



Furnishing fabric and curtains produced using images from the Flowerphotos library, as shown at last year's BAPLA Picture Buyers' Fair. Expect to see more examples of such diverse uses for images at this year's event

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT to see at the Picture Buyers' Fair run by picture library association BAPLA? Pictures, yes. Furnishings? Perhaps not. But one of the delightful surprises at last year's fair was a display of designer chairs upholstered with original, tasteful flower image fabric and a background of similarly decorated drapes – all using images from picture library, Flowerphotos.

It should be no surprise to find libraries looking beyond their traditional markets. It's well known that the picture library industry is suffering from a glut of images and that royalty free and increased competition are driving image prices down. Advances in printing technology now mean that images can be printed on just about anything, from mugs and T-shirts through to toilet paper and wardrobes.

Picture libraries are diversifying as fast as they can, adapting to the challenges of the current climate. Furnishings are just one of the possible side-lines that Carol Sharp, owner of Flowerphotos, is considering, and she wants to create a distinctive brand in the retail market as well as in her traditional publishing niche. Greetings cards are now a major client group for her flower images and, as she says, "It's only one step from there to starting your own brand." She believes posters, calendars and other products could present other opportunities.

Print-on-demand facilities, which allow consumers to choose and buy art prints online, have been around for some time. Getty bought Art.com in 1998 in a move many saw as the beginnings of an entry into

CHAIRS, CURTAINS, PHONES: STOCK LIBRARY IMAGES ARE CROPPING UP IN THE MOST UNLIKELY PLACES. SARAH SAUNDERS EXPLAINS WHY

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business-to-consumer marketing for picture libraries. But that particular dot.com bubble never really materialised and, by 2001, Getty had closed the service. It was not leading anywhere, according to a Getty spokesman, and was not considered a necessary part of the business.

Three years on, there are signs that libraries are again interested in the home consumer. Carol Sharp is investigating the economics of entering the retail market, responding to interest generated amongst people who have seen images on her web site. Furnishing companies Villa Nova and Alto Concepts saw the possibilities for their business while browsing her site, and the chairs are a product of this liaison. People can choose the image they want printed on their own particular chair, and cushion covers, wardrobes and

other products have followed, but all still in experimental stage.

The main problem, says Sharp, is getting the products to market and working out the right formula for sales. Is it best to stick to the high end and deal only in fashion design to order, or is it more enterprising to target the popular market? She has her own views on this. "I hope research will indicate rewards in high quality 'special' products which can be more daring and inspirational," she says. "I want to be able to fulfil my vision of combining natural forms with functional or decorative objects."

Steve Bicknell has some hard-won experience in the retail business. He moved from commissioned photography into the picture library business as commissions started to drop away, but has now closed ►

◀his picture library, preferring to use Alamy for picture sales, and formed a new company Icarus to sell products into the consumer market. His motivation? To be in control of his own destiny.

But it's hard work dealing with a new market place, he says: "The first year has been a complete learning curve, trying to understand buying habits and distribution. There are a lot of pitfalls. Established circles make it difficult to break into the market from the outside. You have to invest a lot to produce a product and take it to market." He quotes a publisher acquaintance who once said "You have to have balls of steel to publish calendars."

Bicknell was always interested in the print side of the business and handles all aspects of the projects from print buying through to distribution. He

their own design. It's a nifty system, and one which will no doubt be used a lot in the future.

This is an experiment for Nagele, who says most enquiries come from Google and Yahoo searches. The problem is that "Ninety-nine percent of enquiries are 'timewasters' who expect a print for four dollars." Nagele believes a specialist portal for photographic product lines would be helpful.

This sentiment is echoed by Chris Parks of Image Quest 3D which offers picture library services, print sales, and a number of products to complement its main business of photographing marine creatures in film and stills.

Image Quest has always produced posters, 3D displays and other products for museums, but the company is looking at making the products more widely available. Parks says:

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knows he's playing a high risk game, but expects a good return. A good agent is a must, but Bicknell is taking every possible route to market at the moment and also sells direct, via wholesale and through deals with charities. He produces greetings cards and calendars but expects to go into other products like prints and diaries.

For libraries who don't want to invest so much in a new market area, it is useful to have a partner for fulfilment and distribution. Photographer and picture library owner Edmund Nagele runs a product shop from his website, powered by imaging company Colab who also provide fulfilment of orders. Punters can place their picture of choice on a number of different products – from prints to fridge magnets to coffee mugs – and move, or enlarge the picture to

"There is a real need for an agent who knows the contacts and who could tap into the consumer markets and match a picture library with suitable consumer outlets."

There is an issue of quality here. Parks set up a sister company a few years ago to produce 3D books. The venture was profitable but Parks eventually pulled out because, as he says, "We were interested in producing a quality product, which used the third dimension to show things that you couldn't see in two dimensions, but the people with the money were interested in 3D as a gimmick and wanted a quick return."

The prospects for image products are interesting, but some think the real profit lies in distribution of images to mobile phones and other "wireless" devices. Getty Images does have



London tiling company, **Digitile**, uses stock images, as well as some shot themselves, to produce photographic images on ceramics. Its website, www.digitile.co.uk, points customers to a list of recommended photolibrary sites

one toe in the consumer market – a deal with a telecoms company allowing images of football matches to be flashed up on mobile phones. Corbis also has deals with mobile phone companies in Japan and Europe which allow subscribers to access Corbis images on their phones.

Sports picture library, Empics, not only provides images, but has also patented a process to speed up delivery, so images appear on mobiles just seconds after that defining match moment. Empics also sells prints via football club sites, but chief executive Phil O'Brien doesn't see that as a major market. "Print sales are a good way of exploring the idea of making money together out of photography, but it doesn't add up to a business". He points out that print fulfilment costs are high and the volume of sales is

low. The market for electronic images is much greater with no cost of sale. And the market can extend to other events as well.

While the mobile phone companies receive a large percentage of the download fee for images, the potential numbers involved could make this a very attractive prospect. Picture libraries will have to do their sums. Some will go for high quality, low volume and others will go for high volume sales. Now where have we heard this kind of debate before? **CR**

Sarah Saunders runs image consultancy, Electric Lane. This year's Picture Buyers' Fair is at the Business Design Centre, London N1, from 12 to 13 May. For full details, go to www.bapla.org.uk