

Value & the Bottom Line

When did publishers become more interested in the bottom line than in finding the best image for the job?

by Danita Delimont

What happened to the value of finding the perfect shot for a project?

Recently, negotiation has become a game of “How cheap can I get it?” What once was gratitude to sources for providing images that perfectly fit the concept has been reduced to nonchalance. And a shark-infested feeding frenzy with all the photo sources competing for business has made it possible. There are so many new photo agencies trying to sell their latest pricing models that picture editors and photo researchers seem to feel the competition can drive the prices down.

Are they wrong? Look what’s happened in the industry. One agency offered package deals (x number of images per year for x dollars) back in the mid-1990s, and other agencies had to make similar offers in order to compete. On the royalty-free front, agencies began buying collections of images outright so they could have complete control over how they were sold. Subscription stock was born and, more recently, microstock. I think it is kind of funny that some people don’t even know what microstock is, but want to try it because they know it can be purchased for as little as \$1. The trouble is, although microstock may have a place, the overall quality isn’t there and someone has to search tens of thousands or even millions of images created by nonprofessionals to find the gems that might work for their projects.

Four years ago at the ASPP Education Conference in Chicago, many senior photo editors and researchers stood up and pleaded for agencies to put up fresh and new content for their publishing projects—textbooks in particular. Many complained that books from the various publishers all contained the same images because there were so few available.

I beseeched everyone in the room to look to the smaller niche agencies that continue to scan and put up significant content for educational publishing projects. Danita Delimont Stock Photography is one of those agencies, so I know how time-consuming, difficult and expensive the costs are in doing this. Few of the specialty agencies are supported by venture capital, trust funds or billion-dollar backers. Still, it is those of us who have been in the business for several decades who actually know and understand the value of the images we select. We’ve seen the specs come up over the years for one project after another. We support educational publishing projects with unique imagery, and we know how hard it can be for buyers to find some of the content. We also do it because often the specs are timeless, and we know the content will hold its own for some time. Few of the big agencies, aside from Corbis, have given educational editorial content much notice.

Most of the new content being produced is oriented to commercial or personal-use licensing and not educational, unless the subject is generic. In other words, there may be more content available overall, but little of it is appropriate for textbook use.

I received an email recently from a textbook photo buyer who had a “take it or leave it” kind of attitude. She (unthinkingly?) included the email addresses of everyone the email was going to (royalty-free and non-editorial agencies as I recall). She included a list of the agencies she currently works with and the deals they had worked out, so those of us receiving the email would know how to bid for her company’s work. Her email stated that her design group would have an in-house meeting to determine which sources they should use, and their decisions would be based on the lowest rates they could get. The photo buyer suggested that \$100 for a quarter-page would keep them coming back to our site for content.

I politely told this photo buyer that there is more than the fee that they should consider, such as the level of expertise niche agencies offer that can help publishers avoid using inappropriate images in their textbooks. I also suggested that the depth and breadth of subject matter that they require is jeopardized when publishers lower rates in an already volatile marketplace. After all, when you combine lower fees with the photographers’ increased costs of doing business in a digital world, the end result may be photographers going out of business or switching to subject matter that is more lucrative or, possibly, changing careers altogether.

I encouraged this photo buyer to come back to our site when she couldn’t find what she was looking for anywhere else.

Nancy Carrizales, a friend and colleague who runs Animals Animals, which services the editorial market primarily, said she’s been receiving these agreements for a few years. “Along with lower fees, the rights requested are greater than what we are willing and often allowed to grant due to our agreements with our contributors. The negotiation process has become an education for both the client and the agency. We are both going through major changes due to new technology and consolidation. We try to be understanding and flexible to meet the client’s needs, however we also need to maintain a clear understanding of the value of our collection and the services we offer. It is this understanding and confidence that allows us the option to say no when we cannot come to terms with a client.”

Could part of the problem be that few mentors are teaching new photo researchers, editors, art directors and other photo buyers the value of content? Many come into a new job or an

internship fresh out of college and without proper guidance and training. Many—possibly most—photo researchers and picture editors evolved into their positions. There are few college courses that can prepare a picture buyer for the job.

I wonder why no one is teaching these new researchers and editors the value of an image, in particular the harder-to-find content? Has an entire segment of the industry resigned itself to mediocrity? If a researcher can't find "the shot" to illustrate a concept the book is covering, is it ok to go with a less suitable generic image he/she can find that fits the budget? We need to take the time to teach these young professionals what we know, and in particular, share with them why some images are worth more than the lowest bid.

Why can't publishers increase rather than decrease the budget? The price of textbooks is increasing due to many costs, so why not increase the price a bit more to compensate the photographers properly as well? Isn't it the role of photo buyers to inform those who set the budget to the reality of what it costs to get outstanding content? After all, the buyers are the ones in the trenches, working with photo sources and negotiating the rights and licenses. They need to speak up on behalf of the photographers if they want to be assured of appropriate content in the years to come.

Some say the lower budgets are all about supply and demand, which is normal for business. There is truly a glut of imagery today, to be sure. Still, if you look deeply into most agency files, you'll see a lot of content, but not a lot that is oriented toward illustrating the textbooks that are supposed to be teaching the next generation!

"We, the small quality agencies around the world, are between a rock and a hard place," said Jose Azel of niche agency Aurora Photos. "High quality at premium prices can and must be maintained. The problem comes with the subjectivity inherent in photography coupled with the number of high quality clients willing to pay what we consider fair fees."

Azel continued, "We have several ways to combat this phenomenon. One may be to consolidate as a group by providing large volume at fair prices, if our material is not being provided by others. In the past this has not been easy since, like photographers, many small agents value their independence. Another [solution] might be to add value to the work beyond what others are doing. We have experienced this with some of our journalistic material, as our captions and information can be infinitely better than the average 'stock' caption. Finally, prove to publishers that better images, even at higher fees, sell more of their product. In the end we [picture agencies] need to make the best choice for the photographers we represent while servicing the market."

So where does this leave us? The easiest course is for both buyers and agencies to do nothing, and go with the status quo, making no waves and settling for images that might not have even been considered five or ten years ago.

Alternately, if you're a photo buyer, speak up for the photographers who work so hard to shoot the material you need. Educate the bosses and bean counters about the value of editorial content and the scarcity of appropriate work. Use your powers of persuasion to get them to accept prices that will keep photographers in business and keep them shooting the kind of material you need.

If you are a picture agency, hold your ground. Realize that you have a collection that is worth more than a bidding war, and refuse to accept these agreements.

We're all in this together.

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