Making Money From Your Art

A guide to getting started in Microstock

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Introduction

If you are like most photographers or digital artists, you'll have a ton of images on your hard drive gathering dust. What If I told you that there are people out there who are willing to pay you to use those images? That's right there just may be a virtual gold mine sitting on your HDD. Welcome to the world of microstock.

In this tutorial I will be taking you through the ins and outs of creating images for stock purposes. What to do and what not to do. From setting up the account, submitting your first test batch of images, and most importantly; creating images that will sell!

The information supplied is geared mostly toward people who want to get a foothold in the microstock market. It is also aimed primarily at photographers, but other artists will get a lot out of this manual as well. Shutterstock is now the world's leading source of vector art... So vector artists, you have come to the right place regardless! You just may wish to skip the photography related sections.

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1. Getting started

1.1 What is stock?

Stock or *microstock* is basically any image; whether photographic, digital or traditional in nature; used to sell or promote a particular product, idea or concept. Maybe even to convey a particular emotion. Generally a stock image is either created by the end user or obtained from a stock image provider such as Shutterstock. You have probably seen thousands of stock images and not even realised.

Fig 1.1 example of a successful stock image

Take fig 1.1 for example. It's not something you are going to find in the average family album. What do you think the purpose of this image could be? Your first instinct may be for the purpose of selling light bulbs, but think a little deeper.

How about energy conservation? Technology, green energy or an idea? The end user will buy the stock image for a specific purpose in mind.

Stock images need not only be photographic. They could be illustrations, paintings, vector art and even video footage.

Take a closer look at some of the major websites you visit. You will be surprised at just how common stock images are.

Generally, images that are considered "arty" may not do so well as stock. What may do well in an art gallery may not even be accepted into any of the major stock sites. It doesn't matter how many people have told you how brilliant the image is; if it can't be used to

sell a product, service or idea, then it ain't stock... That's not to say you shouldn't test the waters though. Sometimes unique and arty images can do quite well, so know the rules, but keep an open mind at the same time.

1.2 Who buys this stuff?

The truth is, you won't know who buys and uses any of your images unless you do a bit of detective work. Stock companies like Shutterstock are not at liberty to disclose who is using your images.

Generally, your images will be used by designers for creating things like websites, documents, newsletters, technical manuals, and advertising. They will purchase use of the image under specific licence agreements which will be explained later. They can be used by literally anybody.

If you really want to find out who is using your images, it can be quite difficult. One thing you may want to try is a reserve image search such as www.tineye.com. This is by no means a sure fire way, but it's a good start.

1.3 The Major Players.

By far the biggest micro stock company and the one with whom you are likely to have the most success, is Shutterstock. Others include Bigstock, and Dreamstime.

All have different standards and joining requirements (the easiest being bigstock). What is accepted at one will not necessarily be accepted at the other. Likewise, what sells well at one, will not necessarily sell at the other.

1.4 What equipment will I need?

I'm not going to lie to you. On the photography side of things, you probably won't get by without at least an entry level DSLR camera or maybe one of the higher end compact point and shoots. If you are serious about photography, one of the things you really should be investing in is a half decent camera. You can pick up some great deals on previous generation DSLR cameras on eBay. A Canon 450D or a Nikon D60 will get you started without breaking the bank.

Something that is non-negotiable is a tripod. This is a *must* have. Similarly, you can pick up a cheap one on eBay for next to nothing. Don't kid yourself into thinking you can

hand hold and maintain perfect focus every time. Micro stock sites are *extremely* picky about focus. Save yourself the trouble, and buy a tripod.

Contrary to what you may think, you don't need an expensive lighting setup (although it helps). You can get by with a desk lamp or two, a roll of tissue paper and a white piece of cardboard or paper. It doesn't have to be expensive. All it takes is a bit of know-how, and I will show you some techniques later in this tutorial.

If you are a vector artist or illustrator; then all you need is a computer, an internet connection and some determination!

