

THE PERFECT PICTURE IS only a click away, says the marketing blurb, but users of online photolibraries, and the libraries themselves, know there's a lot more to it than that. The way creative people search for images has become a matter of intense research as libraries compete for online customers. They are up against ingrained work practices, the foibles of new technology, and lack of online experience in some user groups. Are libraries getting it right, or are creatives still cursing as large numbers of irrelevant pictures load at snail's pace onto their screens?

Tony Stone, founder of Tony Stone Images, and an innovator in the field, has strong views on this. "It's an uncomfortable way to look for pictures. Most libraries have more than a hundred images online for every one that's ever likely to sell. Standard image searches almost invariably call up huge numbers of irrelevant images. Poor image editing and clumsy search systems guarantee searches which are long and inefficient."

But creatives who search online are happier than you might expect, though they use a variety of methods to reach their goal. Keri Powell, art buyer at Masius, wouldn't search any other way. Like other regular users she is adept at using search terms, has got used to the

systems of the larger libraries, and likes going one-stop shopping. "They are all really good," she says, though if she wants pictures from a specialist, she'll pick up the phone as "they are way behind with search engines and keywording".

Regular users like using the simple keyword search, which they refine using category and advanced search options, and associated keyword functions. On the most sophisticated sites, such as Gettyimages, users can set colour ranges, image orientation or type of shot (close-up etc) or use nouns, adjectives and locations to define their search terms further. Keywords entered by clients are often monitored against the success of the search, so that client feedback becomes part of an evolving keyword system.

Concept keywords, though seen to be useful, have a mixed reception. "If we enter words like 'love', 'beauty', 'sensuality' we sometimes get bizarre results," says Meredith Duke, designer for a fashion retail company. "One person's idea of 'beauty' is not everyone's."

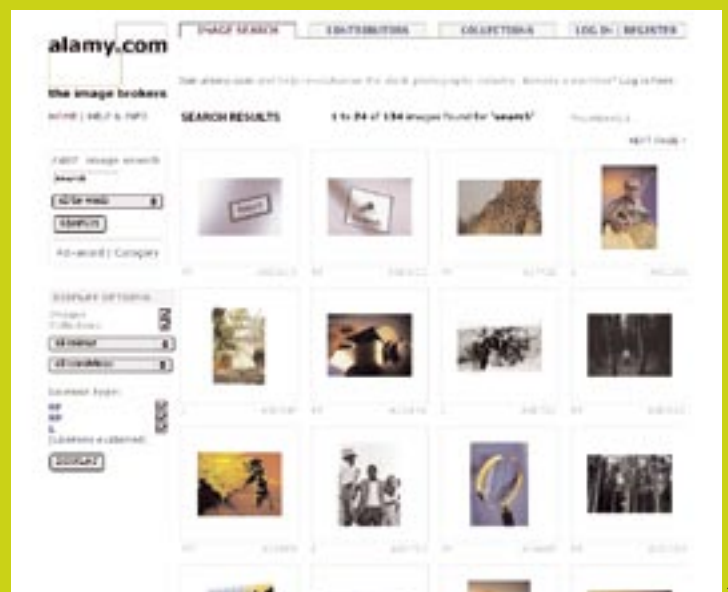
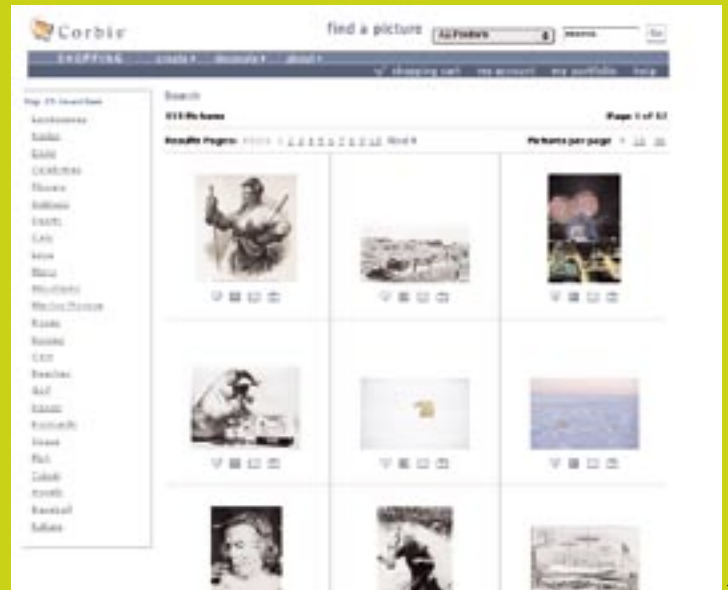
Derek Ferguson, who monitors customer feedback at Corbis, understands the problem. "We have a team of people evaluating the images as they come in – so it's not just down to an individual view. Design users need access to a

broad search which can then be refined. Using concept keywords opens up a collection to users."

With so many images now available online, it is clear that users will need ways of filtering out the irrelevant. Alamy, a new portal site, has approached this in a novel way – by hand-picking editors from various parts of the industry to put together collections relevant to their clients. The idea will be extended to include collections relevant to end-usage, like calendars, book covers and so on, and is an interesting take on the problem of numbers.

