

Bytes for Buyers and Sellers - Giving Them What They Really Want
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Thinking about how much you would like your images to be selected by a regional magazine photo editor? Thinking that a few sales would justify your exorbitantly expensive hobby? Thinking you might like to try for a stock agency some day? What are your chances?

With the increase in competition and crashing budgets, buyers and sellers are being more selective than ever. They don't have to look too far for what they need. But if you want someone to buy or sell your work, learn a bit about them and what they want. Then, give it to them. (For a fair price, of course.)

Do Your Thing

First, go for quality. Shoot what you know and what is close to home. Get very good at it. If you're not sure what good is, you're not posting enough images in the forums!

For editorial purposes, editors and publishers are always looking for high quality images of local or regional interest. Establish yourself well by starting at the local level. This is the place to work out the bugs in your workflow and file transmission skills. There is no substitute for technical acumen. You must learn the base line technical skills for submitting your own images just as you studied correct exposure, critical sharpness and thoughtful composition.

If you hate the computer but want to sell, that's OK, too. There really are people who enjoy the work and who would love to help you. Just be ready to write a check or pay scanning or file preparation fees to an outside source.

Second, shoot the typical to learn the basics, but remember the creative. Push yourself. That can be tough when you have a drop-dead portrait of a Snow Goose, Mountain Goat, cardinal or crane. The drop-deads are exciting and thrilling and fun and represent our adventures. But after awhile, ask yourself if you've seen this image before. If the answer is, "Yes," then don't count on selling it beyond the local market. The files are full. It's that simple.

Instead, do your homework. You know you should, but did you? Find out what has not been seen in your local or regional publications and challenge yourself to find one such subject, photograph and make a submission. Check out back issues of your favorite local or regional magazine and really study the style.

The Draw-Marketability

Buyers want new, refreshing, challenging, innovative images. Stock agencies have all the gorgeous wildlife and scenic portraits they will ever need. There is no motivation for them to be interested in marginal or repetitive images. They want an image that is highly marketable, one that is clear, original and that shows behavior or ecology or evokes emotion. And that's a different emotion than what you felt when you struggled to get the image. Even if you walked two miles over rocky tundra in the rain and rolled in caribou dung to get the definitive snow bunting, it's not your triumphant emotion they are buying or selling, it's your image. So be honest.

Go for a new angle, new view or new effect- anything that is scarce or that can create a concept. Then be sure to list that concept word in the description or key words that define your photo! Make the buyer's and seller's jobs easy. They do not have the time nor inclination to search and research every image of interest. All things being nearly equal, they will select the image that has the most complete information.

Remember to get a model and property release for images that will be used in advertising. Without those, you have near zero chance of selling your image for advertising.

Develop and Diversify

Develop a portfolio that shows many aspects, angles, shutter speeds, and photographic styles for the subjects that interest you. Select and submit only your best shots. If that is only two images to start, so be it. A buyer may be polite but not interested in what you meant to do in a marginal shot. Your intention is not marketable either.

And since you will never have a chance to make another first impression, give them your best shot first.

Prepare your images for your on-line portfolio according to what you have learned by experience or try Greg Downing's suggestions for web-posting here. Then seriously consider the portfolio guidelines Heather Forcier suggests here and the image protection advice offered here by Carolyn Wright. Carefully select a diverse range of images for your portfolio. You do not want to show two very similar images. Show only your best and save the others for back-ups, if requested.

Now think just a little farther ahead about how to be ready when you get your inquiries. How accessible are your images? Providing correct and accurate information takes a little practice, but it pays. As noted before, full and complete captioning is critical; professional portfolio reviewers stress this aspect over and over again. And many buyers or sellers will not accept images that are less than fully captioned. They cannot afford the cost and hassle to get this from you or to hire the work done. At a minimum, provide common name, scientific name (genus and species), location, and date. Put a space before and after each slash mark / for ease of reading.

Provide all the identifying information that can be embedded in the Photoshop File Info. When working with an agency, be ready to follow their instructions about how much of this file info they really want. Some require a spreadsheet, but that is a topic for another day.

Be prepared to produce high-resolution images within 24 hours when contacted by a serious buyer. Although this practice is variable, steel yourself to receive no acknowledgement that your digital images have been received. Some buyers match the desire for instant gratification that many digital photographers feel. They want what they want when they want it and that is when? Now. That doesn't make it right or pleasant, but that is a trend. You may need to make polite inquiry as a follow-up.

Industry Standard Specifications

There are currently no set standards. However, the Picture Archive Council of America (PACA) has been developing a set of guidelines for digital standards entitled, "Taming the Wild Pixel" that is applicable for film or digital images. It is complete with illustrations that clearly show what to do for captioning. You may review the guidelines at <http://www.pacaoffice.org> and download a PDF file for your reference.

There is a tendency now for some buyers and sellers to require that photographers submit files to meet high-resolution standards made with high-end professional digital SLR cameras and lenses producing a minimum 6 megapixels. It is best to review each buyer's or seller's requirements carefully.

The minimum standards seem to be 300 PPI resolution, 30-60 MB file size, JPEG or TIFF (8 bit) format, low compression (10 or above, if any), Adobe RGB 1998 or CMYK color space, no sharpening, color balanced and corrected, meticulously cleaned (sensor spots cloned out, not filtered), and IPTC caption material contained in Photoshop File Info.

It should be noted that for many publication purposes, especially editorial, consumer model point and shoot cameras produce acceptable images when used well.

Best Bytes

What buyers and sellers really want is to be able to use your image. They want the highest quality product for the lowest cost. (That's why you are doing more work with your computer than ever before.) They want to sell and to cause some product or service to be bought or appreciated by the persuasion of your excellent work. They want a product that is highly marketable and meets some kind of digital standards. They want to do their jobs well. They want to be known as those who can deliver the most, the fastest, the least expensively and the best. And that likely goes for most of us!



Juli E. Wilcox is immediate past co-chair of portfolio/editorial reviews at the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA) annual Summit. In that role she worked with 80 professional portfolio reviewers in the past five years representing well-known nature magazines, book publishing, professional photography, galleries, photo buyers, consultants and stock agents. She has a Snow Bunting photo she will sell you.

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