The Picture Desk, a portal offering digital delivery from a website of art, entertainment and travel images. "Technology will force the pace for the foreseeable future," he says, arguing that this pace may prove too fast and challenging and expensive for some suppliers. Dives quotes Moore's Law, which states that computer power or computer memory will double every 18 months.

"The question for specialists is how many clients are we able to reach who are willing to pay reasonable fees for a quality service? You can have the best specialist collection and a superb website, but if the clients out there do not know of your existence, few are going to search for you."

Are clients, then, driving the change? Is the thirst for imagery demanding a change of

Image

Man drinking beer: Photonica
(*44 20 7278 4117)

