



23RD ANNUAL
**STOCK
VISUAL
SURVEY**

BY GORDON KAYE

TIGHTER ECONOMY EXPANDS STOCK VISUAL USE



A tight economy is driving more graphic design firms and departments to seek more stock visuals from more affordable sources. Stock imagery has already emerged in the past decade as a mainstream resource for creative professionals because of its value proposition — choice, accessibility, convenience, affordability. Now throw the Great Recession into the mix, and dependence on stock content has grown even more so, like it or not.

From this basic market reality flows much of the data: 94% of creatives use stock visuals in their work, a peak for GDUSA surveys; 41% are using more stock year-over-year; frequency of use is bullish despite an economy facing headwinds; royalty free licensing continues to rise; and high-volume /low-cost options such as micropayment and subscription sites are on a fast track.

No surprises here for anyone who has struggled with a creative budget during the past year and does not qualify for a bailout.

Still, hidden among the reasonably predictable results, there is one intriguing eye-opener: green shoots for rights managed and niche collections, as designers dig in to defend the value of image exclusivity, quality and distinctiveness. More later.

Meanwhile, let's look at the basic findings.

SHUTTERSTOCK

is the major corporate sponsor of this year's stock visual survey. The agency has more than 7 million royalty free images available through a range of subscription plans that offer flexibility and affordability. Contact: www.shutterstock.com

PICTUREHOUSE is also a sponsor of this year's survey. The company organizes small and intimate trade events that bring together stock image buyers and sellers in settings conducive to real communication. The next Picturehouse event is in New York City on October 14. It is free to GDUSA readers and other professional image buyers. Register in advance at www.picturehouse-us.com



94% EMPLOY STOCK

Questionnaires were mailed to 2,000 graphic design firms, advertising agencies, corporate inhouse departments, publishers and other creative businesses. The central finding of the 23rd Annual Stock Visual Survey is this: 94% of creatives use stock photography in their work. This is the highest ever recorded in a GDUSA annual reader survey. The survey also reveals a substantial use of other stock images, including illustration — another record — as well as footage, flash and animation.

Boiled down, there are five reasons why creatives tell us they are ever more dependent on stock imagery.

First, content. Designers cite content, aesthetics and inspiration as the virtues of stock just as often as they cite ease, convenience and affordability. Stock's quantity and quality, its diversity, edginess and realism, are praised.

Second, ease. Once stock visuals were cumbersome to locate and difficult to secure. With stock's online incarnation, searching, licensing and using stock is quick and easy.

Third, legitimacy. The stigma once attached to the use of stock has dissipated. That is not to say that the ideal of the personalized assignment shoot is forgotten, but survey respondents tell us that stock use is now widely accepted and largely unquestioned.

Fourth, efficiency. This is a combination of price along with the recognition that to generate original content is generally too time and resource-intensive in our tight-budget, short turnaround, travel challenged era.

Fifth is the fresh and compelling new accelerant: a once-in-a-half-century economic slowdown.

Do you use stock photography in your work?

YES	NO
94%	16%

Do you use stock illustration in your work?

YES	NO
68%	32%

Do you use stock footage in your work?

YES	NO
35%	65%

Do you use stock animation/flash in your work?

YES	NO
33%	67%

HERE ARE SEVERAL REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS ON POINT:

"We are definitely using more stock visuals in projects than ever. It helps to save money on photography and forces us to be more thrifty with our out-of-house expenses. That being said, we are also looking at lower cost stock images to meet our needs, to save money, and to still put out attractive, effective marketing materials."
– Nick Warren, Empire Comfort Systems, Belleville IL

"I use more stock visuals today for two reasons. One, they are so easy to get because of the web and, two, budgets have evaporated and they are generally less expensive. Stock visuals are a cost saving because they take less time and usually cost less money than commissioning a photographer. We are definitely doing more production inhouse. I have become a generalist again."
– Deborah McKinney, McKinney Levine Studio, Jacksonville FL

