



24TH ANNUAL STOCK VISUAL SURVEY

Extreme Close Up

A CLOSE UP LOOK AT THE STATE OF STOCK.

More creative professionals are using more stock imagery for more reasons in more projects with more frequency than ever before.

THAT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL FINDING OF GDUSA'S 24TH ANNUAL SURVEY.

The story of stock imagery as a creative resource is the progression from marginal to mainstream to indispensable. The central value proposition of stock imagery — choice, accessibility, convenience, and affordability — has resonated with designers for two decades. Richer content, robust websites, wider price points, tighter budgets and shorter deadlines have accelerated the trend in recent years. For good or ill, there has rarely been such a close convergence of a product and its times.

What does this mean for designers in 2010? In the big picture, stock imagery is helping creative professionals walk the tightrope between art and commerce with as much grace and dignity as contemporary circumstances allow. On a more practical level, it means record-breaking usage: nearly everyone uses stock visuals in their work; most use it dozens of times in a year; relatively new high-volume/low-cost options such as micropayment and subscription sites are prospering; and designers revel in the abundant supply and all its ramifications.

Sponsored By iStockphoto

iStockphoto offers easy, affordable inspiration with millions of vetted, royalty-free photos, illustrations, video, audio and Flash files. Using advanced search, customers download a file every second from a collection of more than seven million files for business, marketing and personal projects. The company started in 2000, pioneering the micropayment photography business model, and has become one of the most successful and profitable user-generated content sites in the world. The company recently unveiled a redesigned version of its popular stock multimedia marketplace, istockphoto.com. The site offers a clean, contemporary look and feel, and has been designed specifically around each type of audience that frequents the site, allowing faster, easier access to content. In addition, iStockphoto has unleashed a free iPhone app that uses iStock's search engine to help customers find the perfect file, as well as access, create and manage light-boxes, and email files to clients and colleagues.

CONTACT:

www.istockphoto.com and
www.istockphoto.com/iphone

Still, there is trouble in paradise. Some creatives fear a loss of creative edge as they grow more dependent on stock elements. Others are concerned with questions of exclusivity, originality and distinctiveness. Some feel overwhelmed with the sheer volume. Most pointedly, many say they are missing the ethnic and lifestyle diversity with which to reflect our increasingly multicultural society.

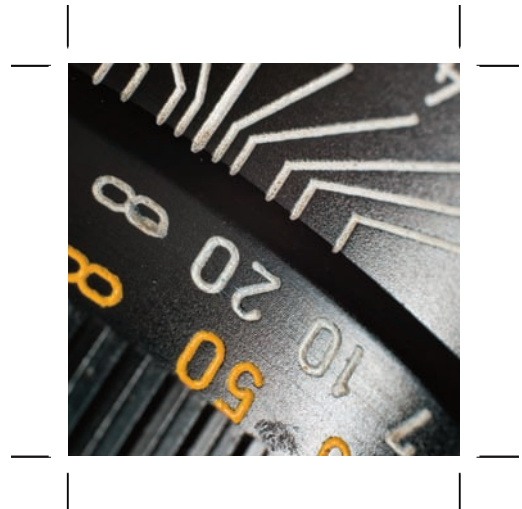
Records Fall

Questionnaires were sent by email or direct mail to 10,000 graphic design firms, advertising agencies, inhouse designers, publishers and other creative businesses. Once the 1,000-plus responses were tabulated, it was clear that stock usage had reached a new plateau.

First, 95% of creatives reported using stock photography in their work. This is the highest ever recorded in a GDUSA annual reader survey. Substantial numbers also use illustration as well as footage, Flash and animation.

Second, a record 54% of respondents use stock imagery more than 20 times during the course of a year. That is nearly triple a decade ago. Perhaps even more stunning, one-in-five designers this year reported using stock more than 100 times. Ten years ago it was one-in-thirty.

Other peaks reached in this 24th annual survey were not so much surprises as the culmination of ongoing trends. For example, 99% of designers said they search for stock online, up from 95% in 2005, and from 29% in 1995 when print catalogs ruled the roost. Another example: 94% of designers turned to Royalty Free licensing in its inexorable climb from one-fourth of that in 1995. The simplicity and pricing of the model has proven irresistible. And to round out the record-setting scenario, fully 60% of designers said they tried a subscription site in the past year. That is double the number of five years ago.