Alex Bortkiewicz, an ex-Stone editor, now at Alamy, says: "At the moment, people ►

Search requests on photolibrary sites such as those for (shown here) Corbis (1), Science Photo Library (2) and Alamy (3) can throw up a huge variety of responses to the same term. The challenge for online systems is to eliminate the irrelevant

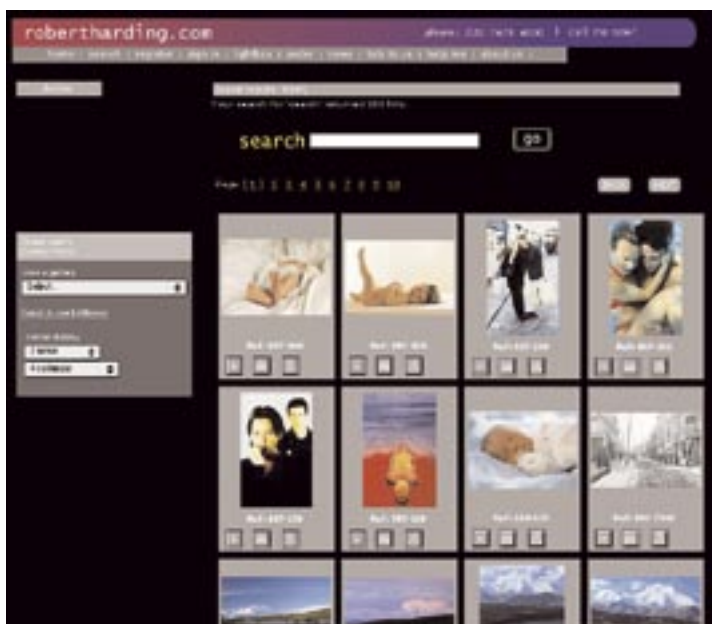


THE SEARCHERS

PHOTOLIBRARIES HAVE INVESTED HEAVILY ONLINE BUT ARE THEY MEETING USERS' NEEDS? ASKS SARAH SAUNDERS



Shown here: sites for Trevillion (1), Robert Harding (2) and Gettyimages (3). The growth of online services has led some to throw away their old catalogues but, says Tony Stone, online services do not, as yet, replicate the serendipity of flicking through a well-designed book



CUSTOMERS WANT A CHOICE BUT THEY ALSO WANT EDITING. THAT'S THE CHALLENGE FOR ONLINE SYSTEMS

◀ are still doing very literal keyword searches. But you get similar results from the same keywords from all the agencies, even though some of them have put huge resources into their keywording. There have to be other ways to find images. Customers want a good choice online, but they also want editing. That's the challenge for online systems."

Maria Storey is marketing manager at Science Photo Library, which has done extensive keywording and categorising work for its online service. But she thinks that too much intervention in the search process can sometimes be counter-productive: "Clients are not looking to be spoon-fed when they come to our site. Many of them are thinking creatively already. It's a more subtle process, which they want to do themselves by searching in the web environment. People will be inspired by seeing a certain type of picture, see other keywords attached to it and think, I want more like that."

Customers tend to agree. Sarah Thomson, art buyer at Abbot Mead Vickers, nearly always searches for something specific. "If I'm given a conceptual brief I try to reach

more specific ideas myself. Searching conceptually is so wide of the mark, I normally don't get what I want." Are there are too many images? "Sometimes, but I'd rather have more than not enough. I can usually refine the search enough myself to make it manageable."

Steve Conchie, designer at The Chase, agrees that the number of results can be frustrating, and would like to see new ways of whittling down the numbers. As with most creatives, time is of the essence, and he often does a search himself while getting his favourite agencies, Stone and Photonica, to search at the same time. "Sometimes

moment." Catalogues clearly have qualities missing from online – the feel, the look, the smell of a book is something people still like. This has certainly been recognised by Stone which, despite being at the forefront of online sales has, at the same time, reinvented its catalogues as more interesting design objects.

Books also offer a random path through images which are often visually as well as thematically linked. Tony Stone says, "there's nothing online which emulates the experience of finding pictures in a good catalogue. A catalogue offers opportunities for serendipity. I

they come up with other options," he says.

Although picture users like to access several collections in one hit, they agree that branding is useful, as it provides an extra indicator of style, an attribute difficult to define in words. You can talk about a Photonica style for example, but how would you describe that in keywords? Smaller libraries come into their own here. Trevillion Picture Library, specialising in designer images for book jackets, is a case in point. Michael Trevillion says: "A lot of our images are unclassifiable, but as our collection is small, it doesn't take long to flick through all of them. We have a very distinctive house style, which people know."

Can the online experience replace the use of catalogues? Users are divided on this. Some have thrown away their catalogues, while others use them regularly, though perhaps in a different way. Meredith Duke says, "If I get frustrated I leave my computer and look at one of the books." Could the online experience mirror the function of the catalogue at some stage? "Some people are trying to do it with galleries and portfolios, but they're not working very well at the

don't think anybody has thought out how to do it online, but I believe it can be done."

Many researchers are still reaching for the phone – prompted either by lack of time, or because library researchers can add something to the search. Robert Harding's online service allows for constant search and download, but he knows his customers still value the in-house search – he estimates that around 70 per cent of these are for non-specific or "woolly" briefs, where the experience and visual memory of in-house staff can be a real help.

What improvements would users like? Most simply want more speed. Aside from that, they can tap away happily in the knowledge that the competition out there is fierce and libraries are constantly on the look out for new features to make the online experience a better one. As Meredith Duke says, "You need someone who knows the way you're thinking involved in the programming. It comes down to the people working at the image library, and what kind of design eye they have." **CR**

Sarah Saunders runs Electric Lane, an image industry consultancy and training company