1.5 Setting up your account

Don't mess about. Setup your account now. You needn't have a single image ready for submission to setup your account. It can take about a week for the account to be verified. Follow this Link for the signup process.

During signup, be sure to choose a display name that is professional. X_rOckchiCk_X just isn't going to cut it. Stock photography is a serious business and you want to project a professional attitude to both Shutterstock and potential clients. After entering your details, you will be required to submit a valid form of id. You may use any form of government issued id such as a passport or drivers licence, or even a credit card. This part of the process can take about a week as your details will need to be verified by Shutterstock.

1.6 How does the submission process work?

Basically, you create the image, submit it to Shutterstock, and it goes into the review queue. This can take anywhere from a day to a week. Upon which time a reviewer will review your image for image quality and stock worthiness It is then that it will either be accepted as a stock image or it will be rejected.

2. Taking a still subject

2.1 Introduction

Illustrators and vector artists can probably skip this and go straight to section 3, as neither has to worry about things like noise, focus or lighting issues. The rest of this manual is completely relevant regardless of the medium you choose.

Now taking a photo for stock purposes is not as simple as pointing your camera at the subject and hitting the shutter button. You first need to think about a reason for taking the shot. What product, service or idea could this image help sell?

Previsualize the image. This means being able to see the final product in your head before you even setup the shot. This is an important skill to have regardless of the purpose of the image.

2.2 Setup and equipment

We are now going to go through the process of setting up and taking a simple photo of a kiwi fruit on a white background. Although I will be using strobe lights, it's possible to pull off with an ordinary lamp, some tissue paper roll for diffusion and some type of reflective material like aluminium foil or a white piece of paper. As in figure 1.2, set some white paper down anywhere where there is a flat base and a wall behind it. A chair works well for this. Place part of the paper on the wall or backing of the chair and stick it there with tape or blu-tack. It's important that you do not crease the edge of the paper where the wall and floor meet. Keep it at a smooth bend to avoid a line through the middle of your image and hard shadows at the join.

Fig 1.2 basic scene setup of a lemon photo

For this shot, we will require two light sources. The main light from the left hand side, and a fill light on the right. Don't have two lights? Then simply get a sheet of aluminium foil or an ordinary piece of white A4 paper and use it to reflect the light (see fig 1.3).

Fig 1.3 using aluminium foil as a reflector

Lighting is an incredibly important element when taking a stock image. The setup in fig 1.3 uses a strobe flash, with a large soft box, but this can be done using a cheap desk lamp and a sheet of tissue paper or a white bed sheet as a diffuser. Using the latter method, you will of course need to use a tripod and a slower shutter speed; but it can be done.

Before you go any further, and to minimize time spend in post processing; go over the scene with a fine tooth comb. Remove any distracting elements, grit, hair dust etc. Clean the item you are photographing. If it's something with a shiny surface, polish it!

2.3 Camera settings

The golden rule of ISO in stock photography is *always* use ISO100 or below. If you need a higher ISO because of low light conditions; then get brighter lights or use a tripod and a slower shutter speed. High ISO mean noise. Noise is one of the biggest causes of an image rejection and all of the major microstock companies are sticklers for noise.

It's difficult to give exact camera settings as it will differ from camera to camera and lens to lens. Generally, if you are taking a close-up photo of a piece of fruit for example, you will want to be at around f9-f11 to ensure everything is in focus.

You will want your shutter speed to be as fast as possible. Although if you are not shooting with strobes, you will likely be shooting at relatively low shutter speeds due to the higher aperture required.

Automatic white balance will usually do the trick. WB can be tweaked in post processing, but it's always better to get it right in camera. Most DSLR cameras will have the option of setting a custom white balance, so if you are using lights with a colour temperature of 5500k, then set your cameras custom white balance to 5500k as well.

2.4 Light

What you are aiming for, is a nice even light over the entire object. If there are harsh shadows and/or bright highlights, the image is likely to be rejected.