DO YOU USE STOCK IMAGES IN YOUR WORK?

PHOTOGRAPHY	95%
ILLUSTRATION	61%
MOTION	26%

HOW OFTEN IN THE PAST YEAR HAVE YOU USED STOCK?

1-5 TIMES	10%
6-10 TIMES	16%
11-20 TIMES	20%
21-49 TIMES	16%
50-99 TIMES	18%
100+	20%

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN THE DECISION?

SOLE/ PRIMARY	94%
VERY LITTLE SAY	5%
NO SAY	1%

Choice and Content

We wanted to know how designers feel about the job stock agencies are doing to provide them with choice and content. The broad consensus is that choice is abundant and content better than ever. How could it be otherwise?

TYPICAL COMMENTS FOLLOW:

“I like it a lot because there’s a good range of choices and I get what I need.”

“There are amazing choices!”

“Unbelievable range of imagery . . . it’s amazing to see how much is available.”

“I think it’s great to use the internet to view and purchase various images with a large selection and easy availability.”

“Since DLSR became affordable, it’s become a stock photo jungle out there. But it’s good for us because we get more great choices at affordable prices.”

“It’s hit or miss. Sometimes you find a gem that’s exactly what you needed, other times something so simple, that you assumed would be available, is not.”

FOR WHICH TYPES OF MEDIA DO YOU USE STOCK?

(MULTIPLE ANSWERS ACCEPTED)

PRINT 83%
INTERNET 70%
PACKAGE/POP 27%
TV/FILM/VIDEO 20%

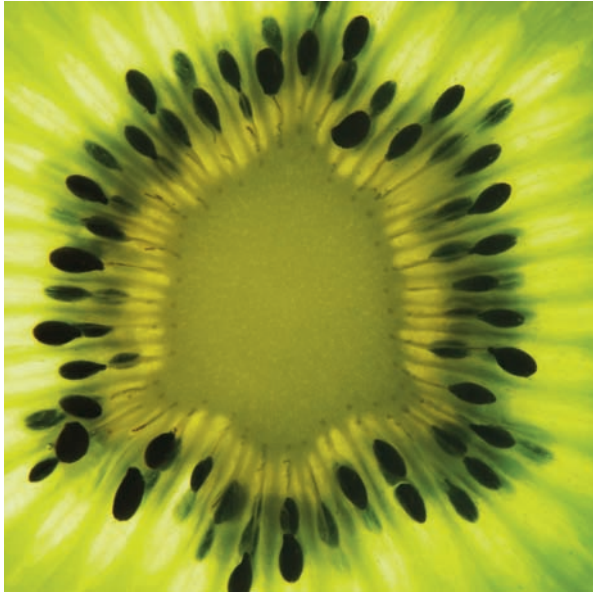


MAIN REASONS INFLUENCING USE OF A SITE?

1. AFFORDABLE PRICES
2. QUALITY OF COLLECTIONS
3. SEARCH/EASE OF FINDING
4. BREADTH OF FILES
5. FRESHNESS OF IMAGES
6. WIDE VARIETY OF TYPES
7. ADVANCED SITE FEATURES
8. EXCLUSIVE CONTENT
9. MY BOSS TOLD ME TO
10. COLLEAGUE RECOMMENDED

TOP CATEGORIES OF IMAGES USED MOST OFTEN?

1. PEOPLE
2. BUSINESS/INDUSTRY
3. LIFESTYLE
4. ABSTRACT/BACKGROUND
5. FOOD/BEVERAGE
6. MULTICULTURAL/ETHNIC
7. NATURE/ANIMALS/FARM
8. FINE ART
9. HOLIDAY/SEASONAL
10. HISTORICAL/VINTAGE
11. MEDICINE/SCIENCE
12. TRAVEL/TRANSPORT
13. ARCHITECTURE
14. HOMES AND INTERIORS
15. MUSIC/ENTERTAINMENT
16. SPORTS/GAMES
17. SPIRITUAL
18. SPACE/MILITARY



Online Impact

Much of the satisfaction arises from perceived improvements in digital search and delivery. Creatives increasingly 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.

