NEW EDITION

HOW TO SELL ONLINE

PHOTOS • ILLUSTRATIONS • AI • VIDEO

new anthem LEARNING

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

- THE AGENCIES WHERE YOU MUST UPLOAD
- THE TOPICS THAT SELL TODAY
- THE DOS AND DON'TS TO HELP YOU GROW

WELCOME!

This is a preview version of my book.

The FULL BOOK is available as part of the full course. You can find the link to it at the bottom of MicrostockLife.com.

Best of luck to you!

HOW TO
SELL ONLINE
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UPDATED: AUGUST 2024

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You can still do this today!

No one can promise you you'll make a fortune in microstock. But the people who succeed in this business follow some simple principles that 99% of their competition does not, and this book and course aims to help you understand these essential points to give you a leg up on your competition.

We're going to assume some things to start: you know how to take photographs, do illustrations or create video. And you have a general idea what microstock is. (If you don't, no problem -- that type of basic information is easy to find on the internet.)

Above all else, this book and course should help you appreciate that microstock is a business like any other. If you are able to determine what a customer needs and create something that meets those needs better than your competition, you should see success.

Yes, there are more people around the world entering microstock than ever before. Some say the party is over, that there's no longer money to be made since so many people are joining the agencies.

This reminds me of the Yogi Berra quote: "No one goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

If there was no money to be made in microstock, why are there more contributors than ever before? It's true that most will never see big success, but that's because most jump in after hearing they can make a quick buck by uploading their family vacation photos or everyday snapshots sitting on their phones.

These aren't serious microstockers. But you are, as you're proving by reading this book.

If you're willing to learn, and perhaps change your preconceived notions about what microstock is and what you need to do to win, then you will have an edge. How big your edge will be is up to you. Let's go!

MY JOURNEY: From zero to $1.5 million

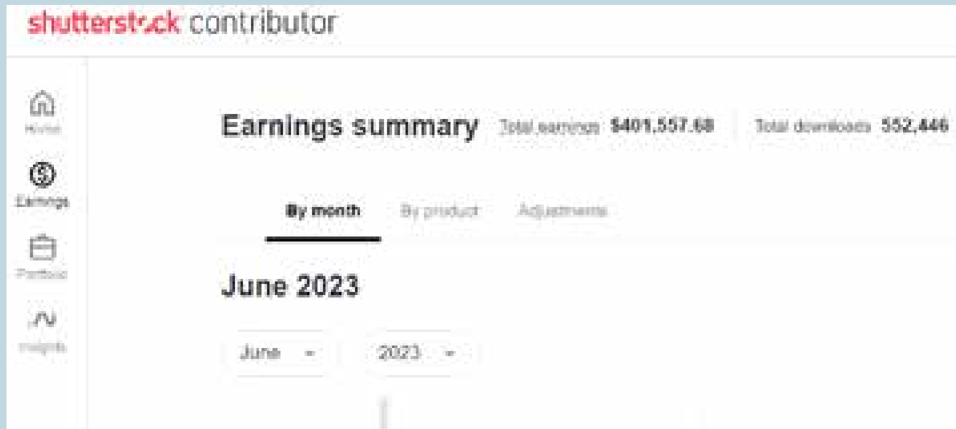
Something had to change. In 2008, I was stuck in a rut at work and my growing family needed more income. I had recently started buying microstock images for work projects and wondered if I too could make some income selling my own work.

