

Online stock photography – the search is on

In recent years, the stock photography marketplace has evolved to the extent that you can now get hold of almost anything - from ancient, rare archival imagery through to contemporary commercial shots that look as good as commissioned photography.

However, for those new to working with stock libraries, finding the right image can be a daunting task.

Knowing the best places to look is a good start. There is a plethora of stock photography agencies, from the enormous all-things-to-all-men agencies to the niche specialists, so you can waste much time in the hunt for the “right one” before you've even started looking for that eye-catching cover image. BAPLA, the UK trade association for picture libraries, offers a useful starting point for finding suitable providers.

Once you've found the right agency for your needs, the next step is to search their stock for suitable images. Most agencies now offer online searches, the convenience of a 24/7

service and the ability to browse and compare thousands of images quickly. Of course the flip-side of this is that if you don't know how to search, you could drown in the volume of results returned by the search engine. Taking time to understand how the search engine works could save you hours in front of a screen.

Online search engines rely on the information stored with each image, typically in the form of keywords, a caption, and perhaps a more detailed description. Depending on the search engine, you can search for images that contain a certain word, a phrase, or perhaps a series of words in any particular order. Most online search

engines retrieve thousands of images, so unless you want to be inundated, you'll need to narrow down the results using a boolean search, say, which enables you to tailor your search with options such as 'and', 'or', 'not' etc. For example, searching on 'dog not bone' will give no images of bones, just dogs, 'dog and bone' will give both, 'dog or cat' will throw up images of dogs or cats or both.

Alternatively, if you are searching for something specific, try placing the search terms in inverted commas to eliminate irrelevant results. Searching for red ball may return a picture of someone carrying a football onto a London bus, whereas 'red ball' should return pictures containing a red ball.

The features offered by search engines vary across the industry, but the good news is that most agencies tend to tweak and improve their systems on an ongoing basis, in response to customer feedback. A good agency will provide detailed online advice with examples.

So while it might look like a jungle, in reality, searching for the right stock photography is a straightforward process and you can achieve stunning results. If you still have problems just pick up the phone - most picture libraries have excellent, experienced staff, accustomed to helping with picture searches, who should be able to guide you through the process. Good luck!

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