

Web Business for Stock Photographers

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Written 31 January 2009
Revised 09 April 2015



Photography has always been about more than just being able to take photos. Now that stock photography is mainly done online, then online is the place where a lot of photographers look to run their business and promote their work. Here I'm talking about small online businesses that can easily be run part-time by one person perhaps with a little outside help when needed.

Websites and On-line Business run by [microstock](#) [2] photographers generally fall into 4 categories:

1. Portfolios

I've often thought this type of 'glorified gallery' website was only good for the professional who is looking for commissioned work; I'm still sceptical about how much use it is to a microstock photographer other than as a business card, and a convenient way to link to images you have for sale at an agency. You can expand on a simple portfolio site by making direct sales of your work or including [search code from a microstock site](#) [3] to drive your microstock sales.

Selling images is probably the most familiar "web application" for photographers (see below). From my experience, and that which I have heard from other photographers, having a way to "buy this

now" is not likely to make you a fortune; importantly however it will, if done correctly make you look more professional and also set a price point for your work. I think with the competition involved at present from individuals and agencies, then it's better to concentrate on one of the other options below unless you work in a niche market. If your work is very specialised then there are some paid services like [smugmug](#) [4] which will allow you to sell your work direct without too much effort in setting up your own photography sales website.

Beginners Tip: Start by creating some lightboxes (istockphoto) of your own images, they are simple to do and make a great landing page where you can direct visitors who have viewed images on your own website. I wrote another article [about creating a bio / photo portfolio](#) [5]. In this I discuss several different ways of creating a simple online space starting with just a profile page on a microstock agency.

2. Blogs

[I've written about photographer blogs before](#) [6], It's important to research before you dive in. To be brutal, if you are in this for the money, think first about who you want to attract to your blog. Don't write about photography tips if you want to attract buyers from a high-end design group to download your stock. There is nothing wrong with writing about photography but understand your readers will be other photographers and there is a lot of competition in this area; every other photographer is also knowledgeable and passionate about the subject.

If you also have a background in a design related subject then that would be better suited at stock buyers if that is your aim. If you have bought and used stock images before, then consider writing about choosing stock, marketing with stock photography etc. At the end of the day you need to be interested in what you are writing or you will become bored / burned out when creating new posts, money can only help motivate so much, and money from writing about dry subjects like buying photos is hard won.

3. Content Sites

Most websites sites are "content sites", this group includes things like reviews, guides and tips, photo galleries, education and news etc. As a photographer you already have lots of great content in the form of your own images, set-up correctly these can be used to attract lots of visitors. If you offer images for free (perhaps only for use as desktop wallpapers), remember that these will attract mostly low quality visitors, so expect to work hard to convert those visitors into an income through advertising or affiliate linking.

At first focus on the content and making the site popular, but keep in mind that you will also need to be able to earn from it - **Google ads are not a way to make significant income, they are a way to lose visitors from a popular site for a few cents if you can't find a better way to monetize it**, that said they are better than nothing when used in the right place. Links to stock photo referral schemes can earn a lot more if your visitors are the kind of people who are looking for images to use in a design. Stock photos are not the only use you can make of your work, think about desktop and phone wallpapers, template layouts, free icons, avatars; in fact anything that people want makes good link fodder which will help your site attract traffic. Traffic is the lifeblood of any content site. [Overview of content management software for photography related websites](#) [7]

4. Web Applications

Pretty expert knowledge required to implement this type of thing, but the barrier for entry is

dropping all the time. Reviews and critiques or photo ratings (something which perhaps can be done on a blog) are a typical starting point. Other microstock related examples are keyword suggestion tools, photo sharing, forums, message boards, link directory, online image editing and graphics tools, facebook / iphone applications or profile sites.

You are sure to hear people talking about 'going viral', but stop dreaming now; just like content sites you have to create something that people need or want to link to because they like it, they think it's fun or they find it useful. There are now off-the-shelf-content management systems that can create all quite useful on-line apps with very little programming knowledge needed. Almost all web applications that are set up by individuals will fail to make a huge impact on the market, but with the correct knowledge and a good idea it's not that difficult to create something whose success can be measured in a modest amount of incoming links or new visitors to your site. Again monetizing from your users is something that needs to be carefully planned, banner ads may pay for hosting fees but you will want to earn more than that to offset the set-up expenses in time and development work to turn a profit.

Key Web Business Tips

Long Term - All good small on-line businesses are sustainable, i.e. they cost relatively little to run. This is important as you need to be in them for the long run, even if they are only 'breaking even'. It's true that some sites burst out of nowhere with a large advertising budget but most small sites grow traffic from Google over the space of a couple of years. Like microstock you won't get rich quickly but you can grow another income stream to help you along.

Network - create links between your own webspaces, e.g. connect your flickr account to your portfolio site and then link that to your images at a microstock agency. You don't want to create a 'walled garden' so link to other useful stuff online not just your own. Offer other webmasters content or become a guest blogger or writer.

Own the Domain - don't settle for something like "msmith.photoxhostlive.com", that's fine for a start, but one day you will part your ways with that company and traffic online is something that you work at for the long run. It can trickle in for years after you have worked to get your site linked into other websites. It's fine to use a service that provides you with a URL so long as you promote your own URL anywhere you 'advertise' and that URL is also the one that Google indexes. At a minimum visitors can be redirected, better still if you are allowed configure DNS settings so that to visitors and search engines it looks like your content is accessed directly by the URL and not forwarded.

Clarity - be clear about what you are doing and why. If you create a portfolio site and are looking for commissions then say so, tell visitors that what you do in several different ways e.g. "Gallery of my commissioned work" an about page that lists what you do, and contact form titled "get me a quote" or rate card etc. The "about page" on a site is perhaps one of the most important so make it easy to find from every other page and include your contact details so that people can easily get in touch.

Protect your IP - Getting your work seen by people is important but you also need to keep tight control over your intellectual property. Clearly mark it as copyright or creative commons (if it's one of your 'link to me' samples). Also make your contact details easy to find so that if someone wants to license it they can do it easily. [Steps to reduce online image theft](#) [8].

Only the Best - Clearly if you want people to find any of your work then that work must be online somewhere, but there are two schools of thought. Either upload everything worth selling and let people find it, or just upload some samples of your best and manually sell the rest once you have opened a dialogue. For a portfolio site I'd recommend just the very best work, perhaps as few as 12 images. If you are setting up your own 'download site' (I use that term loosely) then the more variety

the better.

Targeting: I see so many sites which seem to have an identity complex, not really knowing what they do. It's perhaps understandable if it's your first and only website, and you are just getting onto the microstock ladder. If you set-up a professional looking portfolio and try to mix that up with your sideline in event photos and a blog about your microstock earnings then it's time to spread out into different websites and target each market individually. Event clients need never know about your microstock work or the photography teaching trip you went on last weekend.

CRM [9]: It depends on your audience but your strategy for dealing with repeat customers should be built into your business plan from day one. It can range from doing nothing (a typical microstock approach) sending out email newsletters, right up to making the most of web 2.0 technologies like [RSS \[10\]](#) feeds to keep your clients updated about your images or services.

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