“The growth of the internet has increased the speed at which people respond to media in general. The demand for dynamic design and quantity of it has increased also. Designers and companies don't have the time or money luxury of hiring photographers and illustrators as much as they used to, and thus rely on stock images to push work out faster with minimal sacrifice of quality.”

“It's so much better than the 'good old days' of the hard cover stock books.”

“There is great selection and range of images. I am confident that I can find what I am looking for. Key wording is very important – a website MUST get this issue right from the beginning.”

“It is easier than ever. They can break down every single little category to help you find exactly what you need.”

“It is definitely easier to search and license than in the past. I think watermarked images still need to be figured out. It is quite unprofessional to present them to a client, but I hesitate to purchase them until the client approves them.”

“I never had a problem with licensing, but searching can be so frustrating. I certainly don't have a perfect solution, but it gets better all the time.”

“Metadata has greatly improved stock imagery search capabilities.”

“The internet has made it easy to find the stock image you want, often offering files at high resolution for reasonable rates. The internet is also changing the way we use stock imagery, pushing more and more toward the internet for all things and farther from the print medium,

HOW MANY STOCK SITES DO YOU USE IN A YEAR?

ONE 21%
2-3 17%
4-5 51%
5-PLUS 11%

which means many designers are purchasing lower resolution images for use in websites and internet advertising.“

“Definitely better. Searches give better results, though I think there should be some regulation before keywords are submitted. Some photographers tag images with popular search terms that are unrelated to the image.”

“I like being able to search by more than just content, such as searching by color. Sometimes I will find ideas that I hadn’t considered in this way.”

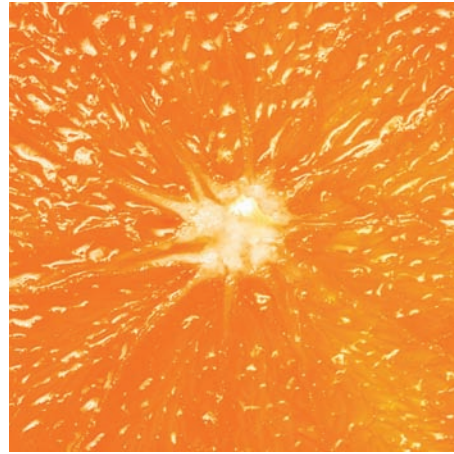
“I still use stock agency in-house research services once in a while, but being able to do my own searching is much better.”

“Yes, I would say that generally stock websites are easier to browse and purchase from. Strengths are added options and filters to choose from in the search. Weaknesses are that a filter for certain compositions are not often found.”

“Very easy to purchase and download right on the spot. Digital media makes it easier to have such a full variety online, also that we can take some of our own photos and develop our own portfolio.”

“There are too many choices, too much website glitz and interference. It’s not simple enough.”

“How I remember how I dreaded using the oversized books, then calling for a price and copying the photo for the presentation – what a pain! Today a quick download drop into layout and off to the client with the cost and all.”



Micropayment + Subscription Sites

If a key to popularity is the quick, easy and inexpensive delivery of imagery to visually hungry creatives, two relatively recent innovations achieve this. On steroids. Micropayment sites, which allow content creators and users to engage in small money transactions, are used by nearly two-thirds of designers, nearly double the results of three short years ago.

Similarly, subscription sites offer many downloads for a set fee, which have now enticed a majority of designers to give it a try. In truth, these two models are exquisitely calibrated to this moment in time. They are pushing the value proposition of stock toward its logical conclusion and, indeed, transforming the way designers use, and even think about, obtaining imagery.

HAVE YOU USED A MICROPAYMENT SITE?

YES 67%
NO 33%

HAVE YOU USED A SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE?

YES 60%
NO 40%



Micropayment + Subscription Sites

CONTINUED

A SELECTION OF REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES ABOUT THESE TWO INNOVATIVE BUSINESS MODELS FOLLOW:

“Price! Price! Price! With microstock, you can actually buy the same quality or even better images for a fraction of what I used to pay with regular Royalty Free stock years back.”

“Microstock is the perfect combination of great choices and great price; it takes advantage of all the new digital technologies to make projects look good for less.”

