

**MAKING MONEY ONLINE**

**BY SELLING STOCK PHOTOS**

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# CHAPTER 1 THE STOCK PHOTO MARKET

## Looking At Photos

Take a look around, and observe the images in your vicinity, whether in a magazine or a newspaper, on a billboard outside your office, on a book jacket, or on a blog that's open in your web browser. All of these almost certainly feature photographs. But where did the photographs come from?

## Assignment Photography

One possibility is that the photo was shot specifically for that publication. This is called assignment photography. If you have a wedding invitation or a school photo on your desk, chances are the photographer was assigned specifically to photograph the happy couple or a class of students. If so, the photographer would have had to be under the employment of a photography agency, and would have been asked to photograph specific things.

Obviously, this is a high-paying and worthwhile type of work, but it is exclusive, time-consuming, and difficult to break into. Even if you were employed by the agency and they supplied you with equipment, it is unlikely that you would have professional experience unless you owned your own expensive cameras and other top of the line tools. Additionally, your work schedule would likely be quite unbalanced. You would be in demand during holidays and local events, and you might have little work in the interim.

## Stock and Microstock Photography

Online stock photography is an alternative to the more traditional assignment photography. In microstock photography, each individual photo pays little money, but you are in control of the subjects you photograph and when you photograph them. You can take enticing and interesting photographs without owning expensive equipment. By simply thinking creatively about how an image can be made versatile and applicable for several purposes, you can attract countless diverse buyers willing to buy a single affordable photograph.

Essentially, the trick is to emulate the photographs you see published, while introducing variations that make them unique, noticeable, yet widely applicable. Your goal is to attract a large audience, instead of seeking a single employer who will compensate you in a large sum.

# CHAPTER 2 WHAT TO PHOTOGRAPH

## Choosing A Subject

You should generally photograph subjects with deliberation and purpose. Don't photograph what everyone else is photographing. The stock photo market is full of businesspeople and pets. Vacation photos do not generally sell well, but if they exist in your collection already, you may submit a few of the best, since there is no reason not to.

Of course, there are a finite number of objects in the world. You will end up photographing people, animals, places, buildings, objects, and nature. Pick interesting and unique instances of these. Take photos when things catch your eye, not because you feel like you have to. But don't photograph things so odd that they are useless. Photographing sea grass is a better choice than photographing your lawn.

In short, your subject should serve a general purpose, but should not be generic. The end result should be a photograph with a clear meaning or context, but which is dynamic enough to be used for various purposes.

## Composed Photos

Many stock photos are complex compositions of a scene. Imagine that someone wants a picture of a snowman. If they are designing a Christmas card, they may want a well-composed outdoor snow scene: blue light of the moon, trees in the background, with a well-dressed snowman front and center.

These shots are relatively quick and easy to take: since you can stumble upon a scene, they don't require set-up, although you will want to take care with the settings on the camera. You should take several different photos of the subject, as you may not get a chance to take another photo of the scene again after the snow melts. These pictures do, however, often require digital adjustment after the fact.

Remember that, no matter how unique or attractive your photo is, the deal-breaker for the buyer may be some arbitrary aspect of your composition--perhaps they want a portrait photo for their card, and don't want to crop your landscape photo, so they choose another user's photo.

## Raw Photos

An easy way to take more versatile photos is to take raw photos. Raw photos are photos that are simply an object (or a composition of objects) on a plain background. Consider

a variation on the snowman above: if your buyer is making a craft project, they may want to buy individual elements of the snowman. In this case, you might sell a photograph of a carrot and buttons, and a picture of a pipe and hat. These raw photos may be more popular than you expect: a carrot may sell both at Easter (rabbits) and at Christmas (snowmen), whereas a photo of a snowy scene will only sell in winter.

These are more time-consuming to take, since you have to set up a stage with your subject. They are easier to re-use if they do not sell, though, as you can quickly combine them into a larger composition digitally at any time thanks to the plain background.

## Staging

You will often want to stage subjects, that is, set the scene. If you're walking your dog and see an interesting stick on the beach, you may want to photograph the dog looking at the stick quizzically, to emphasize the oddness of the object. But you can stage objects alone, too. Make the stick stand up in the sand rather than lie down, and you imbue it with a personality, perhaps suggesting that unique individuals stand out.

You are limited only to your own imagination, and creating variations is a good way to increase your catalogue by making the most of a rare photo op.

