

What buyers say they want and what they buy

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Don't be fooled. The images that a stock agency shows all over the front page are the kinds of images that buyers like to think that the projects they work on are cool enough to use. When those buyers actually go buying, what they want to see in the search results and what they download are completely different.

Remembering back in around 2008 there was a jarring difference between the front pages of iStockphoto and Fotolia.

Fotolia were at the time one of the fastest growing agencies snapping at heels of iStock. A visit to Fotolia and you were greeted with very typical [microstock](#) [2] images of the time, fields of poppies, people standing in the sunshine with their arms outstretched, colored pencils in a desk container, goldfish jumping... A visit to istock and... WTF? a guy sat on a leather studded chair with mascara running down his face against a flock wall paper backdrop! (and don't forget the completely blocked-in vignette corners what would never get past inspection if you uploaded it) who wants that?

At the time I thought this was a failing of istock, somehow trying to target customers what were not matched to the photos they had on their site (hindsight sees them losing ground from that point forward but I don't think the images on the front page were the reason, least not the only reason). What we were seeing here is istock appealing to a class of stock image user who is looking for something a little more creative than available on mainstream sites. istock were differentiating themselves. istocks search results still had plenty of apples on white backgrounds just like all the other microstock agencies, but their home page screamed 'were really cool'. Fotolias whispered 'hmmmm thats nice dear'

Listening to what buyers say they want

The Photoshelter Collection (now closed - their paid sales platform lives on) is almost infamous in the stock industry for asking buyers what they wanted. Photoshelter then set about building a collection of it and subsequently finding that nobody bought it. What buyers actually wanted to buy was different to what they said they wanted in their surveys.

Nobody in the creative industry could ever been seen in public to say that they want sensible, plain, safe images, "perhaps just a little creative on the edges but still safe"; the nearest they come is the euphemistic phrase "usable imagery".

Go "Creativity" Bracketing

So if you are yearning to get into the premium collections, shoot the cool stuff, but also shoot the 'safe' stuff.

Given the opportunity make at least part of the shoot something conventional that could be used anywhere... something your mother would think is a good photo (the "obvious photo"); also shoot with a little more creative thought but still keeping things 'usable' (odd angles, dirty backgrounds, deer in the headlights lighting there are no rules here). Then, because you have got all the spare time in the world try for the really eye catching stuff, it will take a while but eventually it will open your mind to more creative thoughts.

These are the photos that people like but don't buy, BUT these are the photos the agencies like see in a portfolio: they use these images to sell designers a similar but not quite so avant-garde photo that their client will accept.

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