Following on from what was said in section 2.2, the importance of a fill light is paramount. In fig 1.4 and fig 1.5 we see why

Fig 1.4 without fill light

Fig 1.5 using aluminium reflector as a fill light

In figure 1.4 we see what the shot looks like without a fill light. The lighting is obviously uneven. It's much darker on the right side. This image would likely be rejected for uneven lighting. In fig 1.5 we see what the lighting should look like. The image has a much nicer appearance.

Keep in mind, *even* lighting does not mean *flat* lighting. You could simply take a photo of the fig using the on-camera flash. This would no doubt produce even lighting, but it would also be flat and two dimensional, with undesirable harsh shadows. *Even* lighting using two light sources creates an image with depth.

Now that we have our camera settings and lighting in check, we can go ahead and take the shot. I'm going to assume you are using a tripod or at least have the camera sitting on something. Take the shot using its remote timer; this will eliminate camera shake and potential blur in your final product. I recommend this even when shooting with strobes.

When the shot is done, check the viewfinder for exposure and adjust lighting, aperture or shutter speed as required. Zoom in to 100% and ensure focus is tack sharp. Even for seasoned pros, the first lot of images you take will likely be completely wrong, so don't get frustrated if it doesn't always work out first time, every time.

Of course, you will have to adjust your methods depending on what it is you are photographing. See my book recommendations for further reading on the topic at the end of this manual.

3. Typical rejection reasons.

3.1 Focus

Focus issues are probably the most common reason for an image rejection and the causes can be many.

First and foremost, you should adjust your viewfinder diopter. Typically DSLR cameras have a small wheel next to the view finder. To adjust it, point the camera at a bright object such as a wall or the sky, then press down the shutter button to show the focus point boxes. Simply adjust the diopter wheel until those boxes are in focus. This will ensure that what you are seeing in focus through the viewfinder is what you are going to get after you hit the shutter button.

Fig 1.6 bad and good focus

Camera shake is one of the biggest focus killers, which is why a good tripod is essential, as it will eliminate the problem. For stock purposes, I recommend using a tripod even when shooting with strobes, though this isn't always practical.

Invest in a remote shutter, either infrared or cable. They can be purchased relatively cheaply on eBay anywhere from $7 - $15US. This will eliminate the problem of camera movement when you press the shutter button. Particularly useful for long exposures. If you don't have a remote shutter control; use your cameras built in remote timer (see your cameras manual).

Though this is not essential, it can help quite a bit. Make use of your cameras "mirror lockup" feature. This will ensure that there will be no vibration when the shutter goes off, as it locks the mirror in place before hand. See your cameras manual for how to set this.

Finally there is the lens's "sweet spot". This is the aperture size that will give optimal results. Lenses tend to perform the worst when they are at either extreme on aperture size, either wide open of closed up tight. Most lenses have their sweet spot at roughly

the 7.1 mark, but it obviously varies from lens to lens. Just try to stay in the f5.6-f11 range, unless you are going for a creative shallow depth of field.

3.2 Exposure

Another common reason for rejection is exposure. How do you know whether or not the image has correct exposure, if your monitor is not calibrated to *show* accurate exposure? The first thing you must do is calibrate your monitor. The best way to do this is to use a hardware calibration device; however this can be quite expensive. In a pinch, a software calibration will do. These are found quite easily with a quick Google search. Windows 7 has a built in calibrator under control panel/display and “colour calibration”.

Now that we have our monitor set up correctly, we can start checking our shadows and highlights.

Fig 1.7 underexposed, correctly exposed and overexposed

In fig 1.7 we have a correctly exposed image of a fig pip at 100%, and both extremes on either side. The middle image is the only one that has a chance of being accepted. Notice the dull grey background and dark tones in the left image while we have overblown highlights and loss of image detail in the image on the right.

Incorrect camera settings are the culprit here. With a correctly configured monitor this should be easy to spot. However always check your images in the cameras viewfinder.

3.3 Noise

The primary cause of noise is your ISO setting. Simply put, the higher ISO, the more noise you will get. Always shoot stock images at ISO100 if possible. There are times where you may want to bump it up slightly, but try to avoid it. See your cameras manual for how to set your ISO.