## Copyrighted Subjects

Also, be aware of copyright limitations and the ways you can work around them. Be careful with landmarks, and avoid human subjects who are wearing logos or branded clothing. If you have business signs or billboards in the background, try to adjust the focus so they are blurred out, or crop or remove the signs after.

You probably won't be photographing public figures or celebrities, but if you photograph someone who looks like Hulk Hogan, don't sell it with the tag "Hulk Hogan look-alike", sell it with the tag "wrestler" and so on.

## Unwanted Photos

If some photos are not selling, "keep house" and remove them from your online gallery so they don't distract buyers from your more popular pictures. If some photos are being rejected, stop submitting them. You can use them for another purpose: perhaps publish the photo to Wikimedia or offer use of the photos to another project with a good cause, or remix the unpopular photos into a larger composition.

You should be making considerations about quantity over quality. Your images do not have to be perfect works of art to be appealing and usable, and small photos taken on

impulse with your phone may end up selling well. On the other hand, you want plenty of photos for buyers to choose from, but not photographs similar to your own, and not photographs similar to those others have taken.

# CHAPTER 3 EQUIPMENT

## Hardware

Your tablet or phone likely has a camera built in, and if your photographs are compelling enough, you may simply start with those devices. Although better quality photos at large resolutions will make you more money per image, a thoughtful enough photo can sell well enough--there's no cost to you, and if all you have is your portable device on hand, it's better to have a mediocre photo than to miss an opportunity. But you will want to invest in a digital camera eventually, so know its general operation and a little technical information.

First, find out what format of photos your camera is set to take. Raw image files are large, detailed images saved with a file extension particular to the camera manufacturer, and they cannot be practically published online. You will need to convert raw files to a smaller JPEG or similar format.

JPEG is a lossy format, which means the information is compressed and some details are lost. You can set your camera to save photos as JPEGs, and the compression level can be adjusted. For the beginner, the most practical solution is simply to set your camera to save photos in medium-quality JPEG format to begin with, but even the highest-quality JPEG is small enough to not take up too much space on a modern desktop computer.

Also, learn a little bit about exposure, that is, controlling the brightness of the photograph. The histogram is a chart that counts pixels. A dark photograph's histogram should skew to the left; a light photograph's histogram should skew to the right. For the most part, you will know whether a photograph is too dark or too light just by looking at it, but histograms can help you make the final decision between two similar shots.

Another term you should know is bit depth, which determines the brightness of each pixel in your image with a grayscale spectrum. Imagine you have a checkered tablecloth, with red and pink squares. If you shine a light on the red squares, and darken the pink squares, the tablecloth will appear to be one shade of red.

Obviously, 16-bit provides a better range of brightness and contrast. It's not something you have to worry about too much, but if the bit depth is set to 16-bit, it may be incompatible with some sites that you upload to. You will either have to set your camera's bit depth to 8-bit, or convert the images to 8-bit on your computer.

Even if you can't adjust these technical settings on your camera, you can do so after the fact in your image editing software of choice, which we will discuss below.

## Software

Here are a few pieces of photography software you may want to use:

**Adobe Photoshop** and **Lightroom** are popular, powerful, but expensive programs. They will take some time and effort to learn. Recently, Adobe has moved to a subscription model, and you will need a constant Internet connection to use some features. For the beginner, I would suggest buying a past version of these programs, which are now fairly cheap, and can handle almost all of the file formats that you will encounter.

**Paint.net** is free software, is easy to learn, and is good for touching up particular areas of photos. It is less powerful than Adobe Photoshop, but has all of the essential tools that you will need, yet few enough tools that they are all easily accessible from the main toolbar. This is must-have software for the beginner.

**The GIMP** is also free image editing software, and is comparable to Photoshop in terms of features. It is somewhat more difficult to use than Photoshop, and is not recommended for the beginner.

**IrfanView** is free software, good for bulk image editing--say, if you need to convert a batch of images to a specific format that a site requires. It is not so good for editing particular areas of an image, but can adjust entire images (brightness and contrast, etc.) quickly.

**Tagspaces** is an excellent free program for organizing photos and other files with tags. Most photo organizers, such as Google Picasa, are difficult to use, because they are dependent on structured folders and hidden files, which means that every time you move a photo to another folder, the organization scheme will break. Tagspaces keeps tags and metadata in the photo's file name, so no matter where you move the file, the organization scheme will stay in tact.

