

The Stock Agent: Should You Seek One?

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Can you make a living in nature photography? This is a question that many nature photographers ask themselves before making the transition from hobbyist to pro. The answer depends on what you shoot, how well you shoot it, and how you market it. The problem for too many photographers is they treat their photography business as a passion that pays and not as a business. Yet it is a business in every sense: a product is produced, marketed, and sold.

In today's competitive photo market, selling photography on a regular basis is a daunting task, let alone making a living doing it. To earn a living wage at today's photo prices requires at least one decent sale every day and the constant pursuit to find new markets. One additional option for marketing photography is the stock photo agent.

What does the stock agent do for the industry and you? They house images, market them, provide online downloads or negotiate a license for the use, and then send you a check. Agencies are always on the lookout for talented photographers. There is always room for new imagery shot in a new way. Stock agents want photographers who have a consistent ability to produce good imagery and lots of it. As the saying goes these days: "It is not enough just being a good photographer, you have to be great!" Many of the great photographers who make a lot of money are great business people, but many great photographers are not great business people and in this case it does not hurt to have a partner in the form of a stock agent to help them.



Here is another reason to look at yourself and ask: "Why did I, or do I, want to get into professional photography?" For many of us, it is the desire to be out there, all the time. Shooting the sunrise on a cold crisp morning or the warm sunset light in canyon country! It could be the emerging spring flowers or the fall leaves before they drop. Bottom line: the draw is the lifestyle that full time nature photography provides. I doubt many business people looking to invest their money choose photography as a good investment, but many photographers learn to become business people simply to survive.



What do you shoot? Do you specialize in your local community only, shooting the tourist sites, city skyline, and community events? Have you researched the markets for these images? This is an important consideration. Are these images suitable for local, national, or international markets? If you shoot the 4th of July parade in your town (pop. 3600), who outside the local area would be interested in these images? Would having them available to the world through the net create any sales? Would an agent really want them? If you shoot national subjects such as the national parks, then this is another story as the world enjoys our parks as much as we do, but will international clients have a use for the city park? The critical point is that you must create images that don't just move you, but move the buyer because without that, there won't be a sale.



With the advent of the web, the opportunities for your images placed with an agency to sell worldwide has increased dramatically. These online agents are open 24/7 and your work can be licensed at anytime. Agencies have researchers that monitor what is going on within the publishing industry such as; trends, styles, political and economic changes, and so on. They have sales teams that look for new markets and pursue client's everyday.



Is the stock agent good for you? Most nature photographers do not have staff or resources to stay open 24/7 and deliver their products to clients as effectively and as expeditiously. With today's demands for instant fulfillment, how many sales might you lose during the next two week shooting trip? Many clients have flocked to the online agency for many reasons, but one major reason is variety. With the major online agencies having millions of images and many more all networked together, the convenience for a client to enter a selection of keywords at one site and getting results from many, is a huge incentive for them to never look elsewhere.

As an outdoor and nature photographer, you should set a goal of finding an agency to represent your work at some point. I suggest "at some point" because this aspect of the industry is just as crowded as the rest and the veteran pro photographers are the ones making most of the money. The term "Agent" is somewhat of a misnomer since these agents have very little interest in furthering your photography career. They are only interested in the body of work supplied by the photographer and nothing more. The photographer, on the other hand, is concerned about promotion of their entire body of work. This is an important point because signing with an agency is, and should be, only one aspect of your strategy to promote and sell your photography.



To get represented by a stock agent, you should build a large body of unique stock photos. Stock agents are not exclusively for established shooters and are always open to new shooters. They will want to know what you can do for them in the future more than what you bring to show them today. Their primary interest is how much are you going to shoot and how good will the quality be? If you shoot what everybody else does, chances of getting in are greatly reduced. With a larger supply of stock photos available than demand and your specialty is flowers, rocks, and moss, you will have a much more difficult time being accepted than if you shoot nature in a much different and unique way. This will be the first point they address.

Nature is a specialized area of the overall industry and close to the bottom in terms of the best selling categories. This creates another reason for you to join an agency in hopes they will find new markets for your images. Think for a moment on your strategy for marketing your work. You spent time in the book store or the magazine rack making note of the names of the photo editors so you could send your images to them for consideration. Later you checked the calendar lines and also scoured Photographers Market. Some of these you have submitted your work to and hopefully made some sales. Generally, the stock agent does not do this. They do not visit the bookstore and note calendar company names nor are they likely to pour through Photographers Market for leads. They place your images on the website and mass market to the entire world in a 'shotgun blast' approach. Sure, their sales team works closely with the art directors at major agencies or the photo researcher at a book publisher, but they are not marketing YOUR work specifically.

Specialty clients using outdoor and nature photography do not search for images on the web, rather they send requests specifically to the photographers themselves. These go to the photographers that have earned a spot in the clients contact list as qualified photographers with good image files. These clients prefer to let the photographers do all the work by searching their files and submitting the images. Calendar companies are one example. They prefer to not search for images and may not find what they want on the web anyway, so they contact their stable of photographers. An ad agency looking for a photo of Mt. Rushmore for an ad would go right to the web to search for images.

So what is your business model and is a stock agent good for it? Generally the answer would be yes, unless your image subjects and files are so subjective that the world rarely needs what you shoot. This for most photographers is rarely the case. Those who shoot high quality nature images must spend considerable time in the field creating more salable images and the reality is there are never enough sales.

The independent nature photographer will develop over time a stable of clients who buy their images. But there are vastly more clients buying images and their chances of finding the one photographer who has the one specialty image they need is tough. Here the stock agent becomes invaluable! Many large agents like Getty, Corbis, and search portals like Stock Photo Finder, enjoy a huge global presence and searching through them is so easy for clients. Consider a client in Germany looking for an image of lightning over the Grand Canyon to be used in an ad for a European manufacturer. How will they find you in Durango, CO, to buy your version? They probably won't find you or buy your image unless you are either with an agent or a high profile online portal.

Agencies are also valuable partners to be in business with as many have done tremendous research on what sells and will share that with their photographers. If you have an idea for a shoot and discuss it with your agencies photo editor, they will often share invaluable ideas and help guide you to more specifics that will result in better selling images.

Selling nature photography to produce a reliable income is tough, but partnering with a photo agent is one more opportunity to increase income. Do you think it is time to seek an agent? Stay tuned! I'll discuss the necessary steps next month.

Comments on NPN nature photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

Charlie Borland has been a professional photographer for over 25 years. Based in Oregon, he shoot both locally and nationally, traveling extensively for a wide range of clients, some of which include: Xerox, NW Airlines, Fujitsu, Tektronix, Nike, Blue Cross,

Nationsbank, Texas Instruments, Pacificorp, Cellular One, Early Winters, among others. He has received numerous awards and recognition for his photography.

Charlie has been heavily involved in the stock photography business, owning a stock photo agency for 8 years before merging with Definitive/FPG and later Getty Images. He is currently Director of Photography at www.fogstock.com an online agency he co-founded.

He also directs [Aspen Photo Workshops](#) where he conducts numerous workshops including: Making Money in Stock Photography, Travel Stock Photography, and several Adventure Sports and Cowboy Photo Shoots for stock photographers.



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