

The New York Times

TUESDAY, JUNE 5, 2007

National Edition

Delivered to your door every day except on Sundays and public holidays. For more information, call 212 512 2000. The New York Times is published six days a week in the United States. Outside the U.S., it is published five days a week. See Page C10.

ONE DOLLAR

Decency Ruling Thwarts F.C.C. On Vulgarities

MILITARY JUDGES DISMISS CHARGES FOR 2 DETAINEES

RETRAK FOR NEW SYSTEM

When Are Photos Like Penny Stocks? When They Sell.

WEB CONNECTIONS

By ERN GIGER

Earn big money selling photographs in your spare time?

It sounds like a too-good-to-be-true claim for a money-getting scheme. But in this case, it might just be true.

Thanks to the Internet and digital cameras, thousands of unprofessional photographers are now selling their shots through so-called microstock Web sites to consumers around the world. But it's not like the old days of stock photography — before 2000, the price that each shot fetched is too meager to buy a cup of coffee. Microstock Web sites have turned the pricing structure for pictures licensing on its head.

Traditional photographic stock companies charge several hundred to several thousand dollars per image. Microstock prices can be as low as 25 cents, and payments to photographers are even lower, often just a few cents that accrue per sale.

But some photographers are making significant incomes from their pictures, making up to millions, which they have lost in perfect commissions. And that, in effect, is affecting the business of some mainstream professional photographers.

For small-business owners or others needing images, microstock sites can be an alternative to conventional stock agencies.



ERIN GIGER, a Seattle-based food photographer, has sold about 1,200 images to iStockphoto, and her work has been bought 68,223 times. Significant payments began to arrive once she had hit 500 or 600 images at her portfolio, Ms. Giger said, adding, "If you upload more, it's like shooting arrows in the air." Ms. Giger, a former food stylist, began photographing her own work last year, after uploading her material to iStockphoto.

"I like ERIN's daring spirit," Ms. Giger said, referring to the extensive dietitian group and other clients under the site's banner. "It's a matter of being fair. You don't have to go elsewhere."

Business volume matters in microstock sales, a large number of them must be uploaded. Ms. Giger currently has a job photographing available for sale on the site and sells 1 to 25 images each week.

Kelly Cline, a Seattle-based food photographer, has uploaded 1,200 images to iStockphoto, and her work has been bought 68,223 times. Significant payments began to arrive once she had hit 500 or 600 images at her portfolio, Ms. Cline said, adding, "If you upload more, it's like shooting arrows in the air."

Ms. Cline, a former food stylist, began photographing her own work last year, after uploading her material to iStockphoto.

Today, she said, she earns about \$20,000 a year, 60 percent of her income, from microstock sales, and she continues an exclusive practice to iStockphoto.

But Stephen Gilman, a Web designer at Adobe Systems who began photographing a few years ago on a hobby, said he would never use an microstock site exclusively. "I'd be nervous

The pricing structure for pictures...

WEB CONNECTIONS

When Are Photos Like Penny Stocks? When They Sell.

By ERIC A. TAUB

Earn big money taking photographs in your spare time!

It sounds like a late-night TV come-on for a phony get-rich-quick scheme. But in this case, it might just be true.

Thanks to the Internet and digital cameras, thousands of semiprofessional photographers are now selling their shots through so-called microstock Web sites to customers around the world. But it's not like the old days of stock photography — before 2000: the price that each shot fetches is not enough to buy a cup of coffee. Microstock Web sites have turned the pricing structure for picture licensing on its head.

Traditional photographic stock companies charge several hundred to several thousand dollars per image. Microstock prices can be as low as 25 cents, and payments to photographers are even lower, often not much more than pennies per sale.

But some photographers are making significant incomes from their pictures, making up in volume what they have lost in per-shot commissions. And that, in turn, is affecting the business of some mainstream professional photographers.

For small-business owners or others needing images, microstock sites can be an alternative to conventional stock agencies,



SHOOT Stephen Coburn, left, and Lise Gagné, below left, take photographs in their studios that they will try to sell on the Web. Kelly Cline, below, has her eye on the fruit at the Pike Street Market in Seattle.

Sherry Tesler for The New York Times



Mathieu Belanger for The New York Times



Stuart Issett for The New York Times

The pricing structure for picture licensing has been turned on its head.

which base fees on the published size of an image, circulation and other factors.

Microstock sites charge far less, and, with few exceptions, buyers pay a flat fee, no matter how large the image is or where it is used.

"Maybe a \$300 photo for a pamphlet distributed to 300 people is not worth \$300," said Jon Oringer, the founder of Shutterstock (www.shutterstock.com), a four-year-old microstock agency.

Shutterstock customers, who pay a monthly subscription fee beginning at \$199, can download up to 25 pictures a day of the site's 1.8 million photos, at any resolution. For those who download the maximum, that amounts to 27 cents per shot. Shutterstock photographers are paid 25 cents for a purchased picture; the price rises to 30 cents once \$500 worth of their work is bought.

