

What kind of Images sell best?

[What kind of Images sell best?](#) [1]

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The main thing to remember is that [microstock](#) [2] is stock photography, it's not a place for the 'art of photography'. While artistic images might be accepted and sell in limited quantity these are probably not the best way to go if you want to make some good earnings. Likewise the photos that a lot of people praise either by word of mouth or in comments on a site like flickr do not necessarily make good microstock pictures; these often look pretty or have a wow factor, but usually lack a meaning or concept, **this is a common mistake for most beginning photographers** dipping their toe into the stock industry.

From my experience and that of a few other industry commentators I have read, microstock is a place for 'clean and simple' 'middle of the road' photos. One tip I would give is to make sure that your images look good as thumbnails, that might sound like an odd thing to say, but there are some photos are quite striking when viewed full size but due to their lighting, colour palette or composition lose their impact when viewed at small sizes. Thumbnail readability is very important for getting high volume sales, your images need to stand out on the search page as 'the perfect image'.

Three key features of all stock photos

A good stock photo can be broken down into three main components, all of which must be correct to make a high selling image.

1) Choice of Subject, be it an appropriate model or props, an object sat in a context that creates some kind of concept, something quite abstract that only really gains a meaning when used in a matching context.

2) Execution, how well you took the photo, or how you used your photographic skills to express a mood or concept. Atmospheric lighting, high or low key, choice of focal point to add emphasis.

3) Keywording and Description, your choice further emphasizes the meaning of your photo and allows it to be found by buyers. (e.g. a street sign with diverging arrows, represents choice or decision, but only gains that meaning when paired with a title).

I'm going to look at choice of subject below as that is what most people feel to be the most important part, in essence the 'idea' you have before you start work; but without proper execution and good keywording a photo of a well-chosen subject won't sell.

Portrait Photography



Images of people sell well, several of the celebrity microstock photographers have made their portfolios predominantly from people pictures. (as I write this I must point out that my portfolio contains only one portrait style image). People images need to convey an emotion, concept or lifestyle. Someone talking on a phone with a big smile : someone getting frustrated using a computer : children looking bored doing their homework. Faces need not necessarily be shown, some concepts are better defined without the distractions of a face e.g. a walk in the park holding hands where the subjects are walking away from the camera. A model release is needed for all people photos, plus I would recommend getting a release even if just a hand or other body part can be seen. Some agencies treat body parts as potentially recognisable even if they do not have something recognisable like a tattoo on them, so err on the side of caution and try to get a release if you have the opportunity.

[Do people stock photos sell so more than anything else?](#) [3]

Tabletop Photography



This is the staple of the stock photographer. You can save such photo sessions for the proverbial rainy day or during unexpected downtime. Food sells especially well, as do computers and technology concepts. Many of these subjects are however very well covered. One trick here is to 'accessorise' the photos to create something with more of a concept. Instead of 'computer keyboard' think 'working from home' or 'overworked in a busy office' and instead of 'bowl of salad' think 'fresh salad eaten out on the terrace'. Constant research (be looking out for photos wherever you go) will help, for example immerse yourself in food magazines and illustrated cookbooks that contain photos in a style you like. People make their entire career out of taking images of specialist subjects so there is a very high standard of work currently available. Table top is probably the easiest place for the beginner to start out taking photos specifically for their stock collection, although it depends on your connections, you might also consider mastering portrait photography and shooting models if you already have some willing volunteers to practice on.

Take care when choosing subjects to photo, make sure that nothing contains any logos or branding, or is a well-recognised design, more on this in [copyrighted and trademarked photography subjects](#) [4]

Tips and ideas for [microstock macro photography](#) [5],

Landscapes



If they are to be accepted and sell at all then they really need to say something, even if it's just 'wilderness' or 'farm land'. Landscapes won't work if the subject is too generalised like some fields with a mountain in the distance, even worse a sunset. Almost always the landscape will need some people in it to give it scale and allow the viewer to imagine themselves there. There are lots of photographers who specialise in fine art landscapes, taking photos in just the right light, some of these sell, but it's better if the photo is taken in a "travel photography" style. With just a little extra planning when setting up such landscape photo trips can be used to create some stock images.

Travel



This is a popular one with the beginning microstock contributor, everyone takes holiday snaps. To sell well the photo must not just depict a location but capture some essence of what it's like to be there. 'Lovers in Paris', 'Snorkelling on the Barrier Reef', 'Snowboarding in the Alps'. Simple travel photos are usually more than just landscapes, landmarks and cityscapes. There are good sales to be had from simple shots of an iconic landmark subject despite the amount that these have already been captured, this is often exactly the 'cliché' that some buyers have in mind; that said there are lots of buyers looking for a different aspect on a well-known subject.

Remember that there are landmarks local to you, you don't have to travel to exotic locations, [document what you see near where you live](#) [6].

