

# Crowdsourcing & iStockphoto

Kate McCurdy

In February 2007, Getty Images purchased iStockphoto for the sum of \$50 million. At the time, Getty Images CEO Jonathan Klein was quoted as saying, 'If someone's going to cannibalise your business, better it be one of your other businesses.' What began as a free image-sharing exchange used by graphic designers, has in just seven years has grown into an industry leader in social networking and micro-payment systems, and claims to have become the world's highest volume seller of stock imagery, audio and video. The fact that iStockphoto's success made image library and agency giant Getty Images sit up and take notice is astounding in itself. However, the business rules employed by iStockphoto, which has allowed them to achieve this level of success, is something that no business can afford to ignore: the power of crowdsourcing.

## What is crowdsourcing?

Crowdsourcing was first identified by journalist and author of a book on the phenomenon, Jeff Howe, in an article published in Wired, June 2006. On his Crowdsourcing blog, Howe describes crowdsourcing as 'the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call'. This new kind of outsourcing capitalises on the power of the collective; people with shared interests and skills getting together to create and design products, solve problems and contribute content. Significant advocates of crowdsourcing include social networking sites MySpace, Facebook and Second Life, as well as businesses that couldn't survive without the input from users, such as eBay and, of course, iStockphoto.

## How iStockphoto applies the crowdsourcing model

iStockphoto was a prime example of crowdsourcing in Howe's article and subsequent publication, and is deemed to be a market leader in utilising web communities for business. Traditionally an image-sharing site, iStockphoto has grown into a ever-expanding community with benefits for contributors and consumers alike. Vice-President of Marketing Kelly Thompson recalls how the initial marketing for iStockphoto depended mostly on 'word of mouth,' and quickly became popular for contributors due to the services and rewards offered by the site.

'iStockphoto was the first site of its kind to pay contributors. It was also the first to show how many times an image had been downloaded, something that other stock image libraries do not freely publicise,' says Thompson. What grew out of this was a rewards system within iStockphoto where contributors are given a status relating to how many times their work has been downloaded, leading up to the Diamond level. iStockphoto offers those who have had more than 500 downloads to become 'Exclusive Artists'. This title reflects not only the high-volume of downloads by the contributor but also that their work is available only through iStockphoto. Australian-based iStockphoto contributors Russell Tate and Che McPherson are both Exclusive Artists, and both believe that this arrangement is mutually beneficial.



*The Garden*

**Che McPherson (chemc)**

'I get a lot of enjoyment from illustrating characters as most of my work is abstract.'

### iStockphoto 'Exclusive Artists'

Che explains that as an Exclusive Artist with iStockphoto, he 'can't upload to other royalty free sites,' but this means that he can 'focus on creating images rather than uploading to multiple sites.'

This is also the case with Russell who says that his exclusive iStockphoto profile 'suited me just fine as the last thing I wanted was having to upload to different sites and constantly having to check in with them to see how things were going.'

In addition to being able to easily manage their work through their profile, there are other benefits to the relationship. Che outlines some of the 'great benefits from iStock, including up to a 100 per cent raise in royalties depending on my canister level (amount of downloads), inspection priority, a contract with Getty Images, plus much more.'

This refers to the fact that Getty Images now accepts iStockphoto Diamond level contributors as Getty photographers. Kelly Thompson says that now that they are a wholly-owned subsidiary of Getty Images, 'apart from the prestige of being a part of one of the top image libraries in the world, we are delighted to have more to offer loyal iStockphoto photographers.'

The micro-payment system which allows consumers to purchase images starting at \$1, via credits, allows anyone access to high-quality images at a low price. Thompson believes iStockphoto has and will strive to continue to have 'the best quality to price ratio' in this business.

### Russell Tate

Russell Tate is a graphic designer and illustrator based in Sydney with his company MT Generator, which he runs with his wife Catherine at their home studio. He has been an iStockphoto contributor since 2005. With almost 1800 vector illustrations and over 76,000 downloads from his portfolio, he points out that it's not as simple as it may appear.

'Don't get me wrong, it's not an easy ride and not everyone gets accepted. I have rejection notices for over 400 images that they have considered not to be up to standard. The bar is high, but you feel a certain satisfaction when a new images is accepted.'

Russell happened upon iStockphoto when he was searching for a photograph for a design project, and found iStockphoto.com welcoming and was encouraged that they were interested in submissions from 'anybody, regardless of location or skill level. I liked the idea that they wanted everything! Any kind of art: slick, grungy, modern, old fashioned, cutting edge, cheesy, high tech, low tech, etc. As long as it was well drawn and well constructed they would consider it for submission to their image library.'

