

Images, images everywhere

The rise of stock photography, convergence, and the ensuing challenges

By James West, CEO, Alamy Images, <http://www.alamy.com/>

When the first stock agency came on the scene, stock imagery was pretty much limited to print marketing campaigns and delivered as transparencies. Back then, stock was generally regarded by most creative professionals as stale and sanitized. But, a recent survey of leading commercial agencies and corporate image users by *Graphic Design:usa*, New York, N.Y., shows a staggering 90 percent increase in stock usage. What's driving this trend? Key influencers are new marketing platforms and technologies, current economy, and the squeeze on marketing budgets, as well as the affordability, selection, and high quality of today's stock photography.



James West, CEO of Alamy Images: "The trend towards stock imager gives rise to new challenges not only for end users, but also for image providers."

Marketing today

As consumers become more sophisticated and accustomed to tuning out advertising, marketers have to develop creative ways to convey their brand. The result: a plethora of new online and offline marketing techniques has emerged, presenting marketers with multiple opportunities to reach consumers.

For example, **ambient advertising** – an umbrella term for advertising in an unusual and unexpected way, where the audience is captive – means we are seeing image-heavy promotions everywhere, from PDAs and mobile phones, to ATMs, to in-store plasma screens. Picture messaging on mobile devices, though still in its infancy, is becoming a powerful medium of the future, especially in Europe and Japan, where 75 percent of the population (*eMarketer 2002*, New York, N.Y.) have PDAs.

Viral marketing - any form of promotion passed on from person to person – is also increasingly popular, particularly when it is visual in nature.

Direct marketing has become more sophisticated than ever, thanks to new digital printing techniques. Car manufacturers and other companies with advanced loyalty programs are taking full advantage of these techniques to personalize the images and wording of print material and online campaigns.

Using original photography across all these media would be cost prohibitive and – given the quality of today's stock, plus the ability to "buy out" or edit the image – isn't the only option.

Finally, clients are more demanding, looking for quicker turnaround and ways to save money without compromising quality. All these developments, combined with huge improvements in both quality and the supply of stock imagery, have led to more design and advertising professionals purchasing stock photography.

The trend towards stock imagery, specifically digital stock, in this new "converged" and increasingly pressurized environment, gives rise to three new challenges not only for end users, but also for image providers, as outlined in the following sections.

A needle in a haystack?

Digitizing the entire photography industry has led to a deluge of available content. Also, as stock buyers turn more often to the Internet, online image providers have to stay ahead in an increasingly competitive environment. Many picture agencies now offer an online search facility, which, in addition to the convenience of 24/7 service, enables buyers to browse and compare thousands of images. Yet, sifting through them can be a time-consuming and daunting task. Providers need increasingly sophisticated search engines that are simple and intuitive enough for even the first-time user to negotiate.

In a recent survey, Alamy found image buyers base their decisions on finding the right image, fast delivery, and quality. Good stock libraries will employ every method available to ensure they are in tune with the needs of their customers, and constantly revise their online service to stay in line with these needs.

Color management

Image quality is another, much larger, challenge for marketers and online stock

libraries. Marketers have one key objective: to present their company in a consistent manner across all media, throughout all campaigns, and in all markets.

Color management is one of the most important factors when using digital images. Good, consistent color starts with the photographer. No amount of color management by a stock agency, or anyone else in the “image chain,” can improve a poor photograph. Problems with the original photo are complicated when it is used across print, online, and wireless campaigns, where factors such as screen and printer settings can affect color. Add to that recreating the materials in other countries where everything – including ink and the chemicals in paper – varies, and dramatic inconsistencies can crop up, affecting the overall brand representation.

Although color management remains a complex subject, developments in recent years have made managing color across multiple media more straightforward. Excellent color software packages, such as **GretagMacbeth** software and **Adobe** Gamma, can simplify the color management process.

Everyone handling the images, from the photographer to the printer, needs to ensure all printers or other devices are properly calibrated. As a stock library, it's best to provide images in RGB, as this is the most basic model for screen display and, therefore, works best for designers. Printers, however, have different concerns when working with high-resolution images, whereas designers mostly work with low-resolution images. Calibration of all devices involved in production becomes particularly important with digital imagery.

Imagine if the images seen on a PDA were a totally different color to the identical ones used on a website or in printed materials, or if the color of a brochure came out looking totally different from the original mockup. If the color is handled incorrectly at any one stage, it becomes a costly problem; therefore, it's important for stock libraries to reject images that do not meet color standards. It's also advantageous if the agencies offer a properly calibrated output that designers and printers can check against.

The simple facts of licensing

With increased use of digital images, there is much confusion over licensing; but it's all quite simple. Buying an image means buying a license to use that image, rather than the image itself. Although there can be exceptions to the rule, copyright is automatically assigned to the photographer, unless the photographer is commissioned to take the image and has relinquished any rights.

There are generally two types of licenses – traditionally licensed images, and royalty-free images. With a traditionally licensed image, buyers are limited by a set of conditions that specify how the image may be used. Some conditions include:

- **Territory:** The countries or regions in which the image will be used.
- **Duration:** How long the buyer intends to use the image.
- **Circulation:** How many copies can be printed, or how many times the image can be displayed.
- **Usage:** Whether the image can be used for marketing or editorial purposes.

A common misconception with stock photography is there is a risk the images will appear on other websites or print campaigns. With a traditionally licensed image, buyers have the option to purchase exclusive rights or to purchase an agreement that would prevent anyone from using the image for the duration of the license.

Royalty-free images, on the other hand, are available for unlimited use and duration. Once the image is purchased, it can be used as often and for as long as needed. Exclusive rights are not available for royalty-free images; but buyers have the freedom to edit the image, so proficient users of **Adobe** Photoshop can take the original image and alter it to create a new, unique photograph.

Whether purchasing royalty-free or licensed images, good stock agencies will make it easy to find and download images, and will ensure the pricing structure is clear and competitive.

Stock imagery has come of age, and will continue to evolve as new technologies continue to emerge. For example, online stock agencies can already deliver images taken on digital cameras direct from the photographer and, as the quality of digital



One of the many images found at Alamy.com

photography continues to improve, this will increasingly become the norm. As long as agencies continue to keep ahead of trends, while meeting current needs, then creative professionals can rest assured they will be able to download and use images everywhere with ease.

The opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of Photo Marketing magazine or Photo Marketing Association International.