"With this economy, I've used more stock visuals to cut down the cost of the 'photo shoot' process such as hiring a photographer and model. Inhouse production is up, along with purchasing the lower cost images to keep work in budget."
– Katie Ingersoll, Kym Abrams Design, Chicago IL

"Our clients want more for less. We are seeing a trend where we will purchase credits for multiple images, as opposed to buying one image at a time."
– Aimee Rice, Towers Perrin, Atlanta GA

"Over the past five years we have seen a dramatic shift in the approved usage of stock photography in client programs. While they lack the uniqueness of a studio or location shot, they provide the ideal solution for projects with quick turn around or limited client budgets. Due to the economy, our client strategies lean toward the use of digital media tactics in place of more traditional methods. This change has also lead us to increase our purchases of royalty free imagery."
– Kathy Steele, Desert Rose Design, Elmhurst IL

"In general, the economy has required us to operate with lean strategies. This includes doing more production inhouse and, yes, using more stock visuals for cost-savings."
– Janine Thomas, American Cancer Society, Atlanta GA

"My use of stock images does not relate directly to the economy. It relates more closely to the changing design and production industry, and the access of web and electronic data."
– Carol Addyman, Addyman Design, Snellville CA

"We are using less expensive stock sites with the current economic downturn."
– Kristin Hall Black, K Hall Design, Mobile AL

TWENTY OR MORE TIMES



Even in the face of a project-killing economy, nearly four times as many designers say they increased their use of stock as opposed to those who have decreased their use. In the same vein, nearly one-third of respondents report using stock imagery more than 50 times during the past year, and more than half report using it more than 20 times.

Do you use stock more or less now?

MORE	41%
SAME	48%
LESS	11%

How often in the past year have you used stock?

1-5 times	16%
6-10 times	18%
11-20 times	14%
21 - 49 times	21%
50+ times	31%

SUPPLY IS ROBUST

How do designers feel about the job stock agencies are doing to provide them with choice and content. And what stock subjects do creative professionals most often license?

As to the first question, there is broad consensus that choice is abundant and content better than ever. The comments that follow provide confirmation. See, also, last year's survey report, headlined "The Perfect Wave," which explains why "many powerful forces that have been years in the making — economic, technological, cultural, behavioral — have dovetailed in seemingly unforeseen ways to generate an unprecedented swell of supply and options." See GDUSA September '08 or www.gdusa.com/issue_2008/09_sep/stocksurvey/index.php

As for the range of licensed subjects, the breadth is nearly infinite; it might be easier to ask what subjects they do not use. That said, the categories of People, Business & Industry, and Lifestyle are the perennial leaders and remain on top this year. Abstracts/Backgrounds/Concepts surged to join the lead group. Other categories which moved up in the rankings include Nature/Wildlife, Homes/Interiors, and Multicultural/Ethnic imagery. One could write a book as to why these three categories are especially robust: think nesting, think escape, think simplicity, think changing demographics. I will leave any additional thinking to you.

What categories do you use most often? (In Order)

People
Business/Industry
Abstracts/Backgrounds
Lifestyle
Medical/Scientific
Nature/Wildlife
Travel/Tourism
Homes/Interiors
Historical/Vintage
Food/Beverages
Multicultural/Ethnic
Fine Arts
Music/Entertainment
Sports/Games
Celebrities

Where do your design clients come from?

Business-to-Business
Healthcare/Medical
Museums/Schools/Institutions
Financial Services/Banks
Food/Beverage
Publishing/Media
Music/Entertainment/Sports
Technology/Computers
Retail Stores/Malls
Hotels/Restaurants
Auto/Airlines/Transportation
Travel/Tourism
Clothing/Fashion
Utilities/Telecom

HERE ARE REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS REGARDING CHOICE:

"I love the range of choice, it is always expanding. There is more value for the dollar now than in the past."

– Starr Wendt, Hagan Advertising, Osceola IN

"There are more cost-friendly options as well as a greater range of high-quality, well-styled photography."

– Stefanie Decker, French Associates, Rochester MI

"The range of stock photography is very broad. We tend to use [micro stock] due to the cost savings especially since the range of options is excellent."

