

Stock Imagery: Boon or Bane?

by Lauren Smith

The advent of stock imagery, whether it be photography, illustration or video, has fundamentally changed the world of communications design. The use of stock imagery has become so popular that it has spawned a \$2.3 billion industry and provides the convenience of millions of images just a mouse click away. But the convenience afforded by stock imagery comes with a price. The stock revolution has changed visual communications for both good and bad. Let's take a moment to examine the advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

For many the principal advantage to using stock imagery is cost. Licensing images for limited use can be dramatically less expensive than commissioned work. Stock images can be obtained for as little as \$30 apiece. When marketing communications and advertising budgets are stretched this is no small consideration. Also, using stock imagery is low risk. What you see is what you get. It's much easier to get an existing image approved and you can obtain that approval before spending a single dollar. Stock provides a certain flexibility. Need a photo of a snow scene in July? Impossible to shoot a custom photo but you can view a selection of images online in minutes. Finally, stock imagery is immediate. Commissioning custom work requires time. Stock is a real advantage when facing a tight deadline.

Disadvantages

In my mind there are a couple of key disadvantages to relying on stock imagery. First, because stock images by their nature are designed to have wide appeal and to be useful to as many buyers as possible, they tend to be less specific than what one might expect from custom images. While the quality of stock images is improving all the time, to my eye there is a canned quality to most of them because the subject matter is so general. It's pretty easy to look at a brochure and recognize the stock photos. And therein lies the principal problem. Corporate literature is starting to look pretty much the same and this is counterproductive to good branding. Our principal role as designers and branding consultants is to help our clients achieve a unique presence and separate them from their competitors. The use of creative custom imagery can go a long way toward making a company's visual communications unique and bolster its brand. A good example is the palette of images used by Starbucks. It's unique and consistent in style and expresses the essence of the brand. It sets them apart and makes them different.

Stock imagery certainly has its place in visual communications but eschewing custom work in its favor can be penny wise and pound foolish.

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