Fig 1.8 a noisy image

Other common reasons for noise include: Poor lighting, over sharpening and over processing.

All images contain noise, but there is a certain tolerance level. The lower your light level, the more noise becomes visible. This is why good lighting and correct exposure are paramount.

Get your exposure right in camera. If you need to correct your exposure in Photoshop, you run the risk of enhancing the amount of noise visible in your image

Sharpening your image can also increase the amount of visible noise as this will actually sharpen the noise itself as well as the image.

3.4 Image quality

Firstly, *always* save your images at 100% quality, no exceptions. Most of the major microstock companies accept images up to 30mb in size, so there should be no reason for you to reduce the quality of your save. Unsightly JPG artefacts as seen in fig 1.9 will result in certain rejection.

Fig 1.9 poor image quality

Fig 2.0 over sharpening artefacts

Try not to sharpen where possible and practical. This can produce nasty sharpening artefacts as seen in fig 2.0. Sharpening can also increase visible noise. That's not to say

that you shouldn't sharpen your images at all, but if you must; make use of Photoshop's "unsharp mask" and increase the sharpening threshold to around 3 or 4. This will prevent Photoshop from sharpening noise.

3.5 Composition

Composition is a tricky one. Much of it will be beyond the scope of this manual. I would recommend getting hold of a good art book on composition. I will however go over a few basic concepts of the ones I feel are most important for stock photography.

Fig 2.1 making use of the rule of thirds

Firstly keep in mind; "rules" of composition are guides, not laws. These rules don't work for every situation. However, it's important to understand the rules before you break them.

Try to break the image up into 2 equal lines horizontally and 2 equal lines vertically. Keep the points of interest roughly where each of these lines intersect. Don't be too ridged with this; as previously stated it is a guide only.

This does not apply when you are taking a photo of an object such as an isolation image of a piece of fruit, as seen in fig 1.5. It's perfectly ok for the fruit to be centred in that case.

Simplify. Don't leave distracting elements in the background. There should be a point of interest in the frame. If you are taking a photo of something in front of a distracting background, a lower aperture setting (wider aperture) such at f1.2 - f2.8 will be required to throw the background out of focus.

If you are taking a photo of a moving object, make sure there is more room in front of the object than behind it.

3.6 Other reasons

There are a number of other reasons your image may be rejected. Firstly the images need to be a minimum of 4 million pixels (4MP). An easy way to see if your images are at least 4MP in size is to multiply the width by the height. So an image which has a width of 3800pixles and a height of 2400pixles is 9.12 million pixels (9MP); which is more than enough. Anything below 4MP will be automatically rejected.

Although some sites allow a certain amount of upsizing (digitally increasing the size of the image to increase the amount of pixels); I recommend not doing it, as it will reduce image quality and sharpness. However, sometimes you may want to downsize the image if it looks a little soft. This will reduce noise and hide some focus issues, but keep in mind you may lose potential customers who are looking to buy higher resolution images.

Any image which has a visible logo will be rejected for potential trademark violation.

Don’t include any watermark in your image. This will result in instant rejection.

Lastly; frames and borders - Don’t use them, as these will be automatically rejected no matter how good the image is.

4. Preparing your first batch of images

4.1 The first hurdle

Before you are accepted as a fully fledged stock contributor, you need to show that you are capable of producing sellable stock images. It is for this reason that Shutterstock requires you to submit a batch of 10 (and only 10) of your absolute best. You need to get 7 of these images approved to become a contributor. Get any less than 7, and you will have to wait one month before you are allowed to try again.

Be prepared for rejections. Most of us are rejected on our first try. Don't take it to heart though. Use that extra month to learn as much as you can, and be back with a set of killer images. I know of people who have been trying for 6+ months then finally got in. Never give up! You can do it!