“Microstock is good for the graphic designer and for the starving clientele.”

“Micropayment sites are immediate, easy to use and have a sea of information and images.”

“There’s a lot more choice than ever before especially with microstock sites.”

“Choice is good but the registration is usually too elaborate, especially for a one-time purchase.”

“The advantage of microstock is that I can get great photos at an affordable price. The disadvantage is that your competitors have used some of the same great photos.”

“With a stock subscription service, I seem to have unlimited choices. I love the cheaper prices per image with subscriptions, if you buy a lot. It makes me feel free to use more images in one project without it going out of budget.”

“With a subscription, I can download whatever I need, whenever I need it (assuming they have it, that is). But, hi-res images are often not included in the subscription price. Otherwise, we’re pretty satisfied.”

“If you go through a large volume of stock images, subscription ends up being a better deal. You can also count on it as a fixed cost in the budget, as opposed to your overall stock image expense varying when you pay per image.”

“Subscription services provide on demand availability for low pricing. And you don’t have to cut a new PO every time you want an image.”

“An obvious strength is if the subscription allows unlimited downloads at a given price. For a larger company, the subscription is the obvious choice. The only weakness is that fresh, clean and modern images are often excluded from the subscription price — with the incentive to purchase a more expensive subscription.”

“Strengths: Safe, easy to use, great for large inhouse marketing departments or small companies. Weaknesses: No variety of imagery, dull imagery.”



IN THE PAST YEAR, HAVE YOU USED RF OR RM?

(MULTIPLE ANSWERS ACCEPTED)

RIGHTS MANAGED 41%
ROYALTY FREE 94%



Licensing Methods

As for methods of licensing? The age-old debate — well, decades-old, anyway — about the relative advantages of Royalty Free and Rights Managed imagery continues.

In terms of number of images used, this is no longer truly a fair fight. Royalty-free licensing in its many forms dominates the graphic design marketplace; almost all designers have turned to Royalty-Free licensing at one time or another during the past year. Moreover, two-in-three report spending more money on Royalty-Free images than on Rights-Managed ones despite the presumably more expensive price per image of the latter.

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. No wonder it is the popular choice.



Distinctiveness Matters

Thus far, the emphasis has largely been on the practical advantages of stock use: the all-you-can eat side of the business model. Indeed, economics and technology are powerful drivers. But the survey reveals another set of concerns, and another side to the creative temperament, that are harder to quantify but real nonetheless.

That is, many creatives are pushing back by evincing a stubborn respect for the character and quality of rights-managed stock and its close cousin, the specialized or niche stock collection. The flip side of this phenomenon is the recognition of a dark side to mass consumption of stock imagery: the same image can appear in a competitor's communications; oft-used images can get stale; and easy access to prepared images may blunt the creative edge.

Thus, even under the duress of the economic downturn and the plethora of less expensive options, 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 the same or more dollars on rights-managed images than on royalty free in total. Most striking to me is the exceptional ardor with which creatives defend the rights-managed model. Such intensity has meaning.

HERE ARE SEVERAL COMMENTS IN THIS SPIRIT.

"We're used to paying more for something in order for it to be exclusive, such as an original painting. When you pay for the rights, you know that no one else will use it for their marketing. If you want to establish a brand, and you must use stock, the only way to go would be rights managed media. You wouldn't want someone else advertising with the same media your purchased to be connected with your brand."

"Every once in awhile, you get a client that actually wants something hard to find and one of a kind."

"There is always a market for the high end, more exclusive, rights-managed images. The clientele is different."

"Twenty years ago, we had an inhouse photographer. That insured that we had fresh, never before seen photos. Now, if a company wants to be sure its brand is not using a photo that the competition or the consumer has seen before, it either has an onstaff photographer, or has to pay the price."

“The independent stock agencies continue to have the most unique selections.”

“Designers want originality. I think if everyone could afford it, that’s what would be used. The images don’t come across as much as ‘stock’ because of the quality of work you receive. It’s much more personal, and the images are less likely to be seen elsewhere. No one wants to see the image they picked in someone else’s work ... especially if you’re trying to brand something.”

“They are more unique. Every once in awhile someone will tell me “I saw our stock photo used by such-and-such a company on a billboard/ad/poster/whatever, and although we are a non-profit, our staff still likes the feeling of exclusivity, even if an image isn’t really exclusive.”

