



news view

Many picture agencies and photographers who run their own stock libraries initially viewed the development of the Web as a godsend, but some now consider that its drawbacks overwhelm its advantages. James West, of image marketing giant alamy.com, sorts the wood from the trees.

Digital alternatives for photo libraries

MORE AND MORE organisations which use images as part of their general day-to-day business are becoming used to having their needs met at the click of a mouse button. This means that the individuals and companies who supply them are having to keep their services under constant review.

There can be little doubt that the internet is increasingly impacting on the stock photography market. In a recent survey by image marketer Alamy, which included both US and UK buyers, over 70 per cent of respondents ranked the ability to search and buy online as the single most important factor in their choice of image-provider.

While most of the large general and commercial agencies have followed strategies of scanning images and making them available online, there are

build a highly detailed site. However, rather than having the catalogue site it had originally envisaged, HP ended up being pushed into all sorts of additional features which didn't really work for its style of business.

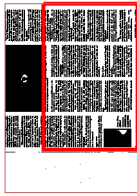
Once the boom had passed, HP gave Nature Picture Library notice to quit. The site ended up needing a complete rethink, which resulted in a much scaled-down version with no e-commerce. The library now uses other channels, including alamy, to provide online fulfilment.

None of this represents an argument for burying your head in the sand. The general trend of increasing digitisation means that picture agencies need to adapt to provide digital images, regardless of whether they choose to go online. This at least prepares them for the inevitable – that increasingly, customers will demand high-resolution scans rather than originals.

While scanning is an expensive and time-consuming process, agencies will find that digitising their best and most popular images is inevitable if they are to survive, let alone progress. It also offers them the chance to find out how their customers respond to the new format, and to gauge how high demand is for further digitisation of their services. Above all, it gives them flexibility with



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strategies of scanning images and making them available online, there are still over 400 smaller picture agencies in the UK. Most specialise in particular subject areas, of which only a small minority have gone the digital route. As a consequence only a fraction of the specialist stock available to customers is represented online.

This situation not only restricts the choices to image-users, it also means that many libraries are missing out on vital revenue. Many specialists will continue to exist for the time being, thanks to their unique content, but there is a long-term risk that as customers become more accustomed to buying pictures on the web, these specialist images will effectively be lost.

So how can the small agency ensure that it does not miss out on potential business, and what are the challenges it faces in the process?

Digital routes

Of course, these agencies and libraries can always start by building a website,

but this presents several obstacles to the relatively small operator.

For one of our contributors, the Anthony Blake Picture Library, going online represented a big cultural upheaval. Accustomed to dealing with clients personally, the managers did not want the business to become some faceless online company; they wanted to maintain the personal service to enable clients to benefit from their expertise.

While this library has actively promoted its website, it has been careful to encourage clients to maintain contact with the team, person-to-person.

Getting the site right represents another challenge. Users (ie potential customers) can be easily disappointed if, for example, they don't find the range of imagery online that they can buy offline, the transaction is cumbersome, or the website is slow. Trying to give the user a content experience online, that is similar to an offline one, is an enormous challenge.

Experienced picture-buyers are now familiar with the large online collections, so their expectations are correspondingly high. This means that online search systems must give the customers quick and easy access to the right images to fit their brief, just as if they were dealing with a library in the traditional way. Visitors to a library site must also be able to see as much content as they can see offline, which means getting the images into digital format.

All of this comes at a price, of course:

developing and hosting a website can cost from £5,000 to £500,000, depending on the number of images on the site, and the amount of control you want to have over running it.

While £5,000 will buy you a 2Mbps line and shared resources (including hardware), you will be reliant totally on a third party. You need to be able to afford to edge towards the top end of the scale in order to co-locate (using your own equipment in a building which provides security and access to the internet, shared with large websites and telco providers).

Either way, you will still have to pay for website development (this can be outsourced for upwards of £30 an hour) and any in-house support you wish or need. Add all this up, and you can see that the costs can be formidable – and that's before even taking into account the cost of getting content up on the site and marketing it.

More hurdles

Even after you have invested the capital to provide the ultimate system, there's still no guarantee that this will provide the solution.

Another of our contributing agencies, Nature Picture Library, was one of the first to build a full-blown commercial website, but actually found that the system it ended up with was too sophisticated and inflexible to meet its needs.

The company had been approached by Hewlett-Packard during the e-commerce boom and encouraged to

further digitisation of their services. Above all, it gives them flexibility with regard to their future strategy.

Developing a catalogue site is another way agencies can test the water without going through the e-commerce headache. This approach enables agencies to show the best of their work to a wide audience, but retain control of the order process. Customers can get a taste for what is on offer, and either telephone the agency to explore further, or email an order through.

In short, if properly managed, the Internet presents more of an opportunity than a challenge. While building a fully enabled e-commerce site might seem like the only solution, in fact specialist agencies can take a simpler approach.

Making their images available digitally will shortly become a necessity for all libraries, whatever their size, but they can still be sold in the traditional manner over the telephone or via a third-party reseller such as alamy. Should the agency then choose to go online in the future, preparing the images is one less problem to think about.

Whichever route is chosen – and this will mainly depend on the type of service provided and the likely range of customers – specialist agencies need to bite the digital bullet sooner rather than later.

The image market is increasingly competitive, and the internet could prove yet another way for the big agencies to swallow up market share.

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