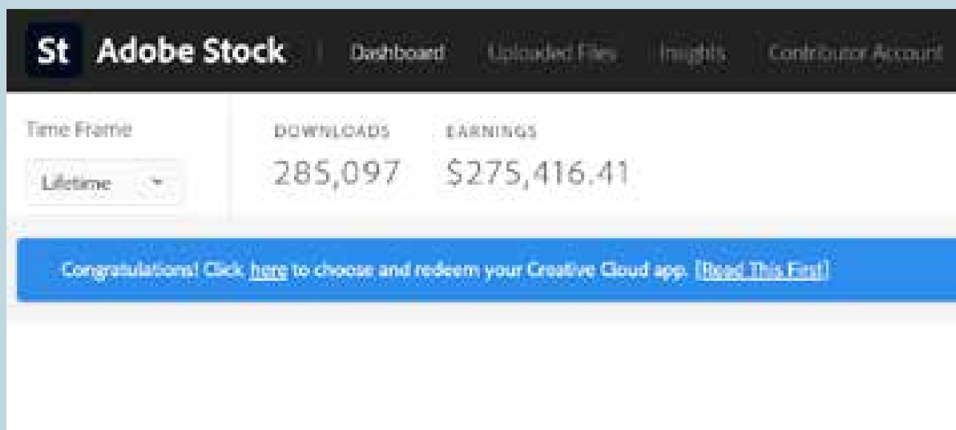
After a few rough starts finding my way, I soon had a portfolio of photos and illustrations at most of the big agencies, and my first earnings trickled in.

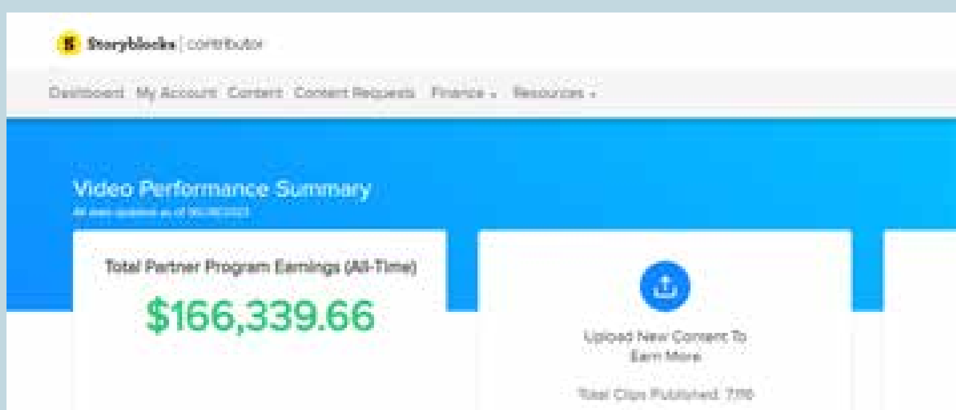
My 20-year background in marketing gave me an early leg up on the competition. Not only did I understand I had to meet the needs of customers, but I was a customer myself. I saw the business from both sides, and this insight led me to quick growth as a contributor.

<u>My microstock earnings:</u>

	income	assets
2008	$308	~200
2009	$17,236	~1,000
2010	$45,433	~2,200
2011	$90,881	~3,800
2012	$113,008	~5,200
2013	$109,958	~6,300
2014	$112,739	~7,500
2015	$110,137	~10,500
2016	$106,295	~13,500
2017	$97,593	~16,500
2018	$91,381	~19,000
2019	$103,721	~21,500
2020	$121,497	~24,000
2021	$134,872	~26,500
2022	$138,967	~29,000







The lesson: I never had great skills as a photographer or illustrator. It's my marketing experience that helped me succeed. That's what I will share with you in this book. Your skills, plus a business mindset, can **help <u>you</u> win!**

This mindset will help you beat the competition

It's not about you. It's about customers. You might love puppies and rainbows, but there's two reasons why you should NOT upload these: the agencies have more than customers will ever need, and customers need very few of them to begin with.

But you also shouldn't simply force yourself to comply with the most in-demand subjects, throwing your passion to the wind. You need to find the sweet spot where your passion overlaps with in-demand topics. Otherwise you'll start seeing microstock as a grind and lose the spark that gets you excited to create new content each day. That will kill your creativity and ultimately show in your work.

Make a list of the things you love to photograph, illustrate or animate. In a few pages, I'll share what I find to be the hottest, most in-demand subjects today, but don't look ahead. First, make your list and then we'll see where your passion topics merge with market demand.

Successfully figuring this out is like cracking the code of microstock, learning something most contributors never discover. Imagine waking up each day being excited to create new work, knowing you'll be rewarded for it when you upload. It's an adrenaline rush that fuels the most successful microstockers, and it's within your reach!