## Other Equipment

There are various cheap tools that you can use to make an improvised stage. Rolls of white paper are a good background for photographing raw photos, and make light reflect consistently on an object. Any single-color fabric can serve as a greenscreen for transparency. Tinfoil can be used to precisely reflect light. Clamps and clothespins can be used to hold objects in place, as well as gaffer's tape--a strong tape that does not leave sticky residue and can be removed easily

## CHAPTER 4 SELLING PHOTOS

In Chapter 6, we'll compare stock photo sites on which you can sell your photos, but first let's take a look at the general features that are offered and the models that the sites operate on.

### Purchase Models

The site's **royalty model** is something that is discussed often, but the importance of this factor is largely overstated. Generally the site will take a large cut of the image price each time the picture sells, leaving you with some of the leftovers (called "royalties"). This is so common that it is not really worth worrying about. Competing sites will all take more or less the same cut (leaving you with 10 to 50 percent of the royalties).

Yes, 10 to 50 percent is a fairly trivial difference. If earning five times as much per picture seems like a big difference, remember that one site may have hundreds of times the audience of another. The size of the user base that each site has will vary far more than the percentage of royalties that you will earn.

More important is the site's **subscription model**--that is, how the photos are sold to your buyers. This is important because it affects the traffic your gallery will receive. Some sites offer a "pay as you go" model, where users will buy a certain amount of credit, and then purchase each individual photo. Other sites operate on a subscription model, where users pay a monthly or yearly fee and can download as much as they like.

Obviously you will not be dealing with buyers directly, but each pricing model affects your traffic. The "pay as you go" model will cause your buyers to be more selective, but you might sell individual photos at higher rates. On the subscription model, you may be paid less for each image, but money will be no object for your buyers and they may download more of your images.

### Acceptance and Rejection

Also consider the acceptance model. If the site examines and rejects your photos, it may hurt your ego, but they are also rejecting your competitors, and your photos that are accepted are more likely to be stumbled upon because they are part of a more exclusive site. That said, web space is plentiful these days, so it is likely that the site does not reject photos.

That doesn't mean that you should publish as much as possible, it just means you have to be critical on your own. The revenue that you make on each photo should be the

judge--delete unpopular photos from your public gallery so that people don't miss the popular ones.

## Site Interface

Take a few minutes to explore the search interface. Does it only allow categorical and keyword searching, or does it have a "find similar images" function? If it's the former, you will have to put a lot more effort into properly keywording and categorizing your images, and examine what synonyms other users are tagging their photos with. Too much description is better than too little. Beware of regional terms and know the regional audience of the userbase--on a hypothetical British stock image site, you won't sell images of "elevators" when your users are expecting "lifts".

If you do sign up, deeply explore the upload interface. You may be able to upload photos by FTP or email, without ever opening your web browser.

## Social Features

Think about the social networking aspects of the site. Can users comment and rate you? If so, this means you will have to do extra "social climbing" duties--marketing and self-promotion--because your images will not stand out on their own merits.

On the other hand, if the users can tag and annotate parts of your images, they will be doing some of your inventory work for you, reducing the time you spend labelling and tagging. Users may even know things you don't, like the names of landmarks in a photo you took on vacation. And make sure there are shortlinks or human readable URLs so that your images can be easily shared.

## CHAPTER 5 LICENSING

As a stock photographer, you get to choose not just what you photograph, but also what context your photos can be used in and how they are paid for. Unless you are selling photos directly from your own site, you will generally not choose a license type directly, but you will choose a photo sharing website based on what license types it offers.

So why is this bland legal concept so important? Well, briefly, licenses are a way of targeting your audience. By setting more restrictions you can avoid competition and get paid at higher rates, and by setting looser restrictions, you can circulate your photos more widely, albeit at a lower rate.

Okay, now let's look at the possible limitations you can put on your photos by choosing a license.

### Rights-Managed vs. Royalty-Free Photos

Most likely, your stock photos will be distributed royalty-free, which is a system that most mainstream photography sites use. Royalty-free photographs are not free; your buyers still have to pay a fee. Royalty-free photographs simply have a one-time fee, and the buyer does not have to pay if they want to use it multiple times in the future. This is simply enforced: a watermark is removed when the image is purchased, allowing your buyer to use it for life.

If you are selling photos independently, you can manage the rights. You may set an expiration on use of the photo, after which the buyer will have to repay royalties. This is virtually impossible to enforce, though, so you are relying on the honesty of your buyers. If you are selling to small companies or individuals, it is unlikely that they will even read, understand, or remember your conditions. They will simply see a photo that they can use. Perhaps if you are selling to large corporations with a reputation to protect and a legal department, they will abide by the terms you set, but large corporations are not likely to be your client base.

