

## **Image Licence in the Image File– The future of PLUS in Europe**

Seven years ago, photographer Mike Laye wrote an article for Photo District News heralding the automation of the image workflow. Wouldn't it be useful, he suggested, if the information about an image file were contained within it, like a message in a bottle. Images could be launched onto the image-using high seas with various bits of job-ticket information neatly tucked inside.

Time has moved on. Caption, credit, copyright and picture number are now more likely to be found within the image file. Automated data handling is an obvious win for the industry. But there's more to come; information about the licence granted to the user can also be inserted, and this is the territory of the PLUS Coalition.

PLUS is an international non-profit organisation founded in the US by Jeff Sedlik and Jeffrey Burke in 2004. Both working photographers with extensive experience in the stock industry, they were aware that creators and users were 'drowning in images' and that image and data management were a growing headache. They also knew about the difficulties of translating terms across national boundaries. With increasing international trade, and a need for customer-focused business models, the PLUS coalition was founded to simplify the communication and management of images rights to image buyers in any location.

Take a leap into the future. Imagine that every item in an image licence is uniquely defined in a controlled vocabulary. The licence can be translated to a machine-readable string of code which your software can enter in the image. Your customer's software can read the code, so the licence, rather than flapping around in paper form or attached to an email, is embedded in the image file itself. Or you can point to an updatable licence on a registry. It doesn't matter which country you are in or which language you speak if the controlled vocabulary, or matrix, of licensing terms has been translated to suit local conditions.

You can do it now! You can add a PLUS licence to an image by using a simple utility at [www.use-PLUS.org](http://www.use-PLUS.org), and all without paying a penny. Fill in a form, browse to find the image, and click to enter the licence. What's demonstrated there is just the first stage, and works only for single images, but you can test the concept. The information is placed in the image file in XMP format, so anyone with suitable software can read it.

If the software people play ball (and there's every indication they will) you will be able add PLUS codes to multiple images automatically from your own library software. We've progressed from 'scan once use many times' to 'add data once use many times'. Automation makes sense.

It's a sound idea, but will it work on an international level? PLUS has some powerful support particularly in the US, but the reception on the ground 'over here' has so far been at best luke-warm. It's early days yet.

Mike Laye wasn't just playing with ideas when he wrote his article. He was actively concerned about creators rights, and image identification. In 1999 he set up the Visual Creators Index (VCI), to create a registry of unique identifiers for images. Perhaps an idea before its time, the VCI didn't really take off, but it paved the way, and Laye's experience was instrumental in setting up the registries which are part of the PLUS system. Here creators, image providers, images and clients can all be registered

with an ID. With Orphan Works legislation looking ever more likely, the idea of registration is becoming more relevant.

You won't have to register anything if it doesn't suit your business. PLUS CEO Jeff Sedlik stresses that all parts of PLUS are optional. The licensing matrix can be used without the registration numbers.

The question of who pays for the service is critical. There's no point in a clever system that people can't or won't afford. The development stages of PLUS are being paid for mainly by Adobe, with contributions from Getty, Jupiterimages, major software providers and other industry bodies. Most of the technical and development services have been provided for free. Ongoing support and development will be paid for solely from membership fees.

While a basic registry listings and use of the PLUS standards are free, PLUS will support itself through membership fees on a sliding scale starting at \$75. The issue of affordability, both for smaller businesses and those in poorer countries will be resolved by mass membership. The fee, says Sedlik, will reduce with increase in membership eventually become negligible. That is the aim.

Membership benefits include voting rights, a unique PLUS ID, enhanced PLUS software, and the use of the registries. Users can decode licences for free, but membership allows them to view all their image licence transactions in one place.

Local working groups representing a range of industry sectors will be a key feature of PLUS worldwide. There are groups in Japan and Spain, and fledgling groups in Germany, Italy and the UK. In the UK, participation seems sluggish. The interim chair of the UK group is photographer Pete Jenkins, who is active on behalf of photographers within the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). He believes PLUS will help creators stay in the market for images, but is aware that there is a way to go to get sign-up in the UK. The key, he says, is not just convincing image providers of the benefits, but crucially to get users such as publishers and media conglomerates on board. There's a lot of hard work to be done.

With substantial support from Adobe and the big agencies, it is tempting to see PLUS as mainly of benefit to the large corporations. PLUS supporters say smaller providers will be better placed to hold their own in international markets as the system makes all forms of licensing – especially rights managed – easier for the user. PLUS is licence model neutral. But it simplifies transactions like the buying of multiple rights to an image, which can be irritatingly slow in current web systems. The advantages are available to everyone. PLUS Packs are bundles of rights which make the process even easier, but libraries will be able to automate their own rights combinations.

The slow take-up in Europe may be in part due to the perception of PLUS as a US outfit. The governing Board of Directors has international organizations involved, but with exclusively North American delegates to date. Sedlik is keen to emphasise that broad international participation is the aim. As original Board seats expire, nomination is open to any PLUS member organisation worldwide. Membership of working groups is available to all PLUS members.

Though Europeans may feel slightly out on a limb at present, there are many opportunities get involved. A methodical, deadline driven approach has enabled PLUS to grapple with what looks like a numbing level of detail. 'We are not currently doing a tap dance in front of the industry' says Sedlik. It is easy to see why. After a three year development process with the involvement of volunteers in 30 countries, the project must deliver the goods on the ground. With version 1.0 of the standards complete, there is room for change. The PLUS standards are updated every two years. The aim is to achieve uptake by software providers and get the full system up and running by 2010.

With support from Adobe and other software providers, and coordinated work with the IPTC, PLUS looks set to be a mainstream system. There's no competition. It's time now for Europe to

get stuck in properly. European champions need to sell the idea into our markets.

'PLUS is an organization without borders' says Sedlik. He admits that perception is an issue, but asserts 'The doors are open to individuals and organisations in any country.'

Mike Laye's message will cross the ocean in its bottle. The challenge for the image business is to make sure we all have a hand in writing it.

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