9 ways to find out what customers need

If only we could get into the minds of our customers, we would know exactly what they want to download before they realize it, and our content would be at the agencies and ready for them. It will never be that easy, but here are some methods that are the next best things!

Some agencies tell us what they need. Pay attention!

Top sites like Shutterstock, Adobe Stock and Storyblocks have sections in their contributor dashboards and/or publish newsletters describing what customers want but is lacking in their libraries. Your competition also sees this, but it's still golden advice!

Read the news, especially certain sources

What's happening in the world today predicts what customers will need tomorrow. But don't just go by headlines or you'll be a step behind. Watch for emerging trends. News outlets on finance or tech are the best predictors of in-demand themes.

Know customers who buy microstock? Ask them!

The best way to find out what a customer actually needs is to ask. While one person doesn't represent the whole market, you could get insights you won't find elsewhere. You can also learn what agencies are preferred, how certain content pops, and more.

Watch the top Google searches for trends

Trends.google.com provides a constantly updated wealth of information on what everyone is curious about right now. We hate when potential customers find an image to grab from Google instead of buying, but learn from them if you want a chance to sell to them.

Follow the authority on your 'sweet spot' topics

In a few pages, you'll see a list of today's hottest subjects to overlay with your passion topics to find your 'sweet spots.' Each of these should have a trade association, conference, news source or other authority you should follow closely to look for emerging trends.

Get hip with the kids, who often shape public taste

They're not microstock customers, but young influencers – sometimes even school-age kids – are big creators and consumers of viral content like TikTok videos, which the corporate world is desperate to emulate in its customer outreach.

Watch contributor forums ... with a grain of salt

Forums like microstockgroup.com can provide great insight on what's selling now, but are also full of people complaining. Learn what you can from those willing to share, but don't be discouraged by whiners and trolls.

Analyze your own data but don't cannibalize yourself

Watch your own views and downloads for clues on what's connecting (create more like this) and what's not (pivot away quickly). Don't just copy what you already have or you'll just compete with our own work. Instead, learn from our success and extend it.

Search 'Most Downloaded' at the agencies

This is last because all your competition is doing this, and it's also backward and not forward-looking, but skipping this is like being blindfolded. Don't just copy what you see. Ask yourself what new spin you could put on top content – how can you do it better?

How to dominate in the top subjects

1

Be there early. Sometimes you're lucky enough to identify a new, niche topic and be the first to upload high-demand content. If so, count your blessings and "flood the zone!"

2

Have the best keywords. Hopefully your images or videos are the best available on the subject, but if not, you can compensate by using the smartest keywords. Look at what words the leading content uses and add to them – others may be "leaving money on the table" by overlooking obvious terms that customers might use to find content on the subject.

3

Think like a customer. If you needed images or videos on the subject, how would you use them? What would you be trying to communicate? Reverse engineer the process of content creation by starting with the customer trying to meet a need, rather than starting with your creation and hoping it finds buyers.

4

Google the topic and see how customers use images and videos about it. Example: search "hire the best candidate" and you'll find recruitment services, job boards and other sites. Click these to see a range of images and videos – a magnifying glass on the words "perfect candidate," a line of people in white shirts and one wearing blue, a resume with a gold star. These were the "winners" for that site's image search. How would you do it differently?

5

Upload a variety of treatments. You might have created the perfect image or video and it's seeing great downloads. Don't stop there. Create different takes in many different styles, colors, angles and more. You might have hit on the exact topic a customer needs, but your competition might have the topic plus style that's desired. Don't lose those downloads by sticking to one or two styles.

6

Double-dip with unique combinations. Example: a customer might offer some type of retirement service, like financial planning. Two of the subjects in our "hot 30" list are "urgency" and "retirement." Why not show a middle-aged couple looking at a clock or calendar, checking their wristwatch or some other pose to indicate "time to save for retirement?" And be sure to use all related terms in the keywords!