In addition to Shutterstock, other microstock photo agencies include Big Stock Photo (bigstockphoto.com), Fotolia (fotolia.com), Dreamstime (dreamstime.com) and iStockphoto (istockphoto.com).

Each uses a different pricing and payment scheme; photographers have the option to upload the same pictures on multiple sites or, with some of the agencies, become an exclusive supplier for an increased commission. There is no fee to post photos on a microstock site.

Whether the varying approaches matter to customers and photographers is an open question. "The differences to consumers ap-

pear to be incremental," said Bruce Livingstone, who founded an early microstock site, iStockphoto, in 2000.

Microstock sites do not accept all comers or all photographs. Each employs a team of inspectors who check every picture submitted for technical quality, as well as artistic and commercial merit.

Shots of dogs and cats are generally not welcome, while "lifestyle" photographs — pictures of people at work and play — are usually top sellers. Other subjects of interest include food, sports and fashion.

Getting photos accepted for a site is just one part of the battle. Potential buyers can find shots by browsing through a collection and its categories, or by searching using a keyword that describes what they want.

The photographer creates the keywords; most sites have no restrictions on how many, though Fotolia had to stop some photographers who were adding every keyword under the sun in the hopes that someone would stumble upon the shot.

Keeping one's pictures confined to one site may not be a good idea, if the site attracts few customers, or becomes known for specializing in pictures of sheep while you are hoping to sell shots of toothpaste.

"We did not want to limit the ability of photographers to earn money," said Tim Donahue, the founder of Big Stock Photo, which does not offer exclusivity.

Some photographers say exclusivity works. The same picture on multiple sites may have different prices. By being exclu-

sive photographers can more easily trace those who might be misusing their work, either by using an image — on, say, a coffee mug — without buying rights to it or by stealing a concept they like, recreating a photograph and selling it as their own.

Those who are doing well selling their work on microstock sites have done their homework: they have figured out what type of photographs a site specializes in, what types of pictures sell and whether the commission is sufficient.

Lise Gagné of Quebec specializes in business shots, one of the most popular genres. Ms. Gagné, who has been shooting commercially for five years, earns more than \$100,000 a year selling her work exclusively through iStockphoto.

"I like iStock's sharing spirit," Ms. Gagné said, referring to the extensive discussion groups and other client aides the site provides. "It's a matter of being fair. You don't have to go elsewhere."

Because volume matters in microstock sales, a large number of shots must be uploaded. Ms. Gagné currently has 4,900 photographs available for sale on the site and adds 5 to 20 more each week.

Kelly Cline, a Seattle-based food photographer, has uploaded 1,363 images to iStockphoto, and her work has been bought 68,215 times. Significant payments began to arrive once she had 500 to 600 images in her portfolio, Ms. Cline said, adding, "If you upload more, it's like shooting arrows in the air."

Ms. Cline, a former food stylist, began shooting food four years ago. At first, she photographed her own work and then began uploading her material to iStockphoto.

Today, she said, she earns about \$70,000 a year, 60 percent of her income, from microstock sales, and she remains an exclusive provider to iStockphoto.

But Stephen Coburn, a Web designer at Adobe Systems who began photography a few years ago as a hobby, said he would never use one microstock site exclusively. "I'd feel nervous about putting all my eggs in one basket," he said.

Mr. Coburn supplies shots to five microstock sites, shooting people, objects and interiors. With 3,500 photos posted to the sites, he earns, on average, \$6,000 per month.

Michael Shake, a tool-and-die maker in Toledo, Ohio, uploads pictures to 10 sites and earns \$1,000 a month for his work. Specializing in shots of houses and new cars, he sells his work to real estate agents and car dealers looking for appropriate illustrations.

When a tire accessory manufacturer saw his work, he hired Mr. Shake to shoot an advertisement, shipping a tire to his home for the shot. "All I wanted was to earn enough money for new equipment," Mr. Shake said. "It's gone way past that."

Not everyone is enamored with microstock Web sites. Professional photographers see the sites' growth as diluting their own incomes.

"This is the death of beautiful photography," said David Skernick, a professional photographer in Los Angeles who does not use the sites. Because of the low prices and large volumes of material, "now clients accept anything."

Mr. Skernick has seen the value of his own work decrease, from a time when photographs were priced not just on their merit but on their intended use. He said he once sold a photograph that was used on a Brian Wilson album cover for \$2,000. "Today I would get \$2 for the same use," he said.

Still, railing against the sites is about as useful as hoping cellphones will go away and phone booths will make a comeback.

"Every month, my income from microstock sales gets better," Ms. Cline said. "You have to go with it or be left behind. Otherwise you'll be saying, 'Woe is me.'"

Sharing a Hobby, Online and in Person

By MATT VILLANO

THE compliment came unexpectedly, an appreciation of Wendy Roth's digital photos of the 100-foot-tall, cooled-lava Keremeos columns in British Columbia.

Ms. Roth, an amateur photographer, had received a number of half-hearted comments during her membership in the photo-sharing Web site Flickr, but this one was different.