– Tiffany Versace, Quickie Manufacturing, Cinnaminson NJ

"The range of choice has improved, especially in using royalty free images, both for quality and images. In healthcare specifically, it is not always as easy to find the exact image needed. Then we will turn to a rights managed source."

– Robert Misiolek, Proed Communications, Beachwood OH

"In terms of photos, I think the big stock agencies will have a difficult time convincing people to pay high dollar amounts for images, with the growing popularity of 'discount' houses and subscription services. The quality of images at 'discount' houses has improved dramatically in the last couple of years."

– Bryan Konieczka, AGP & Associates, Midland MI

"Definitely better quality and better choice of images and illustrations!"

– Heidi Hoffmann, Jacobs Engineering, Oak Ridge TN

"Choice is better than in the past, and the quality is better for a less expensive price."

– Matthew Tucker, Nationwide, Dublin OH

"Stock is better than ever, though it still does not replace custom photography."

– Joseph Romberger, Maple City MI

"Stock keeps getting better and better. I like to see new things and it is good to keep the selections fresh."

– Brent Wirth, Trilix Marketing Group, Johnston IA

"Stock offerings are better than in the past and improving all the time."

– John P. Siebert, JPS Design Group, Madison OH

95% SEARCH ONLINE

To affirm the obvious, nearly everyone searches for stock visuals online, and the internet serves as the primary link between stock sellers and buyers. Once again, this year's survey finds that 95% of creatives have conducted online searches during the past year. Creatives simply take the existence of appealing and robust websites for granted. And, while everyone has a horror story or can highlight some weaknesses and inconsistencies in their search engines, there is a feel-good consensus reflected in the survey responses.

TYPICAL REACTIONS FOLLOW:

"Online searches are so, so much better now. As far as strengths, speed is uppermost. As a person who has worked in the graphic arts for more years than I want to say, I have experienced a lot of changes and updates. What is available now is fantastic in comparison."

– Nancy Bishop, Jewish Chronicle, Pittsburgh PA

"Online search for stock visuals is so much better and more convenient now than it has been in the past."

– Molly Izzo, Izzo Graphics, Dowingtown PA

"Online search is great because photography is available with the click of a button, and it is better and more organized now. It would be nice to have more divisional categories such as by photographers, angles, camera techniques, etc."

– Aaron St. James, RIT, Webster NY

"Yes. Online is better. It is faster and at your fingertips. Searching for specific images is easier as well."

– Nicole Damico, Lenox Inc., Bristol PA

"Online searching has gotten much easier over the years. We primarily use royalty free images, and their quality has improved as well."

– Helene Krasney, Scott Design Communications, Philadelphia PA



How do you search for stock imagery?

Online 95%
Print Catalogs 22%
CD Catalogs 13%
Researcher 5%



What stock licensing method have you used this year?

Royalty Free 95%
Rights Managed 45%

Do you spend more total dollars on rights managed or royalty free?

Royalty Free 61%
Rights Managed 28%
Same 11%

95% LICENSE ROYALTY FREE

As for methods of licensing? The age-old debate — well, decade-old, anyway — about the relative advantages of royalty free and rights managed imagery continues.

As noted in last year’s report, this is no longer truly a fair fight. Royalty free licensing in its many forms dominates the graphic design marketplace. For the first time this year, fully 95% of respondents report having turned to royalty free stock during the past year. Moreover, nearly two-thirds report spending more money on royalty free images than on rights managed ones.

The reasons are clear. Royalty free possesses many of the traditional advantages of rights managed stock but with greater speed, ease and affordability; a reduced potential for hassle over price or usage rights; and continued improvements in the choice and quality of content. At the same time, designers do acknowledge the dark side of royalty free use: the same image can appear in a competitor’s communications; oft-used images get stale; and easy access to prepared images may blunt the creative edge.