7

Keep it fresh by uploading new content periodically. If you start getting a significant share of the sales on a certain subject, count on other contributors jumping in to steal your downloads. You want to make sure your content stays timely and relevant, and that you have some results showing near the top if customers sort by "newest" content.

8

Remember you're serving a diverse audience. Be sure to create content that represents different cultures – use a diversity of models and appeal to many geographic regions. More and more, you're serving a global audience and not all cultures have the same tastes. If you use models, add diverse faces to the mix, or at least include some that can't be immediately described as a specific race or culture.

9

Learn from what is working – "rinse and repeat." As you grow, you'll start building your own best practices. You'll apply certain styles to subjects and hopefully some will catch on. Apply those same approaches to many of the top-selling subjects to repeat your success over and over. Repeatability is a big key to success!

10

Make sure your images or videos stand out from the crowd!

Your content will be surrounded by many that could look just like it (hopefully not better!) What will make yours jump off the search results page and scream "download me?" Be sure to have special qualities, or "unique selling proposition," to ensure customers see your content and consider a purchase. How to do this? It's covered in the next section!

ADOBE STOCK

THE LOWDOWN:
YOUR INROAD TO MILLIONS OF BUYERS IN WORLDWIDE CREATIVE COMMUNITY

Veteran microstock artists recall an agency called Fotolia, which was a Tier One agency from the early days of the industry.

Adobe purchased Fotolia in 2015, and the creativity software giant quickly integrated the agency into its suite of services. Fotolia's legacy foothold in the market, plus the instant connections to creative professionals around the world, made Adobe Stock an immediate leader in the space and a must for any microstock artist.

Today, Adobe Stock is one of the most innovative of the agencies, being the first of the legacy companies to accept PNG files from contributors, and allowing AI-generated artwork into its library. While AI has been a point of contention among the contributor community, its inclusion at Adobe Stock signals that Adobe intends to be a leader rather than follower as the AI revolution unfolds.

My own experience: Shortly after Adobe's acquisition of Fotolia, it demonstrated a commitment to learning what customers and contributors wanted. In 2015, Adobe flew a few dozen of its top contributors – including myself – to its annual conference, Adobe Max in Los Angeles, where it collected our feedback on its direction for the future. At that time, I was convinced that Adobe intended to become the world's top microstock agency, and its progress in reaching that position has been remarkable.

ADOBE STOCK AT A GLANCE

ESTABLISHED
2005

IMAGE+VIDEO LIBRARY SIZE*
350,000,000

CONTRIBUTOR COMMISSIONS*
Up to 33% for images and 35% for video. Full details here

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
Ability for customers to discover and download your content from within Adobe applications

*** AS OF JUNE 2023**

SUCCEED AT ADOBE STOCK

File types accepted: JPEG, PNG, AI, EPS, MOV, MPEG, MP4 – See full requirements here

How to apply: Sign up online here

EASY UPLOAD SCORE: 8 (OUT OF 10)

Upload limits: Varies, based on your experience as a contributor

Accepts Editorial: Yes (but only what it calls "Illustrative Editorial," and must not include recognizable people")

Keyword limits: 49 for images and videos

Policies on AI: Accepts AI-generated artwork. See full policies here

Important tips:

- **Don't over-manipulate your images.** Adobe asks that you to "process your images subtly — clean color images that are in focus sell well."
- Adobe gives more weight to the first seven or so keywords, so be sure to put your most important terms – those your potential customers are most likely to search – right up front!
- If uploading AI-generated images, be sure to check the box indicating they are generated by AI.
- Adobe is known for its responsive answers to contributor questions or concerns. For example, Mat Hayward, the company's "stock contributor success manager" is a frequent participant in online forums where he quickly addresses contributor inquiries. Have a question? Ask Mat!

THE PROS & CONS OF ADOBE STOCK

\+ Great return on investment of your efforts and time

\+ Leads on new trends and technologies

\+ Access to enormous Adobe creative customer base

\+ Great customer and contributor service

\+ Relatively easy uploading system

\+ Commission system, in my estimation, is relatively fair and transparent, compared to the other agencies

\- Potential for rising competition from AI-generated art

SHUTTERSTOCK

THE LOWDOWN:
LONG-TIME LEADER AGENCY IS NO LONGER ON TOP, BUT STILL A TOP SELLER

From the earliest days of microstock, Shutterstock was widely acknowledged as the 800-pound gorilla of the industry. It was often the first agency new contributors strived to get into and the yardstick against all other agencies were measured.

