

Microstock Photos For Free

[Microstock Photos For Free](#) [1]

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Written 06 March 2009
Revised 05 April 2015



With [Chris Anderson's](#) [2] new book "Free" in the pipeline and comments I heard at UGCX like "*What about [creative commons](#) [3], it's the elephant in the room everyone is ignoring*", there is a lot of interest and perhaps concern about how low exactly the price of some stock images will go. **Will the price to the end user of 'ordinary stock images' be driven to zero** in the same way as other digital assets and services such as digital music, on-line email, holiday bookings etc.

I think that in a few years time with market saturation of 'ordinary images' as it is, then we will see a fair amount of this type of work being made available for free. I'm not talking about the style of image that sells for 100's as macrostock, but the very easy to shoot, low set-up cost that is the staple of microstock. What would happen to the market if the best 30% of the images that one of the largest agencies rejected were set free on the internet? That would perhaps, be a million quite usable stock images most of them with only very minor defects.

I'm not suggesting that people will be giving their work away and earning nothing in return, there are several ways that you can 'earn' even if the cost to the end user is zero. Many of these ways are commercially supported e.g. most Google services are free to the end user, but not all of them need to have garish commercial messages. There are also lots of ways in that the end user can pay with their time in return for a free stock image. Visitors to [Flickr](#) [4] actually help the site work successfully as they spend time favourite-ing and commenting on images, without this the site would be a disorganised mass of about 3 billion images! Many of us use flickr for free but how many of us have gone on to buy Moo cards or stickers etc? Did we feel that they were rammed down our throat by advertising? No, we probably couldn't wait to get our hands on them and more likely we thought 'yeah **they host and promote my images for free but it's quite fair that I have to pay to get something nice printed from one of their business partners**'

I think offering work for free undervalues it a lot less than offering it for a very low price. Free work suggests that this is a free sample with strings attached that can be used by 'cheap people' who

really don't want to pay for anything, with that in mind the paid for photos whatever the price point take on a cache of being a premium product.

How companies can become rich by charging nothing at all for their products...

Here's a few words from Chris Anderson editor of wired magazine [on the subject of his up-coming book "free"](#) [5].

"Everyone under 25 gets this, if you say to someone our age [older than 25] everything wants to be free they say go on, get out of here. If you say to someone under 25 everything wants to be free they say yes of course, do you have anything more interesting to say?"

If you're under 25 you understand that music wants to be free, you also intuitively understand that concerts want to be expensive".

As companies move more of their business on-line more of the facilities we previously paid for become free. While stock images have tangible costs to produce, the actual cost of serving them to end users and taking electronic payment in large volume becomes almost zero.

Many companies are moving to this type of business model, charge nothing for their key product but then sell add-ons and related services for that customer. In the stock world several websites are trailing the idea of giving bloggers valuable commercial and celebrity images free of charge in return for them hosting ad's or backlinks. [Life Magazine](#) [6] now offers all of their images for free non-commercial use if you use the code they provide (get bloggers to link to your site is the intention here). I suggest as background reading this article about the free economy in the March 2008 edition of wired [Why \\$0.00 is the future of business](#) [7] (-.pdf file)

If stock images become free... how do we make money?



Not all of them will be free and I should point out that this is just my educated idea of what is coming in the future based on what I can see already happening in the industry (agencies are building free collections, getting involved

with API's to promote their paid images on free stock sites etc.). The exact proportion of images that will be free is open to question. People already do give some of their work away for free so the downward pressure on low end prices might continue, this is **balanced by an upward trend that we see in prices of microstock licenses**.

Along with using free photos to promote your work or attract visitors to raise ad revenue, you or an agency can charge for extra services such as:

- Any kind of time saver or tracking feature on a website
- Advanced search or automatic image matching functions (again a time saver)
- Exclusivity (or perceived exclusivity, e.g. access to 'premium free images')
- Hosting or streaming of images or video, or functions like image rotation (cycling image code)
- Higher resolutions or quick editing and image processing functions built into the service
- Access to similar or related image series that are not free
- Prints and Print resolution downloads
- Extended licenses outside those in the 'free' terms for printed products
- Host them and make the free images 'ad supported' then charge for removal of the commercial messages
- Printed stock catalogues or magazines; with everything online we will start drooling over material as something very special we can actually touch and hold.
- Require that for free use an attribution is needed, but sell a paid license that does not demand attribution
- Make the images free but charge for video footage as demand for video increases; videos with matching print-res still images will be more attractive than video alone.

As a microstock contributor you will likely still get paid some income even if the end user is not being charged for some images (i.e. they are placed in the free section), it's clear that without a good income photographers cannot sustainably contribute to an agency, but some photographers can survive on a lot less than others. It's likely that the agency will be choosing which images are free and which need to have a price tag, **obviously every image can't be completely free** (can it !?). [istockphoto](#) [8] currently move photos that don't sell well to their 'dollar bin' and then remove them altogether if they fail to sell. Note there is an important psychological barrier between 'free' and 'almost free', if that barrier is dropped then will users expect all images to be free? Undoubtedly at present if the dollar bin became free there would be a lot of 'choice comments' flying around. Perhaps istock with their dollar bin have it right and Fotolia et al and their free section have it wrong, the market and microstock contributors will decide. Photographers feet and buyers mouse-clicks are powerful voting tools.

While some well known music artists are releasing their latest singles free of charge from their website, some even the full album (note premium stuff for free not the B-side), their fans also appreciate that if they want to buy a CD or even download a 'special edition' of the album with extra 'freebies' then they must pay for it. Microstock sites do the same, giving some free images to tempt people into buying an expensive subscription is clearly a business model that currently works.