SEVERAL RESPONDENTS EXPLAINED WHY ROYALTY FREE STOCK REMAINS SO POPULAR:

“Most of the images are just as good as rights managed now. Easy to find great photos to fit any budget. With the current economy, my company is more concerned with saving dollars than worried about someone else using the same image.”
 – Cindy Michel, AXA Equitable, New York NY

“Royalty free stock is so popular because it is cheap and easy. Its strength is in the quantity of images to which you have access. Its weakness is also the quantity and sometimes the quality. Quantity can be a double-edged sword.”
 – Aaron Johnson, Aaron Johnson Design, Worth IL

“Being, originally, a professional photographer, I can appreciate the reason for the high price of rights managed stock, but the insistence on recurring charges to the end user makes it difficult to justify the cost. For the most part, royalty free stock does the trick and is so economical, it is hard to resist. If I cannot find exactly what I want, I go ahead and shoot it myself.”
 – Connie Tucker, Star Design & Marketing, Stockholm ME

“With the abundance of royalty free images available and cost conscious clients, I have rare need for rights managed photography.”
 – Gayle Holton, Gayle Holton Design, Dublin OH

MICRO ECONOMICS



If a key to popularity is the quick, easy and cheap delivery of imagery, several relatively recent innovations do this. On steroids. Primary on this list are micropayment sites; roughly three-quarters of designers have now used them, nearly double the results of three short years ago. Next up are subscription sites, lots of downloads for a set fee, which have now enticed more than four-in-ten designers to give it a try. These two models are exquisitely calibrated to this moment of time and are transforming the way designers use, and even think about, stock content.

Have you used a micropayment site?

YES	NO
74%	26%

Have you used a subscription service?

YES	NO
42%	48%



GREEN SHOOTS AT THE HIGHER END

Given the warm embrace of royalty free stock and the move to microstock, one might assume that rights managed licensing is a thing of the past. One would be wrong. It does not necessarily follow. As noted earlier, this area of inquiry generates the one real surprise of the 2009 survey.

Specifically, creatives continue to evince a stubborn respect for the character and quality of rights managed stock and its close cousin, the specialized or niche stock collection. Even under the duress of the economic downturn and the plethora of high volume-low cost options, more than four-in-ten stock users report licensing rights managed images despite their tendency to be more expensive. Further, according to the findings, more than a quarter of creatives still spend more in total dollars on rights managed images than on royalty free.

Most striking to me is the exceptional ardor with which creatives defend the rights managed model. Such intensity has meaning.

“I believe that — even more costly — rights managed stock and specialty/niche stock collections continue to thrive because they are fundamentally unique. I can’t tell you how many times in my career I have seen competing companies use the exact same royalty free imagery on high profile pieces like annual reports or corporate websites. It can become embarrassing. It screams generic! In this day and age, in order for your product or brand to cut through the clutter, you need to have powerful imagery that isn’t run-of-the-mill. Usually the quality of these resources is much higher although micropayment sites continue to narrow the gap in terms of quality.”

– Patrick Sesko, Sesko Creative, Olney MD

“Many rights managed collections are just better, more specific, have more creative photography. I have looked through some magazines and brochures, and seen a stock shot that I used for one of my clients.

– John Burrows, Three Bears, Princeton NJ

“Buying quality photography pays for itself in presenting your brand ... company image and branding is way too important to cheap out. Be smart with what you put out there, even if it costs a little more.”

– Shelly Tabor, Biztimes Media, Milwaukee WI

“A certain quality comes with rights managed stock. Other times, it is just a matter of providing a better chance of finding what works best to promote a client’s product or services.”

– Timothy S. Lusk, TSL Design, Seattle WA

“Specialty collections generally have what you want. It is all about results.”

– Richard Gonzalez, Flection Design, Oklahoma City OK

“Higher end pieces require the quality and impact of rights managed images.”

– Cynthia Lucier, Raytheon, Nashua NH

“Rights managed and niche images thrive precisely because they perform a specific duty for a niche, rather than for general purpose. To satisfy a niche market, your piece must address the customer’s expectation at all levels — copy, visuals, aesthetic sense, and in my experience, rights managed and niche images do that more successfully than others.”