In 2023, Shutterstock's standing is diminished, though it is still in the top three earners for most contributors. Changes to commissions have angered many contributors, with the most infamous cut being the 'big reset' each contributor faces on January 1. After a year of climbing the ranks based on downloads, which raises a contributor's commission level, each first day of the year puts you back at level 1.

Still, it's hard to ignore the volume of downloads possible due to Shutterstock's huge market share. While some contributors have taken a stand by ceasing new uploads or pulling their portfolios, it's tough to make a viable pursuit of microstock if you're excluding this leading agency.

My own experience: In Shutterstock's heyday (let's call it 2008 - 2018), they were far and away my top performer, sometimes earning twice what my number two earner brought in. They have contacted me twice over the years as they brainstormed with their top earners on new features they were considering. It's clear they're trying to strike that tricky balance of being competitive with an affordable offer to customers while making uploads worthwhile for contributors.

SHUTTERSTOCK AT A GLANCE

ESTABLISHED
2003

IMAGE+VIDEO LIBRARY SIZE*
460,000,000

CONTRIBUTOR COMMISSIONS*
Six separate earnings levels, from 15% to 40%. You rise through the levels as your download count increases throughout the year, and it resets to Level 1 each January 1. Full details

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
Big player, lots of customers.

* AS OF JUNE 2023

SUCCEED AT SHUTTERSTOCK

File types accepted: JPEG, TIF, EPS, MOV, MP4 – [See full requirements here]

How to apply: [Sign up online here]

EASY UPLOAD SCORE: 8 (OUT OF 10)

Upload limits: Up to 500 images and up to 100 video clips during any 7 day period

Accepts Editorial: Yes

Keyword limits: 50 for images and videos

Policies on AI: Doesn't accept AI-generated artwork. Allows your content to be used to train AI – meaning elements of your artwork could appear in AI art generated on other platforms – unless you opt out.

Important tips:

- **Be aware of the "similars" policy.** I find Shutterstock to be the strictest agency when it comes to images that seem similar. To avoid action taken against your portfolio, keep similars to a minimum, but when you feel the images are different enough to provide unique value to customers, separate them into different upload batches several days apart. The site software may still reject them as similars, but they will be less likely to be flagged by human reviewers if uploaded separately with gaps of time between.
- **Don't keyword spam.** Shutterstock strictly enforces it, and it's a bad idea regardless!

THE PROS & CONS OF SHUTTERSTOCK

+ Still near the top of the agencies with massive customer base
+ One of the easier uploading systems around
+ Contributor dashboard is thorough and easy to use

- The "Big Reset" -- after you claw your way up through the levels all year long, reaching a higher commission rate with each step, you now get knocked back down to Level 1 each January 1. Extremely demoralizing.
- It once had a "honeymoon period" for new content to enjoy great exposure and downloads right after being accepted, today new content has little chance to be seen.

BEST UPLOADING STRATEGIES

1. Upload in small batches

Even if you have 10 or 20 images or videos ready to upload, it's a good idea to separate them into smaller batches. Two reasons why: it lowers your risk of a large number of rejections if you have the misfortune of an inexperienced or moody reviewer saying no to an entire batch at once; and it lowers your risk of rejections due to similars (more on this below....)

2. Separate your 'similars' into varied batches

Some agencies (I'm looking at you, Shutterstock!) get a little crazy with rejecting uploads for being too similar to other uploads. I agree that uploads in principle are bad. We shouldn't overwhelm customers with nearly identical images and videos that add no additional value to other content. But sometimes reviewers (and AI algorithms) take it to the extreme. That's why I break up images and videos that could be flagged as similars into separate batches, submitted days or even weeks apart. It doesn't always prevent rejections, but I have noticed a decrease.