4.2 What images should I consider?

Your first 10 need to be special. Go for variety. Don't simply submit 10 photos of the family cat. You need to show Shutterstock that you have what it takes. It's probably best to take 10 new photos, unless you already have some which you think fit the criteria and quality of a stock image.

When you are taking or considering an image for stock, ask yourself this simple question: What product, service or idea can this image help sell? Have a browse through the Shutterstock gallery to get some ideas.

4.3 What images should I avoid?

Try to avoid anything that Shutterstock already has a lot of. Things like flowers, brick walls etc. Unless they are truly spectacular, they are likely to be rejected for low commercial value.

Also try to avoid anything that has a snapshot quality about it. A random photo of your friend with no thought into lighting and composition is not likely to be accepted.

I know it can be difficult to be unique when everything has already been done to death, so try not to fret about it too much.

For obvious reasons, images with poor composition, noise, lighting and contrast, should be avoided.

Arty images are ok and can do quite well, but I would be careful about selecting these for your first batch of 10. Keep it simple. Once you're in, there will be plenty of time for experimentation.

Don't submit anything with a visible logo of any kind; this will be rejected for potential copyright violation. Shutterstock is very picky about this. A jogger with an out of focus blurry logo on their shoes will be rejected for this very reason. In fact, avoid anything that is of a recognisable design such as a popular brand of television set, motor bike or car. Similarly, things like coins and stamps are also off limits. As with every rule however, there are exceptions which will be explained later.

4.4 I have my 10 images. Now what?

You may think you are ready to submit, but not so fast. First you need to go over each individual image with a fine tooth comb. First zoom in to 100%.

- How does it look at 100% zoom
- Is there any visible noise?
- Any sharpening artefacts?
- Blown highlights?
- Is the main subject in focus?
- Do any of the images contain trademarks or logos?

4.5 Keywords

You are now ready to submit, but there is one last thing you need take into consideration, and that is keywords.

Keywords are the search terms associated with your image. How is a potential customer going to find your image if the search terms don't match your image? It doesn't matter how good your image is, you won't sell a thing because no one will know the image is there!

Shutterstock requires at least 7 keywords and up to a maximum of 50. I try to aim for about 20-35 keywords.

You will get better with keywords as you gain more experience, but try to think of what keywords *you* would use if you were searching for an image. Search for a similar image in the gallery to get some keyword ideas.

5. Legal stuff

5.1 Licensing and copyright

By default, when you take a picture or create a piece of digital art, you are the copyright holder of that picture or artwork. This means you have full rights of the works which you can do with as you want. There are exceptions to this rule, such as situations where you have come to a prior agreement in which you will give up your copyright, but for microstock purposes, you own the copyright to everyone of your images.

Licensing on the other hand is a way of allowing other people to use your images. What you are doing is essentially giving someone a licence to use you work. Just as a drivers licence will tell its holder what types of vehicles they can drive, an image licence will tell its user what images they may use and how they may use them

A common misconception is that by selling your images at Shutterstock, you are giving away your copyright. This can't be further from the truth. Microstock companies such as Shutterstock and Fotolia, give out licenses to clients on your behalf, but the copyright remains with you.

5.2 Types of licences

Microstock companies use what's called a royalty free (RF) licence. This is the standard licence used. The end user pays a flat charge for the licence, so they may use it in the manner they choose. Shutterstock pays out 25 cents per image. However, this amount will increase incrementally up the more images you sell (up to 38 cents)

There are of course exceptions and limitations on how they may use the image. They can't, for example, use the image in a way that is offensive, pornographic in nature, derogatory or embarrassing to the model etc. Also, a standard licences limits the end user to how many times the images may be reproduced.

Shutterstock also offers what's called an enhanced licence; which allows the end user to use the image in much the same way, but with more reproductions allowed. This pays out a nice $28 to the artist per download.

5.3 Release forms

If any of your images contain recognisable people, they will require a model release form to be filled out and signed by both you and the model. This is basically a form saying that you have permission from the model to use his/her image, and to use his/her image for commercial purposes. Release forms can be downloaded from Shutterstock.