– Jay Thomas, Melwood, Upper Marlboro MD

“It’s the professional look of images in rights managed or niche collections. You can’t always find the right look at micropayment sites.”

– Jennifer Harris, Mindscape Design, Red Bud, IL

“I believe that rights managed stock images and specialty/niche stock collections are doing well because people still need and want original or unique images. And they do not want to see their same image used for another company. The cost is still less expensive than purchasing the experience, time and equipment of a professional photographer.”

– Angela Jackson, Studio J, North Highlands CA



USER GENERATED CONTENT

We wondered whether the increasing glut of user-generated content would diminish the demand for professional content in stock imagery (not to mention music, literature and other intellectual property.) Thus, we asked our readers whether, in their professional projects, they employ user-generated content created by themselves, clients or consumers? More than one-third of respondents — slightly higher than last year — say they have incorporated user-generated content into a project in the past year, though often to a very limited extent, only at the behest of client, and usually without much enthusiasm.

A FEW REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS FOLLOW:

“User-generated content has potential, but I do not yet see it as a major factor in our projects.”

– William Lancaster, Lancaster Design, Culver City CA

“We really don’t incorporate user-generated content; I haven’t seen anything of value to my clients thus far.”

– Ron Shaw, The Marketing Consortium, Rolling Hills CA

“I only use it rarely, when we have an image that is unique and is of high enough quality.”

– Marcia Escobosa, Cal State Fullerton, Fullerton CA

“Yes. I often receive and use photos from musicians from their shows or rehearsals or recording sessions.”

– Derek Martin, Derek Martin Designs, Yorba Linda CA

“Not really. But on occasion I will use a digital camera to create an image for no cost to accomplish a specific assignment or need.”

– Roy Neuhaus, Roy Neuhaus Design, Monterey CA

“Because we focus on human-centered user-driven needs for our designs, we often incorporate videos from users.”

– Gretchen Addi, IDEO, San Francisco CA



A CROSSMEDIA MAJORITY

The demand for stock imagery has traditionally been driven by print design. Now, it is also being propelled by new media platforms like the internet and mobile devices, and by cross-media pollination. For example, more than 90% of designers use stock imagery in print work and more than 50% use Flash, footage and stills for web and interactive projects. That prompted our final question: does the growing demand for imagery across platforms compromise the quality of stock images or confuse creative and production people? In brief, this is not generally perceived as an issue; designers are sophisticated enough to know that high res is high and low res is low.

HERE IS A CROSS-SECTION OF COMMENTS:

“The computer screen has its resolution requirements and print has very different requirements. Both are important to educate the designer about. Respect the res.”

– Julie Evans, Evans Creative, Winston-Salem NC

“Demand may shift in favor of new platforms but print, and the need for high res images will always be around.”

– Carlton Gunn, Carlton Gunn Advertising & Design, Richmond VA

“There is a growing demand for website to mobile phone connections, meaning that photos need to look great on a desktop, laptop and cell phone.”

– Leeann Dolan, Ginger Griffin Marketing, Cornelius NC

“I use high res images for collateral, posters, etc, and do not see any problem with the quality or resolution of stock.”

– Steven Ratych, Trahan Burden & Charles, Baltimore MD

“Nothing is more frustrating than to find the ‘perfect’ image, only to discover that it is not high res enough for print work. Trade show booths, signage, collateral all need high quality images. I usually buy the highest resolution for what I need, and downsample it when necessary.”

– Helen Leger, Latisquama Design, Southborough MA

“We always maintain a minimum of 300 dpi for our print. However, we are constantly given images from partners pulled off the web at 72 dpi. The assumption that an image from the web is fine for print is rampant. Therefore, I would say quality could potentially fall by the wayside.”

– Scott Tetreault, AAA Southern New England, Cranston RI

“Not an issue for us. We are a large law firm with many clients in the Fortune 500. Therefore, we still need conservative, business-type images suitable for print more than electronic media.”

– Laura Owens, King & Spaulding, Atlanta GA

For what types of projects/media do you use stock imagery? (TOP 3)

Print 93%

Web/Interactive 52%

Packaging/POP 26%