### Retail Use

By licensing your photographs for retail use, you allow your photos to be used and circulated as widely as possible. This allows buyers to use your photos on merchandise like clothing, mugs, and souvenirs. You are not licensing them specifically for these purposes; retail use just means that buyers can use them as a major component of things that they are re-selling and profiting from.

Obviously, the main reason that people want to buy your photographs is not simply to admire them as artwork--they are buying your photographs so that they can in turn

make money on them, so the retail model (perhaps under a different name) is probably the licensing model that you will end up using if you join any major sites.

## Editorial Use

Editorial use limits use of your photographs to newsworthy and educational contexts. Your first thought may be that you should get your photos as widely circulated as possible. But if you are good at working in niches, limiting the use may be effective, as you can sell your photos on more specialized sites which may pay a little more, and will cut back on competition.

Imagine a newspaper article about school budget cutbacks. The paper could not get a photo of anyone they interviewed, and instead use a stock photo of a woman resting her head in her hands and looking sad and forlorn. It is likely that they used a specific stock photo site that specializes in photographs of professionals.

If you are one of a few hundred people who can specialize in photographing models to express the sadness of a failing school, you do not have to compete with the millions of people who can photograph empty playgrounds to evoke the same sadness.

## Public Use

Some images or works are for public use. While you will not make money by placing your own photographs in public use, you can use works that are public images in your own compositions. An old statue is intended for public use. You are free to sell a photograph of your daughter posing with an old statue of Christopher Columbus, whereas you cannot sell a picture of her posing with a cardboard Ronald McDonald prop. (At least, not without paying McDonalds for the usage rights first.)

## Free Use

You can also put your photographs under public domain or a Creative Commons license. This is useful if you have an excess of photos that you do not intend to sell. Your photos can then be redistributed or modified for free by others. Licensing photos in this way will not make you money, but is a good way to promote yourself. If you post an image on a relevant Wikipedia article, it will circulate, and you can see where potential audiences are by using a reverse image search to find where your photos have been republished. If you use Creative Commons, you can allow the image to be freely used on the condition that you are cited as the creator, introducing the possibility that people who are interested in purchasing similar images will contact you.

## Image Theft

You may have your photo stolen, no matter what site you post it on. It's a common practice--the thief simply pays for credits on major image sites and gets a bulk discount. The thief then sells the image to someone at a price more expensive than he originally paid, but at a price cheaper than a one-time shopper would have paid.

For obvious reasons, you shouldn't attempt image theft. But the derivative spirit behind it is right! You should be offering people what they want even if it already exists. Legally safer, more ethical, and cheaper is to remake an image that someone requests. You can re-stage pictures on request, or if you are artistically inclined, you could even imitate the image with computer-aided drawing. Vector images are hugely popular, and a vector image of simple objects, say, a coin, can look just as realistic as an actual photo of a coin.

## CHAPTER 6 SITES TO JOIN

Here are a few sites you might want to sign up for. It is difficult to get precise numbers for your potential cut of the royalties, so take any of the numbers below with a grain of salt and realize that they change often. In the beginning, you will likely be earning under a dollar per photo each time it's sold, so the percent of royalties you earn is less important than how much audience exposure the site will give you.

### Major Players

**Shutterstock** is one big name that you'll likely recognize, and has one of the largest user bases of all the sites. It is also non-exclusive, so you can sell your images elsewhere too. Again, expect to earn under a dollar per sale per photo. It's not picky about submissions, and as long as you're not committing blatant plagiarism, Shutterstock won't worry too much about a copyrighted image in the background.

The time you'll save posting your photos to such a large audience, with so few rejections, totally compensates Shutterstock's slightly lower payout. Shutterstock is probably the best choice for new users. However, you must make at least \$75 to withdraw your money.

**Getty Images** is a major player that you may not have heard of. They charge very high prices for photos (in the triple-digit range for high-resolution images), but you still will only be earning around 20% of the cut. However, they also sell the same images in bulk at very low rates, so you probably won't earn more per image than any other site--under a dollar per photo.

Getty offers the ability to restrict your photo to editorial use as well (see chapter 5). They do reject photos, but are not so picky and don't require technical perfection. Getty is exclusive, so if you publish an image here, you cannot sell it anywhere else.