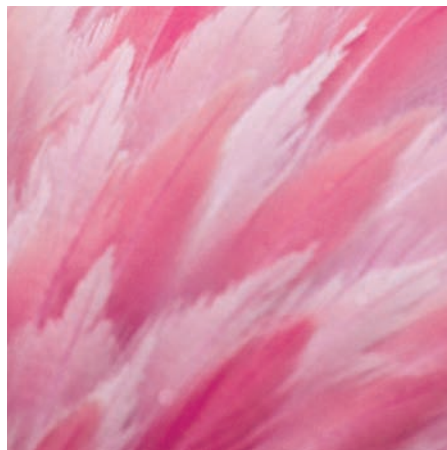
“They are more original and less overused, but you have to be careful with these images and pay attention to the rights...”

“Why license rights-managed? Good question, I haven’t bought a rights managed image in years and this month alone I downloaded over 25 images from our stock subscription service.”

“They have a lot of sharp photography. The range of sports photography is amazing. I can get Lebron James at 7000 angles for just the warm ups.”

“They still produce higher caliber images for high-end clients, or when nothing else will do.”

“You get what you pay for.”

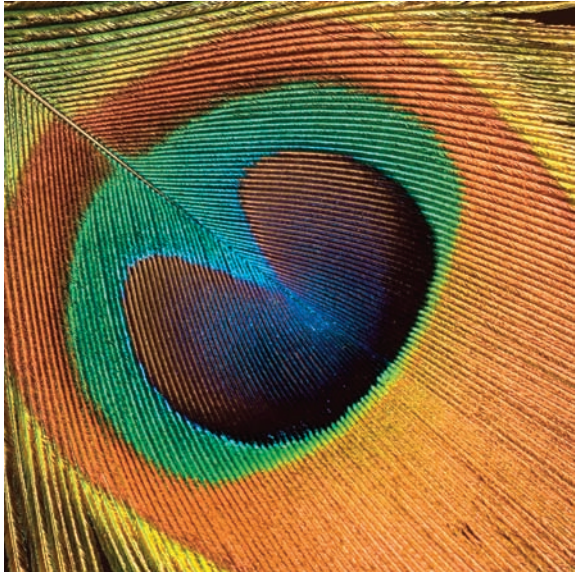


A Multicultural Moment

Diversity, or lack thereof, is another area where creatives are pushing back and expressing dissatisfaction with the marketplace. This is so, even while “multicultural” images have jumped into the top echelon of most frequently used types of images.

There is a backstory here. Blandness and staginess were historic obstacles to the adoption of stock imagery in the late 20th century. Early photos largely presented carefully scrubbed individuals, usually youthful and usually white, posed or placed in predictable middle-class or office scenes.

In many ways, the situation has changed for the better; agencies have done a praiseworthy job of encouraging more reality and edginess in their collections over the past few years. Still, our 24th annual survey results suggest that they may not be keeping up fast enough with the sweeping changes that capture multi-ethnic, multicultural America today.



A Multicultural Moment

CONTINUED

AMONG THE REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS:

“The good old USA is changing. Many more diverse groups are influencing and changing how we live, eat, work and govern ourselves in the age of Obama. Image providers need to raise their game.”

“Stock is generally good, but there are definitely times when I have looked for shots with more diversity, more age range or more realistic office settings, and haven’t found them.”

“We deal with a diverse population and it is often hard to find photos to represent the cross section, particularly Hispanic families and children.”

“If I’m looking for general imagery, I often find what I’m looking for. If I am looking for something too specific, particularly on types of people, I can rarely find it.”

“Most prominent stock sites have limited ethnic variety. It is hard to find good photos of blacks or Hispanics, or images of multiracial families and friends that aren’t cheesy. “

“Not always diverse enough. And diversity doesn’t just mean race. It also means age and gender.”

“We find it hard to find young people acting naturally, especially black, Hispanic and Asian-Americans.”

“There are many great choices and more popping up all the time. Even the multicultural/ethnic selection is catching up. We have programs for refugees and immigrants, and finding photos of specific groups still isn’t great, but it is getting better.’