I don't think as photographers we all need to race out and devise a new business strategy that makes use of the web, leave that to the agencies. Just be open minded about sites that offer such features and realise why there is a check box that allows you to 'place this image if the free section is if it rejected from the main library'.



I can see 'ordinary' small sized stock images (the type of thing that users can at present just steal from anywhere online) wanting to become free, this countered by the notion that high resolution and hard to find images want to be more expensive than microstock currently prices

them.

How does this affect me?

Obviously you can choose not to give any of your images for free. All the microstock websites that allow you to add your images into a free section (for a direct return or not) do so in an opt-in fashion. **Many photographers, perhaps rightly balk at the idea of 'free'.** Do look at it this way though, most commercial photographers who take on contracts do so for a fee, if a client needs/wants/argues for that work done for a lower cost then many suggest that the best option is to offer the photography service for free then charge full rate next time; better to do this than work for a reduced rate setting a precedent suggesting that you could work for that rate and still make a profit next time round.

I've previously made reference on microstockinsider to giving away some images to entice buyers to your website or blog if you have one, this works well if you only give away a lower resolution versions, and only give away 'stocky' generic images and not 'specialist' subjects. You can also give away your 'crap' so long as you can find a separate outlet for it so it does not detract from the standard of your normal images (i.e. don't combine free with a blog extolling the quality of your paid work), just take care not to waste time keywording images that really should just go straight to the recycle bin.

Free photo sites such as flickr or sxc.hu provide a neat way for you to get your photos in front of millions of potential customers (especially those sites aimed at designers) in return for an attribution provided that you select the correct options and make your images Creative Commons (or similar) licensed. The results of this type of promotion is very hard to measure, and takes quite some time for your attributed images to be used in enough places to produce any noticeable results.

A quick look on sxc.hu reveals many different tactics that photographers are using, people offering images of 1024x768 with a link in the description of the image to a microstock site. Others offer high resolution but under the terms they require that the images be attributed to them or their website. It is difficult to measure the effect of this type of promotion without quality analytics (which are not an option in many cases) you are not just tracking visitors but also the quality of conversions between people who were first looking for something for free and then chose to buy. Compared to people who were looking to buy a stock photo in the first place the conversion rate is significantly less. If the visitor who see your images is willing to open their Paypal account then paying \$1-\$5 for an image that they like the look of is not too much of an ask, especially if it's easily available. The key to all of this is getting your image into their field of view, if they really like it and it suits their purpose perfectly then they will buy a version of it if they have to.

A common marketing lesson is "if you can't measure your ROI then don't do it"; but a lot of web marketers spend their entire work life online creating 'authority' by posting and commenting useful information on forums, blogs and other social media; most of this is difficult to measure but clearly has a return to the parties involved.

Some pitfalls:

If you upload to multiple sites then you might find a rejected image in the free section on one and for sale on another, clearly customers will not be amused if they found out, even worse demand their money back or take their contracts elsewhere.

Some sites move images back into the main library if they achieve a certain number of downloads in a free section, a benefit, unless it makes you fall foul of the above problem.

Microstock Sites with Free Sections



Most of the microstock sites give away a free image or two each day or week, but here we are talking about those with an actual library of free work available to attract customers. A couple of the microstock sites include their own free sections where photos that don't make it into the main library for whatever reason may be accepted and made available for free. Some agencies pay an ad revenue but the details of this are currently somewhat vague.

I've read that some agencies reward you with a share of revenue from new buyers who sign-up via one of your images in the free section, others I suspect take your 'donation' of an image into account when calculating your ranking, perhaps not recording rejected images in the free section as part of your rejection percentage (hence increasing your rank). Apologies if this paragraph seems a little woolly, but in researching this topic and reading terms and conditions I found it hard to work out exactly what each agency with a free section was doing. I suspect that if you were signing up to an agency then reading thought the terms they would not really want to shout about the possibility that your images might be being given away for a net revenue of few cents or less.

[Fotolia](#) [9] allow you to place images that have not sold in 24 months in a free section earning 0.5 credits per image placed in that section, once in the free section images cannot be removed for at least 18 months. Currently it seems that end users can only access a selection of the free images each day from Fotolia.

123rf.com [10] have almost 20,000 images that contributors have made available for download in their free section.

[Dreamstime](http://Dreamstime.com) [11] and [Featurepics](http://Featurepics.com) [12] also have free sections users can browse, [Cutcaster](http://Cutcaster.com) [13] is currently building their library of free images from those images which don't make it into the main collection and users then go on to nominate for a place in the free section.

[BigStock](http://BigStock.com) [14] recently [announced that they were offering an API](#) [15] to allow website owners to serve images from a free collection at bigstock. This is basically a free section but there is no access to it from BSP itself only via 3rd party sites. The free images are sourced from a special collection that were provided by photographer with their approval. If you interested in donating to the BSP free section you can provide their support department with the image IDs you want to donate, BSPs Tim Donahue explains "The shooters get some special consideration because their names and links to their portfolios are there for the world to see".

Related Reading:

[Promoting your Stock Image Portfolio](#) [16]

[Should I set up my own photo blog?](#) [17]

[The 3 worst ways to undersell your photos](#) [18]

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[2] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Anderson_\(writer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Anderson_(writer))

[3] http://microstockinsider.com/guides/introduction-licensing-images#what_is_creative_commons

[4] <http://flickr.com>

[5] http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/2007/05/my_next_book_fr.html

[6] <http://www.life.com>

[7] <http://www.wired.com/images/press/pdf/free.pdf>

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