Fig 2.2 no release required

Fig 2.3 release required

What is meant by “recognisable”? Well ask yourself; is there anything in this image that may be used to identify this person? Be it a visible face, birthmark, tattoo. *Anything* that could be used to identify that person. If in doubt, *get a release.* In fact, even if a release is not technically required, I would highly recommend one; as some buyers may overlook your photo if a release is not signed, regardless of whether it’s needed or not.

Another type of release that may be required is a property release. This one gets a little more complicated, and there are a lot of grey areas. Basically any building which is private property, inside or out; will require a property release form signed by the building owner or appropriate authority.

Other things which require a property release are famous landmarks and locations, custom designed items such as cars, artwork or furniture, recognisable animals that belong to any entity such as race horses, some zoo animals and unique pets etc.

There are exceptions, however. If you have taken a photo of a person, event or building that is considered newsworthy, it will not require a release. This is called an editorial image. Please be advised that your friend sitting on the couch, watching TV, eating a Twinkie, isn’t newsworthy.

I tend to stay away from editorial images. They usually have very low sales rates, as most microstock customers are commercial organisations looking for commercial images. Newspapers and magazines may purchase editorial images, but it’s unlikely to be a huge

earner for you. Don't get me wrong though. If you have an editorial image, submit it. You have nothing to lose by doing so.

6. Final words

6.1 Rejections

Even the best of us get our images rejected. Shutterstock is good in that they give a general reason for the rejection.

I know it's not a great feeling to have an image rejected, but *never* take rejections personally. Instead, use that rejection to improve your skills and ultimately your work. Thrive on honest feedback and criticism. It is the only way you will grow as an artist of any medium.

Remember this *when* (not *if*) the rejections come.

6.2 Do's and don'ts

Don't submit work which doesn't belong to you or that you did not create. This includes images that you have used as elements of the overall image.

Don't submit anything offensive. Tasteful nudity is fine, but will be accepted at the reviewer's discretion.

If your image is rejected, submit it to the critiques section of the Shutterstock forums, and ask what you could do to improve it. Make those improvements and resubmit.

Don't continually submit the same rejected image over and over again in the hopes that it will eventually get accepted. This will result in a warning and possible termination of your account – which you most certainly don't want.

If you are resubmitting an image legitimately, always give a reason for the resubmission in the notes, and let the reviewer know what you have changed or improved.

6.3 Parting advice

Your earnings will obviously increase over time, so never give up if you are feeling like you are not earning what you expected. It takes commitment and determination. You have nothing to lose by joining a microstock agency, and everything to gain. It can also be a lot of fun creating the images and watching them sell! You have nothing to lose!

If you are committed you will do well. It's all about volume of images, so keep creating and keep submitting. With this in mind, sign up to multiple stock agencies. The more you have out there, the more money you are going to make form your images.

Here is a list of the ones I recommend:

Shutterstock http://submit.shutterstock.com/?ref=634804

Bigstock http://www.bigstockphoto.com/?refid=hZoEMP8fVD

Dreamstime http://www.dreamstime.com/register-resi2539446

If you are going to sign up to only 1, then make that one Shutterstock. It has by far the best payouts of all three, and an excellent, easy to use submission process.

If you need any help or have any questions, feel free to contact me via a note on Deviantart at http://eman333.deviantart.com/
or via my website http://www.threevisual.net

6.4 Book recommendations

Don't let this manual be where your learning experience ends. Get out there and start reading, learning and becoming better at what you do.

Light Science Magic – This is the bible of light. *Every* photographer should read this, and know it

Studio Lighting Techniques for Photography: Tricks of the Trade for Professional Digital Photographers – A great book for studio lighting, easy to follow.

The Food Stylist's Handbook – A must have for the delicate art of food photography

Microstock Money Shots: Turning Downloads into Dollars with Microstock Photography – Great further reading to this manual.

David Busch's Mastering Digital SLR Photography, Third Edition – A great book to help familiarise yourself with your camera.