3. Submit content regularly – daily if possible

It's well known that your downloads will suffer if you take too long a break between uploading. Don't let this happen to you! Daily uploading is a great target. But we all have periods of being extremely busy or being away (vacations, holidays, etc.) When I see these periods coming, I ramp up my creation in advance and upload (but not submit) extra content right before a break. Then during my down period, I simply go in each day and hit the submit button on a few images and videos at a time. This tells each agency I'm still actively contributing and shouldn't be hit with the 'inactive' hammer, pushing my content lower in search results for customers.

4. Don't forget model and property releases

This should be a no-brainer, but I've seen my share of rejections for forgetting releases. Also, if your content includes objects like newspapers or contracts, agencies may reject them, assuming you're using protected intellectual property, even if you created them yourself. You should provide a release for those types of objects, telling the agencies you created them.

5. Prioritize your top agencies

To maximize the productivity in my daily workflow, I only do daily upload for my very top performing agencies, and bulk upload the rest on a less frequent basis. This frees up a bit of time each time for more content creation, but you do increase the risk of rejections for similars or due to a cranky reviewer saying no to many at once. You might test this a few times first before making this a regular practice.

6. Upload content with accurate titles

Every image or video you upload should be titled with words that accurately reflect the content. I've made the mistake of getting too conceptual with my titles, only to be rejected by reviewers who took the terms too literally.
For instance, I submitted an image with a title including the phrase 'nest egg' since it was about saving money for the future, but it was rejected since the image contained neither a nest nor an egg!

7. Check the right boxes

Another mistake I've made, requiring me to waste time uploading a second time... forgetting to check the box for "illustration" at Shutterstock, or uploading an AI-generated image at Adobe Stock without checking that box. These mistakes will earn you quick rejections, or put you at risk of action down the road.

8. For video: fine-tune your upload workflow

Submitting video is a much bigger pain than images, since clips don't include embedded metadata. We have to manually enter a title and keywords for each clip. To streamline the process, I keep a spreadsheet of keywords open and copy the cell with the appropriate keywords once, then paste for the file at each of the three agencies where I actively submit. Then I do the same thing for the file names. It may seem like a minor hack, but it probably saves me 10 minutes a day, which is time I'd rather use creating new content!

THE TRUTH ABOUT THESE MYTHS

Should I set up my own site to sell my content?

In a word, no. Many, including myself, have tried to set up their own site to earn big profits from selling directly to customers. The dream is that you'll earn 100% of the sale as opposed to a commission of around 30% (roughly the agency average). The problem is you would be competing with behemoths offering tens of millions of images and videos. Their SEO is long-established, meaning your content will be so buried in Google search results that buyers would never find it. That being said, if you have a large following of buyers and could share your links through social media and other channels as opposed to having to rely on placing well in search results, you may have a shot at earning more than the costs involved in hosting your own website. If your goal is to have a vanity site to show to friends and family, have at it – just be prepared to lose money with it.

Should I wait until my skills good enough?

When I started, I doubted my artistic skills would earn much money, and four years later I was making six figures annually. If you have just one takeaway from reading this book, I hope it's this: having a basic understanding of photography or illustration or videography is the price of entry, but it's your marketing knowhow that will determine your success or failure. Do NOT feel you have to master your artistic skills before diving into microstock. The sooner you start LEARNING what customers want from trial and error (and with a big leg up from what this book has taught you) the sooner you will start EARNING.

In my first few months in microstock, I reached out to a legendary contributor and asked for his opinion of my early content. He told me I wasn't ready, that I should wait to dive in until I had more finely honed my creative skills. I ignored that advice, and am glad I did. From what I can tell from his posts to forums over the years, my earnings surpassed his own several years ago. I now realize he was likely trying to discourage potential competitors. I hope I'm doing the opposite here. Yes, you might be a future competitor for me, but I have always believed in "paying it forward!"

Quality vs quantity – which is more important?

