

What is microstock photography?

[What is microstock photography?](#) [1]

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micro (*payment*) {*small, tiny*
i.e. low cost} + **stock** {*off the shelf, i.e. ready to use images and graphics*} (*photography*)

Microstock is selling stock photos for a low price (just a dollar - a few dollars), the business plan that if the images are cheaper then more people will buy, this is in contrast to the traditional stock image market which was a very expensive place to go shopping.

"The microstock concept allows amateurs, professional photographers and designers to upload their work and sell it to a large audience of buyers. Previously the stock photo market was limited to the professional photographer with a large portfolio of images, It was very difficult for the beginner, or part-time photographer to break into."

[Micro payment stock](#) [2] photography has opened up a whole new buyers market of non/semi professional 'designers' who are building websites, blogs, local newsletters and charity publications etc, who can now afford to purchase low cost images to illustrate their work. Full priced stock images were and still are, out of their price range.

There is still a market for full priced stock, for those who want the exclusivity of knowing that an image is only licensed to them or has a higher price attached and hence is used less frequently. One of the only downsides of microstock is that the images can become 'common' with typical stories of companies having posters printed for a trade convention only to arrive and find that three other companies have used exactly the same image on their posters and advertising materials... and it's too late to change!

Some would say that microstock has undervalued professional photographers, but they all said that 10-15 years ago when 'royalty free' images took off and 'ruined' photographers who were licensing their own portfolios and inflated prices.

There is an argument that microstock sites (photobanks / agencies if you like) source these 'cheap images' from an army of 'citizen photographers', unprofessional/non photographers who do not know the value of their work. While this in part might be true in that some sites are cashing in on photographers who currently have no other means of selling their images, the whole industry has opened the door to a new career in microstock photography for many people. It has allowed countless professionals and amateurs to earn money from images that they would otherwise earn nothing but enjoyment from. The high standard of the pictures available on microstock sites speaks for itself.

🐼 Ups and Downs of Microstock



What microstock has given

- Enables amateurs to sell their work. Before microstock entry into the stock industry was difficult.
- A great way for amateur photographers to learn more about stock photography and improve their skills
- A route for professional portrait, event or commercial photographers to enter the market part-time.
- Opening of a new market to buyers who could not previously afford full priced stock photos.

What it's taken away:

- The cache of being a stock photographer, it seems everyone these days is holding a [DSLR](#) [3].
- Reduction in income of those photographers whose work turns out to be only as good as

microstock.

- The perception that ALL stock photography has a high value, premium work now must be very impressive to stand up to competition from microstock.

Microstock has not killed or ravaged the stock photography industry, it is simply the manifestation of what happens when internet technology enables a different business structure to collide with one establish over many years. Comparisons can be drawn between bloggers and paid news journalists, indeed magazine and newspaper sales are dropping, but journalists and newspapers still have an important role to play in forming a trusted source. Stock photos houses can still create a brand and provide premium [RF](#) [4] and RM images but they now face strong competition from microstock - their products need to justify their prices. Did ebay put an end to the Garage Sale?

A company spending a few hundred dollars (in total) on an advertising campaign is likely to source images from microstock, they would not be able to budget an image from a premium source. A company spending several thousand on an advertising campaign could choose a microstock image, but **buyers and designers are not so naive as to always take the cheapest option**, microstock images lack exclusivity and often the 'stand-alone' quality needed in a high end application. Such premium business will inevitably end up on the doorstep of an experienced professional or traditional '[macrostock](#) [5]' stock agency.

How has microstock affected the stock industry?



The change in the technology landscape has thrown the stock industry into a state of flux. But it's not just stock photography that has been affected, you can easily draw a parallel with the music industry where independent and signed artists are offering free downloads as samples, earning their money through merchandise, concerts etc. and taking reduced royalties from selling records.

With all this change comes great opportunity but those unwilling or unable to change will inevitably suffer; some are obviously quite vocal about it. Just as the music industry has changed after some delaying (sites like itunes offer dollar downloads of music while ardent fans and the technophobic can still purchase CDs) the stock photography industry has changed and will continue to change over the coming years.

A few years back microstock was greeted with first denial, then anger, depression etc. but it's now

generally accepted by all as an important part of the stock photography arena. While the industry has still not realigned itself with the current changes taking place both of the industry leaders ([Getty](#) [6] and [Corbis](#) [7]) have their own microstock interests and are watching closely the results. Getty have owned [istockphoto](#) [8] from a safe distance for several years and Corbis have recently taken a bold step in introducing a 'marketplace' which is essentially microstock into one of their premier brands at [veer.com](#).

Further Reading

Beginners might want to start by reading [thinking about selling microstock](#) [9], some of our [beginners guides](#) [10], and take a look at our [fast start guide](#) [11] "**Microstock Success in 15 Hours**"

You can view a list of our [recommended microstock sites](#) [12] or view a [directory of all microstock sites](#) [13] we have registered.

The latest industry news stories can be found on the [home page](#) [14]

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