**iStock Photo** is owned by Getty Images, and is more of a household name than Getty itself. iStock Photo sells photos cheaper than Getty Images does, but you can earn a 25-40% cut of royalties if you sell a particular image enough times. iStock Photo offers a non-exclusive option, so you can sell your photos on other sites too, but if you choose this option, your cut will not be more than 15% no matter how many times your image is sold. You'll have to earn \$100 or more to withdraw your money.

**Adobe Fotolia** and **Adobe Stock** are two other stock photo hosts. The money you will make per photo per sale is about the same as other sites, perhaps slightly higher. The site is non-exclusive, so you can sell your photos elsewhere. However, Adobe is quite picky over the technical quality of your photographs, and will notice copyrighted parts of your images, so rejection is quite common.

Adobe's most unique quality is that they integrate their image hosting site with Photoshop and Lightroom, so you can upload and download images quite conveniently from your editor. This is only available in newer Photoshop versions, though, so if you decide to buy the software, know that it's unlikely that choosing Adobe as your image host will pay off the cost of the expensive Adobe software.

## Smaller Sites

There are also other smaller or less known sites that are fairly average in terms of pay and features. These include **Shutterstock**, **Alamy**, **123rf**, **Can Stock Photo**, and **Dreamstock**. If you want a lot of control over pricing, **VisualSociety** is a rare site that allows you to keep all of what the photo sells for.

Some sites make the submission process more participative. If you don't just want to upload images passively, consider **Demand Media**, which offers freelance gigs to photographers, or **PhotoMoolah**, which hosts contests seeking photos of specific subjects and places.

Note that these sites may go defunct quite quickly, and may not even be in operation by the time this book is published. But if you're selling non-exclusively, it pays to sell photos on as many sites as possible.

## Merchandise Sites

You can merchandise your photos, either as prints (posters, cards, and such) or other merchandise like mugs and shirts. Etsy, CafePress, Redbubble, VisualSociety and DeviantArt all offer variants on this. Photoshelter and Smugmug give you a virtual storefront to customize and design, so you can have a unique front for your photos even if the photos themselves aren't your best.

Make recognizable products by cleverly working around copyrights. Internet memes are good sellers: nobody owns them, but people will recognize and search for them. You can't sell a photo of your Great Dane and claim it's Scooby Doo, but you could certainly sell the picture on a smartphone cover that reads "HELLO YES THIS IS DOG."

## Non-stock Sites

You can also publish to free photo sharing sites. These are useful for backups and organizing your personal collections, or just freeing up your hard drive. You can usually set your galleries to be private, or viewable only to people who have a link to the gallery. Flickr offers gigantic storage space for a free account (1 terabyte) and allows individual

photos up to 200 MB. Likewise, Google Photos has unlimited space for small files, and will convert large photos to a reasonable size. Photobucket offers a modest 10 gigabytes of space and allows images up to one megabyte in size.

If you simply want to share photos, these will do it faster than stock photo sites, because there is no acceptance or rejection process. If you have photos that just won't sell, that are variations on another photo that you are selling, or that are so popular you want even more people to see them, these sites are a great place to put those photos.

## Social Networking Sites

Note that often you won't be able to embed images from these sites on your personal blog or web page. You'll either have to upload the image to your web space, or link to the site. But Instagram and Imgur have virtually no space limits and are designed to serve as easily postable galleries on social networking sites. Instagram is tied to Facebook, and Imgur is tied to Reddit. Sites like these often have great interfaces and excellent mobile compatibility, because their purpose is not to get people to buy photos--it's to get visitors to browse as many photos as possible, thereby bringing in ad revenue for the site.

If you have photos that you can't sell because of copyrighted material, these sites are a place for those. You can post as many photos of licensed Elvis impersonators as you like, because you won't be making money off of them, just building your reputation and social network.

## AFTERWORD

Over the past six chapters we examined how to make money online by selling stock photos. Remember to start small--use what you have on hand and practice the craft during your spare time. When you earn enough money, you can start investing in photography equipment and begin being selective about which photographs you're selling. Until then quantity over quality is important.

Experimenting costs you nothing. It usually costs nothing to sign up for a site and to download decent image editing software. Always choose subjects for your photographs with a hypothetical audience in mind, and ask yourself your work is the sort of image that you could find amongst your competition.

Try to understand how your photographs are licensed, what rights you retain, and whether you are getting a fair deal on the sales, but don't overthink it. Be persistent and patient, sign up for and share your photographs on several sites, and you are sure to achieve a little extra income until you get your big break.