In most things in life, we're told quality is more important than quantity.
I'm tempted to tell you that in microstock they are equally important. But the truth is that quantity should win this battle. I'm NOT saying that you should upload content that is bad by any aesthetic or technical standard. You want customers to see a great portfolio and be enticed to download a lot of your content.

But remember this saying: "The perfect is the enemy of the good." It's a more productive use of your time to be creating and uploading 10 good images or videos a day than one perfect one. The good ones are just as likely to be seen and downloaded by a customer as the perfect one. Again, DON'T upload anything with technical flaws, or strive for mediocrity. Always strive for greatness, but don't throw out your results that reach goodness.

Do I need to promote my work on social media?

Sure, why not – but it's not necessary.
I have ZERO social media presence, and without it have earned six figures in microstock for many years. Customers download my work because it meets their needs in the moment. They don't care about me or what my latest uploads look like. Having a big social media following works well for fine artists, who have customers who collect their work. That's a totally different world than microstock, where creators are largely unknown to buyers and audiences. If you're in microstock to earn fans and followers, you're in the wrong business. The goal here should be spending more time creating and uploading, and less time on things that don't contribute to increasing downloads. Social media is definitely in that second bucket.

INTRODUCTION: STARTING YOUR JOURNEY

Welcome! And congratulations! By enrolling in this course, you've decided to make an investment in yourself, and I've always believed that's the best investment you will ever make.

You've decided that selling your photos, AI generated images, illustrations or video online is possible. And you're absolutely right. You can make passive income if you follow the detailed steps and advice I'll share in this course.

This course is structured based on the key topics you'll need to master to succeed at selling your work, and a total of more than 20 modules, so you can learn at your own pace. Whether you take a small step or a big step everyday, remember that each step gets you closer to your goal. This simple concept has helped me on my own goals in life, in all that I've done. Every journey is a series of steps, and if you commit to making some steps each day – whether it's twenty steps or just one – or giant leaps or little movements – the key is, you're closer each day to your goal.

This is an especially important idea in selling your work online. As you start out, you'll probably upload just a few images or videos. And the sales will start out small. But as you learn, you'll upload more – and figure out what buyers like, and create more of that great content. Hopefully, you'll start to see a snowball effect, with success building on success.

This course will help you whether you intend to sell photography, AI images, illustrations or videos. The principles I share will apply to your chosen media, whatever that may be. You see, stock photography is a business, and the principles of serving customers what they need is true no matter what you're selling.

You might be wondering – are my skills good enough to make money at this? As I'll share in a moment, I think I'm a good example of how just about anyone can do this, even if you don't consider your technical skills to be sufficient. Yes, you need to know how to shoot a picture or a video, or how to write a great AI prompt (which I'll teach later), or do some basic illustration. But more important than that is to figure out what customers want, how to meet those needs in a way that others aren't, and make it easy for customers to find your work. That's the winning formula, and if you can master it, your goals will be within reach.

Throughout the course I'm going to be posting the key things that you must remember on screen like you see here. Just about every module will include one of these GOLDEN RULES. So right here in the introduction, we're going to call this GOLDEN RULE #1… it's actually three rules in one, which makes it that much more crucial to follow: Figure out what customers want, meet these needs in a way that others aren't, and make your work easy to find.

This is also a golden rule in marketing, which has always been my day job, so I was fortunate to have my marketing background as a foundation in building my microstock side career. Many of your competitors don't get this basic principle, and now that you know it, if you embrace it, you're going to be ahead of a lot of your competition. In addition to these GOLDEN RULES, I'll also share GOLDEN HACKS because I don't just want to say "Always Do This" without actually showing you "How to Do This." So, Golden Hack #1 explains one way to find out what is selling and to hone in on a lucrative niche. Let's say you have an opportunity coming up to create an image or video of business people – always a popular theme, but also a very competitive one. Go to AdobeStock.com, do a search on business people, -- expand the filters and select photo, illustration or video – whatever it is you plan to create, and this is the key -- sort by Downloads.

GET THE FULL BOOK!

This was a preview version of my book.

The FULL BOOK is available as part of the full course. You can find the link to it at the bottom of MicrostockLife.com.

Best of luck to you!