



Guest Column: How to Put Stock to Work for You

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In the 20 years since I started my creative career, my reliance on stock assets has increased exponentially. From photos, to video, to audio, to 3-D models - quicker turnaround times and shrinking budgets make creating original assets a challenge. But how do you work with stock without making it obvious, or sacrificing the aesthetic of your final product? The answer is knowing where to get what you need and using it wisely. Here are six steps I include in my workflow that are instrumental in getting the most out of stock assets.

Narrow Your Options Quickly

My stock budgets vary from "whatever is necessary" to zero dollars, zero cents. Hence, my first consideration is always with respect to where I will look for my images, and what kind of rights I need and can afford. Even with a real budget, my search will encompass both paid and free sites, and unless my requirements are incredibly stringent, I will stay away from rights-managed images.Â

I have two reasons for this. Rights-managed image licensing tends to get more complicated and time-consuming to figure out. Often, it's difficult to pin down precisely how and where our clients may use the final product, and most of our jobs are too time-sensitive to wrangle serious rights management.

In addition, use can easily change over time, with or without our knowledge, and create licensing hassles down the road. The simpler, royalty-free licensing option still offers a plethora of stock of all types and price ranges, from the premium content on Getty, to micro-stock aggregators such as Fotolia. Becoming familiar with average price points across different companies and different media, since pricing on audio and video also varies greatly, is helpful in quickly eliminating anything that's out of the budget. Â

When my budget is zero, and that's often the case for pro-bono and volunteer jobs, I rely on public domain and Creative Commons licensing. The difference between the two is simply that public domain is composed of works of all kinds for which exclusive intellectual property rights have expired or are no longer valid. This usually means older and archival content. Creative Commons includes works that are donated, in a sense, for public use through the generosity of individual, current creators. Within the CC model, there's a range of acceptable use, based on the honor system, that outlines specific permissions with respect to modifications and commercial application. Google Images and Flickr are my go-to sources for CC images since both platforms allow for quick and complete filtering.

You don't always get what you pay for. Sometimes you'll get less, and other times you'll actually get more. With the democratization of creativity, we have benefitted from variety and lower costs in a market once dominated by a handful of giants. But, the digital revolution also removed the highly selective gatekeepers that separated professional contributions from amateur attempts lowering the average quality. Even filtering by site-specific image grades, like iStockphoto's "Signature," isn't an automatic guarantee - I've purchased and discarded enough photos that were unintentionally out of focus, or illustrations that were a complete mess "under the hood."

Choose Carefully

Therefore, it's important to get to know the micro-stock companies, because not every site is created equally. Without plugging one over another, I will say simply that everything from quality to pricing to the user experience varies greatly. Some sites are better for photography while others offer wider video options. Many set their acceptable execution bar exceptionally low, creating "needle in a haystack" search experiences that wipe out whatever image cost savings once adjusted for time spent looking. And while the pickings are slimmer when it comes to free stock, I've found incredible images on sites like Pexels.com and StockFreelimages.com.

Explore and familiarize yourself with options to find stock sellers that best suit your needs, preferences and budgets. My searches generally span at least three or four websites for each job that needs stock assets. Whether I start with the more expensive libraries depends not just on the overall budget I have for stock, but also the time I have to look. A more expensive library doesn't mean you'll immediately find what you're looking for, but it sure does mean you could

find it faster. In particular, for very specific needs, I always want to know what my most expensive choice will run me so I know how much time is worth wasting to search for something more affordable. In the end, it's the average cost per asset that really matters, so purchasing a premium asset or two may not break the bank if you're careful about all others.Â Â

Cast a Wide Net

If you're unsure where that line is, search for "This is a Generic Brand Video" and enjoy. Lesson here is avoid the obvious and the contrived. This goes for any prefabricated visual puns and clichÃ©s, like upward arrows with inspiration words. If you want your stock to be an asset, not a detriment, to your final product, you have to build your own metaphors, both literally and visually. However, if used wisely, stock searches can actually spark creativity. The trick is to keep digging. For example, a search for "success" on a popular site brings up an image of a guy in a suit with a jetpack and several versions of fist pumps by rather unconvincing actors. But, a dozen rows below, I see a beautiful image of a silhouetted man standing relaxed and casual on a cliff that overlooks stunning blue mountains. It's a metaphor that's subtle and graceful, and even if this image isn't the right one, I can now use more specific search terms that are better suited to the desired aesthetic and mood.

Stay Away From the Obvious

My rule of thumb for stock is "less is more." That means no over-complicated illustrations, no over-processed photography and no motion elements that are pre-composited into multi-layered videos. I am not interested in buying a finished product, just a time-saving shortcut to creating something from scratch. With this agenda in mind, it's advisable to lean towards simplicity. For illustration, vector files are key for easy editing and I'll pass if the option isn't available. For photos, this means picking color-balanced images that haven't been processed with a heavy hand, for a neutral base from which to do color correction. For motion graphics, keyable/green-screen and single-focus animations are the way to go, as opposed to videos where compositing decisions have already been made. For live action, purchasing assets at maximum resolution offers the best flexibility in composition, and much like photography, the most usable shots are the ones that are color-balanced and without effects.Â

Favor Flexibility

Choosing the right assets is incredibly important, because using stock wisely means integrating it seamlessly into the rest of your creative. Your production shortcuts should never be obvious, so stock, no matter what format, should merely be a starting point. This is only possible if you approach your selection process with this practice in mind. Using "off-the-shelf" stock is a rookie mistake, but there's more to true integration than basic color correction, for example. Especially with jobs that demand very specific imagery, it can be

impossible to meet all requirements and find a batch of images that share an aesthetic. Illustrations that could have come from multiple sources, artists and aesthetics must be adapted to the palette and style of your project. Integrating video doesn't end with color correction. Using an overall color-grading style that considers grain quality and softness of focus, for instance, helps tremendously to unify shots that are coming from multiple different cameras. Sound effects should evolve into actual "sound design" with layering and additional processing. Even 3D models that arrive lit and textured aren't ready for rendering until their look is reflective of your creative direction.Â

Always Adapt and Refine

Stock is a great solution to managing production challenges when it comes to time and money, but only if used as a starting point in your process, not a direct beeline to the goal. It can either degrade the overall production value of your work, or elevate it far above whatever inherent project limitations you were faced with. Choose wisely and make the best use of what's out there - by making it your own.

Maria Rapetskaya is founder and creative director ofÂ Undefined Creative, a creative agency blending uncommon ideas with sophisticated design and polished execution to establish and cultivate brand awareness, through motion graphics and animation. The agency's clients include national consumer and media brands across platforms.

[Images are stock courtesy of Google Images]