

Why not just sell the images yourself ?

[Why not just sell the images yourself ?](#) [1]

By Steve Gibson
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It's an attractive idea to sell images direct to customers, but can you attract enough customers? and at [microstock](#) [2] prices is it worthwhile?

It's an attractive idea to be able to sell your own images direct to the buyer, cutting out the middle-man and their commission, even better if you can automate the whole process then you have a 'license to print money' don't you? I heard the following comment regarding start-up stock photo websites at a recent conference "**it takes 20,000 images to start a site and get traction**"... that's quite a tall order for most individual photographers.

If you want to sell your own photos then aside from doing it manually (i.e. taking payment and email the file) there are lots of e-commerce solutions available, I guarantee you will spend days reviewing and playing with shopping cart software, galleries and [photo CMS software](#) [3], reviewing sites that offer services to professional photographers all ending up having nothing to show for it but experience. You can set up your own user contributed microstock site for around \$400 US using off-the-shelf software, but there are plenty of reasons why it's a bad idea to just dive in.

Every microstocker is aware that there are agencies that don't earn them anything 'because there are no buyers' yet a lot of them feel that direct selling and starting their own site is the way to go, there are some easy solutions out there - but look before you leap, buyers don't just appear out of thin air.

Business Analysis

I do agree that as a photographer you should diversify and investigate selling directly, you can set a price premium, or sell some specialist photos that perhaps would not be accepted as microstock. I'm not telling you not to do this, but do sit down and carefully work it out, is this the best avenue to go down?

1. How long is it going to take me to set-up or upload all the images to 'my site'?
2. Who will buy from my site?
3. How will customers find my site, how and where will I advertise?
4. Will it be secure, [can people steal my images](#) [4] from it?
5. How much maintenance will it need? will I have to write software to make it all work together?
6. Will it look professional?
7. What will be my price range, 'microstock \$1-3', 'microstock/cheapstock \$5-15' '[midstock](#) [5] \$35' or 'full price \$200'?

If you can create yourself well informed business plan that answers these questions then go right

ahead. If you have already mastered your own promotional skills and meet frequent contacts who are just waiting to buy and are happy to pay a little more than microstock prices then good - go do it. I admit for me it's nice to sit back and look at my own website selling images (not so nice to look at the earnings), Do you really have the time and knowledge? and will you honestly get the customers on to the website and persuade them to buy? You will be moving from the world of photography into the cut-throat world of e-commerce, [SEO](#) [6], CRM, payment gateways, editing PHP, CSS, XHTML or some other code. ready for it?

"Setting up an E-Commerce website yourself would try the patience of a Saint"

One of the simpler options you might want to look at is [smugmug](#) [7], [photoshelter](#) [8] or a similar photographer orientated gallery and shopping cart service, if you pick a site like that you can combine your portfolio, contact details site with a solution for selling stock or managing event photography.



Case Study - What do

you do?

For me the only real way to find out was to give it a go, and the only thing that made that feasible was my technical skills. This opens a bigger conversation that for success in microstock, you don't have to be 'multi talented' but you definitely need to be able to take good pictures AND have either good business skills (delegation, analysis, time management) and/or good technical skills and entrepreneurship (site development, marketing, 'ideas generation' web technology). You can specialise in just one and have a working knowledge of a few others so long as you know when the time is right to outsource or get some advice. Stock photographers tend to be individual operations, and one of the attractive things about microstock is that they deal with all the customers, marketing, technology etc. leaving you to do little but shoot, sort, keyword and upload. **Despite what you might feel as a microstock photographer you have the easier part of the job.**

For me setting up my own sales site was done to scratch an inch, I was receiving messages from people wanting to buy my images perhaps five times a month on average, some of these images were not on microstock sites, and dealing with each individual request for the pricing that microstock offers was just not practical. It didn't work to offer them "I'll send you a Paypal request then email the photo", most of them wanted the photo 'now' not by return of e-mail.

So for my skill-set setting up my own 'photo e-commerce' was relatively easy - all the details are above, and in the post I wrote about [CMS software](#) [3]. I used gallery2 and made various modifications to turn it into something that worked like a pro stock photo site, marketing tweaks and improvements for [photography site SEO](#) [9]. (contact me if you want to know the URL of the website in question and my reasons for not being fully open about the site). After quite a lot of work I ended up with a few sales a month, lots of traffic, but not many buyers, I was hoping for more! I'd imagine that this process would be well outside that of many photographers, but given that **photography tends to attract not just artists but also those with a 'technical / scientific bent'** (even back in the days of film) I'm sure someone reading this has the knowledge (and determination!) to give it a go or do something similar.

If I could go back knowing what I know now would I repeat the exercise? Yes I would. Why? Despite the fact that the amount of **direct sales on the site barely covers the annual hosting fees** there are ways to turn visitors looking for photos into money using [microstock referral programs](#) [10] and search integration. Before you curl your toes up at 'affiliate marketing' this simply entails satisfying buyers who can't find an image on your site with one from another agency, and taking a cut in the process. With only about 4000 of my images on offer it's unlikely that I will have the subject that a buyer wants, even if they have seen my image somewhere and clicked one my links to "license this photo" having such a small collection invariably means that they don't feel that they have seen a wide selection and chosen the 'best image'. After implementing the search integration (which basically involves showing some microstock results when zero results are found by the site search system) sales did drop off by about 50 percent but the referral incomes more than made up for this even with the potential loss of repeat custom from those 'lost customers'.

This essentially boils down to technology rather than photography or marketing, something you can't do if you use a 3rd party to sell your images for you (smugmug, snapixel et al). I hope to bring a detailed case study / white paper on this in the future.

The (Few) Benefits of Selling Direct

If I haven't already put you off the idea of selling stock at micro prices direct to customers there is one more thing to analyse: CRM - [customer relationship management](#) [11]. Personally I think that for the time spent and the tiny margins on microstock sales it's not feasible, but there are several benefits from one-on-one negotiation with buyers:

- Buyers list, once they have made one purchase from you they are more willing to do it again,

building a close relationship you can learn exactly the style of image they like, opening the potential to shoot to fulfil their needs.

- Regular sales, find the right buyers with regular needs, in a niche that matches yours e.g. a magazine or website with regular articles and you can provide them with a regular stream of images they might be interested in.
- Hands on, some customers like to have someone to offer them an image suitable for their needs rather than searching at an agency. You can charge a premium for such 'search services'. Again this is more the type of thing what requires macro [RF](#) [12] / RM pricing to make cost effective unless you employ a lot technology to help you.

Conclusion

If you want to make a go of microstock - then 'focus' on it. (sorry for that photographic pun), but on the other hand "He who dares, wins". A quick look at the top microstock photographers reveals that each one operates in a different way, some work alone, some work exclusively to one agency, some have a team of people to edit and upload leaving them just to shoot - there so many recipes for success, and none of them are easy.

If you are chomping at the bit to try and bring in some extra image sales then also have a quick read of [promoting your portfolio](#) [13] and look into marketing your images using one of the many [microstock agency referral schemes](#) [10].

Related Posts

[CMS software, photography and microstock sites](#) [3]

[Online business for photographers](#) [14]

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