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news

25 March 2009

Alamy's 'unlimited downloads'

Contributors to Alamy picture agency are questioning the introduction of an unlimited download service for UK newspapers.

In a recent blog post, James West, Alamy's CEO, says that UK newspapers are spending 30% to 70% less on stock photography this quarter compared to last year. After talking with editors, West explains that print sales have been falling and will continue to do so, while online versions of newspapers 'have yet to deliver a revenue stream comparable with that of print'.

More worrying for photographers, according to West, is the fact that picture desks are now buying images only from stock agencies offering subscriptions. 'Alamy is the only large supplier of imagery not offering a subscription scheme to newspapers and we are being squeezed out of this market by offers from our largest competitors,' wrote West. 'These deals are in addition to, and separate from, newswire subscriptions. In the past we have managed to keep away from these deals because we represent a lot of material that isn't available anywhere else. Unfortunately, the recession is forcing a change in behaviour at the picture desks that leaves little opportunity for image providers who don't offer unlimited downloads for a fixed fee. To put this in context, our largest UK newspaper customer has ordered its picture desk to only download images from agencies it has subscription deals with.'

Consequently, Alamy has announced it will be offering its own such subscriptions to UK newspapers. 'Broadly speaking, any subscription offer needs to be priced at or below the total expenditure for the previous year for an unlimited number of downloads,' said West. 'Wherever possible, we will allocate revenue to contributors based on usage, but in some cases we may have to divide up the revenue based on downloads. It is hard to judge in advance what impact this will have on the average price per image for this market. At one end of the scale prices will remain at or slightly below 2008 prices, whereas at the other end prices might fall by up to 50%, or perhaps even more. My expectation is that we will see a mixture of both.'

He added: 'We face a stark choice - either we adapt to match the competition, or we accept that UK newspaper revenue will continue to decline sharply over 2009.'

However, contributors have protested against the use of subscriptions arguing that Alamy is 'not dealing with the problem at hand,' says freelance photographer Pete Jenkins. 'It's insane to start devaluing your product if two or three of your clients can't pay their bills,' he tells BJP.

According to West, the UK newspaper market represents 8% of Alamy's annual revenues.

'The subscription model works great for Alamy because it guarantees their revenues,' Jenkins adds. 'However, contributors' revenues are not guaranteed. On the contrary, they will most likely fall. Alamy is no longer acting as an agent to photographers.'

West has defended his decision arguing that 'our assumption that the uniqueness of the images on Alamy enables us to keep away from subscription deals has been obliterated in recent weeks. Financial difficulties being faced by these customers have overridden the fact that Alamy has a better selection to offer than our competitors,' he says. 'If we sit back and do nothing, over \$1m in revenue will be wiped out over the next two years'.

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