

JOHN HENSHALL'S CHIP SHOP

It's two years since John Henshall looked at ALAMY.COM. In the meantime the dot.com bubble has burst. So where is ALAMY.COM now? Is the dream still alive?



When a small dot.com started up in hi-tech Milton Park, near 'Didblot' power station in Oxfordshire two years ago, it

seemed like very good news for photographers wanting to sell their work through an online picture library.

ALAMY.COM were asking only 10% commission for themselves, plus a few more percent for credit card charges and a fee for online storage which was only payable when the sales came rolling in.

Anyone used to a stereotypical image library – cabinets full of specialised pictures and a dedicated staff that knows every one of them in detail – might have believed that setting up an online service, with worldwide access, would be relatively easy. Not so.

A gallery, or 'catalogue' site is not too difficult. Many photographers have already learned how to make their own websites of this kind. They invite enquiries, either for similar commissions or to buy the actual stock shots shown in online catalogues. Customers can then complete the order by eMailing or telephoning the photographer, or library, to discuss usage, fees and delivery of the chosen images.

Used in this way, the Internet is an easy way to test online market potential. It's the next step which is really difficult, if not almost impossible, for small picture libraries and individuals.

Online quoting, eCommerce and electronic delivery of the images as high quality compressed scans is much more difficult to set up. For some picture buyers it also represents a culture shock which they don't want. They don't want to address a computer screen. They want to deal with people.

Yet for other picture buyers, it's now their preferred method of buying images. Once familiar with the routine, it's easy and convenient to get images right now – while the idea is still fresh – rather than wait for a courier to arrive.

Alamy's original model was the faceless internet screen. But that has changed to a hybrid system. Those who want the human interface can ring and ask Alamy's specialist staff for advice – it doesn't have to be just mouse clicking. The important thing is that, at the end of the order, the images are all delivered electronically because ALAMY.COM does not have any tangible images in its library. All its images are submitted and stored as digital files. After all, that's how they will be used.

Adaptation to what a constantly changing market requires is only possible in a company which is sufficiently in tune to be able recognise what is required and which has the flexibility of management and staff to put it into action without delay.

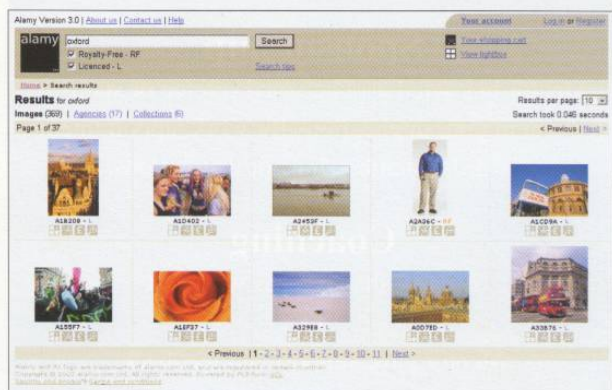
This is where small dedicated companies such as ALAMY.COM score over large corporations. This is not to say that making essential changes is easy. On the contrary, making changes to a complex eCommerce site can be very difficult.

One day, easily customisable software may be available but, in these early years, every line of code has to be written by experts who understand all the ramifications. Alamy has the engineers who can give difficult code a friendly interface. And that is a very important skill.

Alamy's growth has been modest but steady. Visiting their offices two years on, the change is noticeable immediately. Two years ago it was just a handful of people writing code in spacious accommodation.

Today, it is almost bursting at the seams with a team buzzing with activity. ALAMY.COM is not just a site where freelance photographers can sell their work. Many other picture libraries, including such

Selling Your Pictures Online

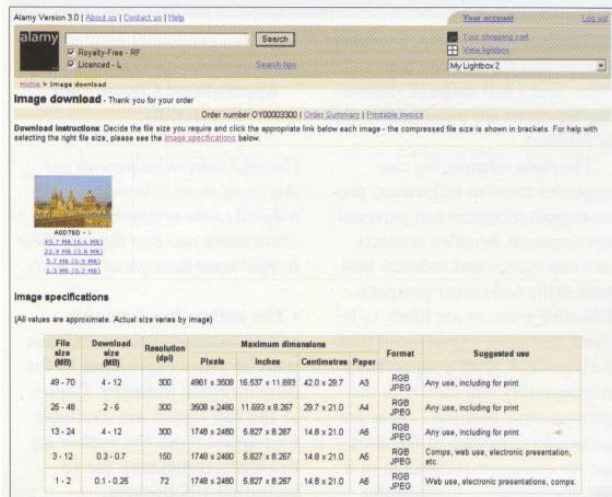


ABOVE: Speed is of the essence. A search for 'oxford' (note the lower case 'o') using the new software returns 369 images on ALAMY.COM in 0.046 seconds. These are the first ten.