The person who gave the compliment, Mandy Polson (screen name, MandyOnEarth), seemed passionate about nature and was interested in hiking. She had a Flickr page full of photos of her own — depicting wildlife in various environments.

Coincidentally, both women live in Pentiction, British Columbia. Ms. Roth (screen name, SoulVision) told Ms. Polson they should meet. "It just seemed that we had too much in common not to get together," said Ms. Roth. "The whole idea was to shoot photos as a pair."

The first time they met, they took photos along a trail that cuts between two lakes outside the city. The second time, they visited Okanagan Lake, where Ms. Polson wanted to photograph migrating Bohemian waxwings. Other trips included an outing to photograph bald eagles.

"If it wasn't for the Web site, we probably never would have met," Ms. Polson said. "Now I have a new friend who will talk to me about photography, and someone to join me whenever I want to go out and shoot."

Ms. Polson and Ms. Roth are not the only photo enthusiasts who have connected through the Internet. Across North America, thousands of amateur and professional photographers are using photo-oriented social networking Web sites to meet and practice their craft.

Like the women from Pentiction, the majority of these photographers came together through Flickr. Sites like Picasa (picasa.google.com), Vazaar (vazaar.com) and PhotoSIG (photosig.com), have attracted fol-

lowers as well.

Users call these gatherings meet-ups, and they get together as often as once a week. While most involve pairs or small groups of photographers, some attract dozens of people.

At the Flickr meet-up in Madison, Wis., for example, a young man named Kieran Nagoda regularly leads 10 to 15 others on what he calls photo walks around the city and surrounding parks. The group convenes at a downtown landmark and fans out to photograph everything from people to landscapes and flowers to buildings. Some participants trade gear to try new equipment. Others act as assistants for friends, holding up a flash on a particular shot.

"We're there to teach each other and help each other become better photographers," Mr. Nagoda, 19, said. "Meeting in person gives us knowledge we wouldn't be able to get from only meeting online."

Atlanta also has an active Flickr group. Members use the Web site to schedule "photo strolls" two to three times a month, meeting at destinations like the Atlanta Botanical Garden and the Georgia Aquarium.

Carissa Craven, a graphic designer, has taken part in these strolls. The crowd is overwhelmingly male, she noted in a recent e-mail exchange, and the outings are a great way to increase skills, acquire technical knowledge and make friends.

"When you attend these meet-ups, there is always the amusing two-part introduction: 'This is Robert, and he is Wananga on Flickr,' or 'This is April, and she goes by Avril Stylo,'" Ms. Craven wrote. "As you meet people, you're hurriedly attempting to mentally match their real-life personalities with what you can remember of their photo stream."

Most Flickr fans agreed that the father of the photo meet-up was Bryan Partington, a 26-year-old with the screen name Striatric.

Mr. Partington worked on some of the earliest versions of the Flickr



BIDDIES Wendy Roth, left, and Mandy Polson search for owls along the Trout Creek Trail in British Columbia; they met through Flickr.

Carey Tarr for The New York Times

site and founded one of the first regular meet-ups in Toronto in November 2004. These initial get-togethers were social in nature — two or three people talking at a pub. As interest grew, Mr. Partington began organizing walkabouts to shoot photos.

With the Toronto walks established, Mr. Partington left for a tour of the United States in 2005 to visit hundreds of friends from Flickr. Everywhere he stopped, he participated in meet-ups and encouraged members to start photo walks.

"If you compare the activity to music, it's like a jam session, a communal improvisational thing," said Mr. Partington, who now lives in Edmonton, Alberta. "You're not burdening yourself by thinking about what you're doing. Instead, you're doing

Meet-ups and outings to increase skills and make friends.

things reflexively and experimenting to become a better shot."

Still, not every photographer wants to meet with virtual strangers and shoot en masse.

Phil Cantor, a professional photographer who lives in Montclair, N.J., said that while it was fine to meet with other photographers to talk shop, the process of selecting, fram-

ing and capturing a shot is a personal and iconoclastic exercise.

"Photography is all about your individual vision," he said. "If you ask me, having someone there who also is shooting just muddies the picture."

Carolyn Byerly-Dean, an occupational therapist who lives in Oakland, Calif., noted that most photo-sharing Web sites don't reveal much about a person's character. "Even if you've looked at someone's photos online for months, you don't really know much about that person beyond what you read in a profile," said Ms. Byerly-Dean, who said she preferred to take photos alone.

Many online photo enthusiasts say the benefits of meeting offline far outweigh the risks, even when they're not shooting photos.

The Aperture Users Professional Network serves as a message board (apertureprofessional.com) for photographers who use Apple hardware and software. Members also schedule get-togethers to discuss technique and try out new gear.

While most meetings are informal, David Schloss, the group's director, said that some events were structured talks. This April, for example, Bill Frakes, a photographer for Sports Illustrated, spoke to a group of 85 people at the Apple Store in SoHo in Manhattan.

"You're going to learn something whenever you attend a group of creative and eccentric people," Mr. Schloss said. "But on top of making people better photographers, the events also are just a lot of fun."