### Che McPherson

Che McPherson – or chemc as he is known on iStockphoto.com – is based on the Gold Coast, and works in commercial design, illustration, photography and traditional and digital art. He describes himself as 'constantly jumping from medium to medium for creative input. I draw inspiration from a large cross section of sources and my love of mixed media pretty much defines me as a designer and artist.'

Che has been contributing to iStockphoto since 2003, and has a considered approach to his portfolio. He has uploaded over 300 images but has deactivated a third so that his portfolio now contains just over 200 images.



top  
*One trick pony*  
Russell Tate

above  
*Tastes Like Candy*  
Che McPherson (chemc)

'I consider deactivation just like spring cleaning, so I deactivate my files to ensure I have a stronger overall portfolio,' he says. 'I'm not sure that makes good business sense, but I feel it's necessary for growth. I ultimately concentrate more on quality rather than bulk. This reflects in sales, with close to 40,000 and growing!'

### Global contributions keep things moving

The iStockphoto community is not restricted to image sharing, but rather the crowdsourcing model is applied site-wide to achieve high-quality content and information. For example, members of iStockphoto such as Che and Russell can submit articles which range from advice on techniques to explorations on creative themes and concepts to interviews with designers. Everyone in the community is encouraged to contribute their knowledge of copyright issues to the iStockphoto Technical Wiki. Like Wikipedia, and indeed the iStockphoto business model in general, this is crowdsourcing working at its best. By handing over the job of researching copyright to the community, the Technical Wiki can stay up-to-date with information from around the world, which is then verified by iStockphoto experts.

### How iStockphoto gives back

By applying the crowdsourcing model to the way that the entire company operates, the team at iStockphoto can remain relatively small, with approx 50 members of staff employed at the headquarters at Calgary, Alberta Canada. A further 80 experts operate globally to inspect and approve images and other crowdsourced content, checking for intellectual property and creative and technical quality and integrity. Approximately 40,000 images are submitted to iStockphoto every week and through the help of software applications as well as the collaborative nature of the company and the sense of working as a team, iStockphoto can give their contributors and consumers quick yet considered responses to their submissions.

iStockphoto also actively markets and supports its contributors by providing business cards and viral marketing tools, features their work in iStockphoto advertising and PR programs, and provides intensive educational sessions called iStockalypse and Vectorlypse in locations around the world. The Designer Spotlight section of the website encourages designers who purchase images from iStockphoto for particular projects to submit the completed designs back to appear on iStockphoto.com. Each item includes all the components used to create the design, and allow consumers and contributors alike to see how these images are used everyday.

### A strong sense of community

Both Che and Russell believe their iStockphoto profiles have not only allowed them to find potential clients by being able to showcase their work online, but also made them feel part of a significant community and helped them to grow as artists. 'I think it's broadened me a little as to the many different styles people use in illustration,' says Russell. 'It's also prompted me to try different styles and approaches...I don't really know anybody in Australia who is an iStockphoto member (although I know there are plenty of them!) but I keep in contact with about ten people mainly in the USA, and we often alert each other if we see their work online or have a question.'

Che believes that it is a very 'special' community. 'The community means everything to me. I always feel like I am indebted to it and try to give back as much as I can,' he says. 'You have this wealth of knowledge from a team of amazingly talented artists who are all willing to share and grow as one. Full marks to the image inspectors, which I feel are at the heart of the community, and always the first to help and nurture contributors.'



Town View Map  
Russell Tate

For more information on crowdsourcing:

Jeff Howe's Crowdsourcing blog  
[crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2007/04/faces\\_in\\_the\\_cr.html](http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2007/04/faces_in_the_cr.html)

Crowdsourcing by Jeff Howe  
[www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307396204](http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307396204)

Wired magazine  
[www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/look.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/look.html)

iStockphoto links:  
[iStockphoto.com](http://iStockphoto.com)

Che McPherson (chemc)  
[www.istockphoto.com/chemc](http://www.istockphoto.com/chemc)

Pixel Pimps (Che McPherson)  
[www.pixelpimps.net](http://www.pixelpimps.net)

Russell Tate  
[www.istockphoto.com/RUSSELLTATEdotCOM](http://www.istockphoto.com/RUSSELLTATEdotCOM)