ABOVE: Full details of a chosen image include what the maximum filesize can be. Note the keywords – important to get your image found. No 'dreaming spires' though.

BELOW: The download page, where you can choose how big a filesize you need for your proposed use. The JPEG size is shown alongside the full image size when opened up.



Quality Control is not there to pick holes in your work. On the contrary, it's there to help sell your images. That means success for everyone.



ABOVE: Faces beyond CyberSpace – most of the real Team Alamy. Left to Right: James West, CEO; Monica Hart, Sales and Marketing Director; Caroline Berry, Software Developer; Frederic Guigand, Database Administrator; John Schilizzi, Senior Finance Manager; Lisa Harris, Content Manager; Kerrie Weston, Office Administrator; Martin White, Creative Director; Nikhlesh Haval, Quality Assurance Supervisor; Joanna Santander, Customer Retention Executive; Stefano Valle, Production and Design Developer; Kaldip Chohan, Senior Software Development Manager (Seated); Boris Lau, Software Developer (Standing); Adele West, New Account Executive; Alexandra Bortkiewicz, Director of Photography.

resources as the Royal Geographical Society, whose extensive collection of travel and exploration from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is unique, use ALAMY.COM to sell to the whole world. That's a unique benefit of selling on the Internet.

One photographer who signed on with ALAMY.COM is former BIPP President Jim Tampin, who has an extensive collection of African wildlife images. Jim was disappointed not to get a cheque when Alamy first sold some of his images, because the fees were swallowed up in storage fees, which were not charged until a sale had been made. He has now changed to a new 35% rate which includes all charges with nothing hidden, so he receives 65% of the revenue immediately. This is still better than most other libraries. In fact, Alamy has now scrapped the 10% 'plus this, plus that' fee in favour of the 35% inclusive rate, or a 25% rate which does not include storage charges.

Jim still sells more images privately, through exhibitions and his own website, than through ALAMY.COM. He finds this surprising, as he has images from pre-independence Zimbabwe, including war and riot pictures and former Prime Minister Ian Smith, which he

expected would have been used by some of Alamy's newspaper clients in view of Zimbabwe's extensive news coverage recently.

The creative aspect of the images you submit is entirely up to you, though ALAMY.COM do have the power of veto over your images on grounds of technical quality.

My business relationship with Alamy was short lived two years ago, because of a curt eMail from a Quality Control person who clearly knew nothing about what could be achieved from scanned and adjusted transparencies of personalities from forty years ago. I knew I had good scans from that old 35mm but he obviously thought that they should be like high resolution scans from 4x5 sheet film. (See *Chip Shop* June 2000 on the web at www.epi-centre.com/reports2000/200006cs.html)

You wouldn't have that problem today because ALAMY.COM now have a QC expert who really understands digital image files: Dave Pattison.

Dave tells me that the most prevalent problem is dust and dirt on scans. It's clear to him that most photographers don't look at images at 100%, navigating around, examining them in detail, as they should.

Badly exposed shots, especially from digital cameras, can be a prob-

lem and some submitted images have obviously been interpolated up in size. You really do need to have a clear understanding of resolution, especially for scanning, and the use of the histogram and levels for checking and adjusting exposure.

ALAMY.COM usually asks for files with true resolution at 24 to 70MB. Files from digital cameras may be from 9MB, however. This should not present a problem with today's digital studio backs and SLRs but it could become marginal if you crop sections from images. Wherever possible, frame so as to use every one of those expensive pixels.

Poor colour balance, colour casts and lack of saturation are problems which could be due to using an uncalibrated workstation. This is something which cannot be ignored if you value quality. Calibrate now.

Most of the problems in submitted image files are quite fundamental and, although some people get upset when faults are pointed out, most are grateful for the advice which Dave Pattison gives freely in his easy-going informative manner.

Dave points out that quality control is not there to pick holes in your work. On the contrary, it's there to help sell your images. That means success for everyone. Buyers don't

want to have to retouch files, it's the photographer's responsibility to get them right in the first place.

Bubbles which grow too quickly inevitably burst. Alamy's growth has been steady and that's undoubtedly a good sign. Although a relatively new image library, it is at the leading edge of the business of selling images online. It has an experienced staff which understands the market and keeps it under constant review. One day, all image libraries may be like ALAMY.COM.

Two years after its launch, ALAMY.COM now has over 200,000 images available online. Customers include some of the UK's major newspapers but most of Alamy's sales are already to overseas buyers, especially to the US. The Internet is instant and global. That's the biggest possible market for your images. It's yours. Why not grab it?

**ALAMY.COM is at www.alamy.com
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 Jim Tampin's personal website is at
www.tampin.com.**

John Henshall's Chip Shop
 is also available on the Internet at
www.epi-centre.com
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