More tips for the hobbyist/opportunistic [microstock traveller](#) [7]

Fine Art Photography

It depends very much on the subject, be thinking 'movement in blurred car headlights' than a 'stormy seascape that looks like Mark Rothko painting'. There are surprising sellers in this area. As well as things like fractals and CG backgrounds, you can sell textures like the ubiquitous 'brick wall' and 'rounded pebbles'; these are easy to take and can sell reasonably well **if not already covered by someone else**. Outdoor details like breaking waves on a beach can also create useful 'backgrounds' for a designer to use. Microstock is ideal for buyers in the market for a cheap background pattern, texture or shapes to use as design elements.

Try to stay away from the photography night school clichés of sunsets and abstract blurred fairy lights. While these are fun to take and somewhat sickening to see on-line with a lot of earned downloads, someone invariably got there first with a lot of these subjects. They are however a great learning experience in technical photography, composition and selecting the best images to sell for the beginning stock photographer. Such subjects should be shot if you 'happen across them', keywords and descriptions can be used to differentiate your photos especially with abstract topics like 'future'. Clearly that's not a way to make a business but for the microstock hobbyist these subjects are fine, and perhaps more importantly, enjoyable!

While you can imagine using your photo of some storm clouds for the masthead of some design, look at it from a different perspective. There is nothing to stop a designer, for the same price, downloading a great looking location shot that includes a stormy sky and cutting and pasting from that. From the agencies point of view why clog up the server with yet another photo of 'just a stormy sky' when they have already accepted one that also depicts a stormy landscape location people might want to use in its own right?

Try searching for 'storm clouds' at one of the big agencies, you will see you have some competition to deal with!

Illustration (Vectors)

If you can draw then consider creating a few illustrations to sell as stock. This is not a subject I can impart a great deal of knowledge on as I have little experience, apart from a few surprise sales from a non-vector illustration I put together in Photoshop in five minutes. The only thing I can say is that there is the potential for illustrations to sell very well due to being fresh, stylish and usable where photos are not suitable; but also **look very dated a few years down the line**. Stock sites are currently full of XP style icon sets and web elements, a couple of years back it was all OSX style icons with reflections. True that ageing is the same for some types of photos where hair styles or technology goes out of date, but every time I think of illustrations at the moment with those floral leaf patterns I then imagine how that will look ten years down the line, will I have the same feeling about those as the now dated looking airbrush or pastel business characters in triangular suits that were everywhere less than ten years ago?



Everywhere 20 years ago - Nowhere Now.

Icons and sets of web navigation buttons also seem to have high download rates, but their creation is obviously quite time consuming compared to a photo, of course vector illustrations command a higher payout when downloaded as the original vector file.

3D Rendered Images

Are these a stock image fad that will go out of fashion? If you have the skills with 3D software then do it, no problems with being rejected for [noise](#) [8] or compression artefacts. I have noticed that I'm seeing a few less silver or gold 3D stick figures with big heads gracing shareholder reports and corporate newsletters, so the boat might have already sailed? There are plenty of microstock portfolios full of thousands of rendered images like this so it's clearly something worth investigating if you are talented in 3D modelling.

Help from the Agencies

Here are a few links to pages where microstock agencies have listed images in demand or images that sell well, almost all the agencies have some photographer guides like this listed somewhere on their site:

[Shutterstock Top 100 \(requires you to be logged into contributor account\)](#) [9]

Take a look at the Shutterstock top images, you'll see that yes, flowers are there, despite being told 'no more flowers please' they still sell the best, because of the popularity of them as a photography subject the quality of the photos need to be nothing less than stunning.

Also keep an eye on Shutterstock's top search's of the last month and week to keep up with current

trends, at time of writing I noticed a lot of Spanish keywords are cropping up in the top searches. I guess these are translated from the English ones and you can go to Shutterstock.es to see what they show up - it might be an anomaly but I think more likely it's an indication that a serious number of downloads are being made from shutterstocks foreign language sites.

[iStockphoto Training Manual: Needed Files](#) [10]

Crestock: [Top 10 best Sellers](#) [11], and their [10 worst submissions](#) [12] (bizarre!)

[Make what you will of these stats from panthermedia](#) [13] (and explain them to me if you know what they mean!)

Summary

Beginners to microstock are the ones who take and upload the simple photos that make other photographers say "wow, that sky with fluffy clouds has been downloaded 3800 times!"; and while that is a way to make money at microstock it is very hit and miss; you can get lucky, very lucky, but for a more consistent income you need to concentrate on at least some amount of **review what is selling, has sold, or is requested and then fill the demand.**

There seems to be no penalty for being 'obvious' with subjects and concepts in micro. It looks to me that while the big agencies seem to be also accepting more 'grungy and edgy' images (perhaps a sign of saturation in some subjects) it appears that the 'inoffensive' simple photos are the ones that sell in volume - given that microstock is about quick and easy solutions to image needs this makes sense, 'non-professional buyers' will opt for a safe choice when buying.

Finally a link to our post about [picniche](#) [14], a keyword evaluation tool which compares search popularity with the number of images online; this helps to evaluate potential sales of a concept shoot you might be considering.

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[Microstock style compared with traditional stock photography](#) [15]

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