

iStock™

Using Imagery in Digital Marketing 101



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936885974, nesharm

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Cover image credits:

599922122, Jacob Ammentorp Lund

Introduction

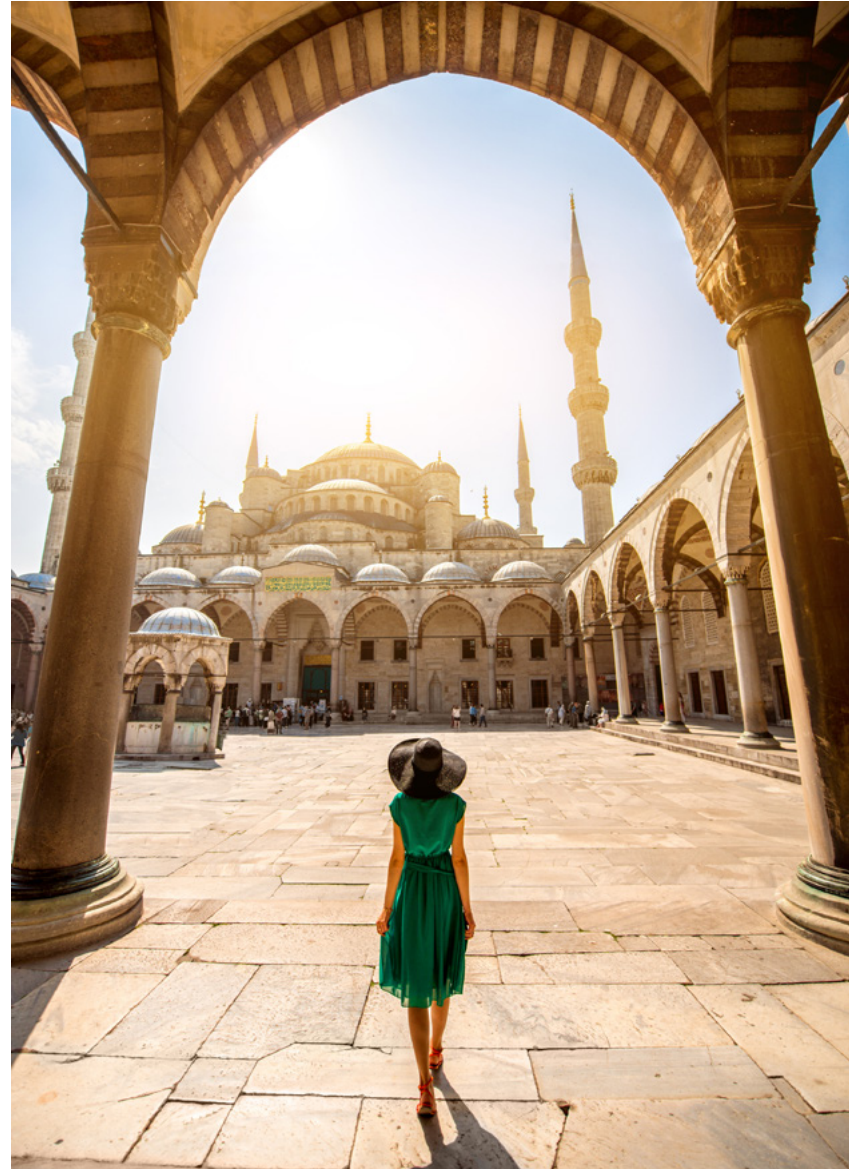
A powerful visual can captivate a viewer instantly.

That's why every piece of content you share needs at least one –and another every 100 words or so, according to BuzzSumo¹. So that you not only communicate, but truly connect.

Without the need for words, photographs, illustrations and other forms of graphic art can immediately convey a powerful message that speaks to your brand alone. And a carefully curated selection tells a story that engages and retains a readership while creating a lasting impression on any audience.

Effective visuals can help drive brand awareness and conversions², which matters most to the success of your business. With iStock's extensive collection, the highest quality images are within reach—for any kind of company or independent creative working today.

Read on to discover what to look for, and how easy it is to find.



511054492, RossHelen

Know Your Audience

According to The New York Times' Customer Insights Group, there are five reasons why people share and consume content online³:

- Bring valuable and entertaining content to others
- Define themselves to others
- Nurture relationships and stay connected
- Feel more involved in the world
- Support causes or issues they care about

Your personal and professional brand visuals, and everything you share online and off, should fulfill one or more of these objectives. And for small businesses, independent contractors, and many others, it's a unique visual language that helps you truly stand out from the crowd.

High-value content relies on powerful images to get seen and shared—and they help build brand equity, too. With a curated selection of visuals, a company and its content become more memorable and fun to interact with for audiences old and new.





1147375440, nesharm

Who are they?

Your audience goes online to find information, inspiration, and entertainment. But as a business and a brand, it's up to you to understand who it is you're trying to engage.

An effective marketing strategy depends on outstanding visuals that are specifically curated with clear customer personas in mind. Know who you're dealing with, and the work of curating your unique collection of imagery will be all the easier.



1003547058, Jelena Danilovic

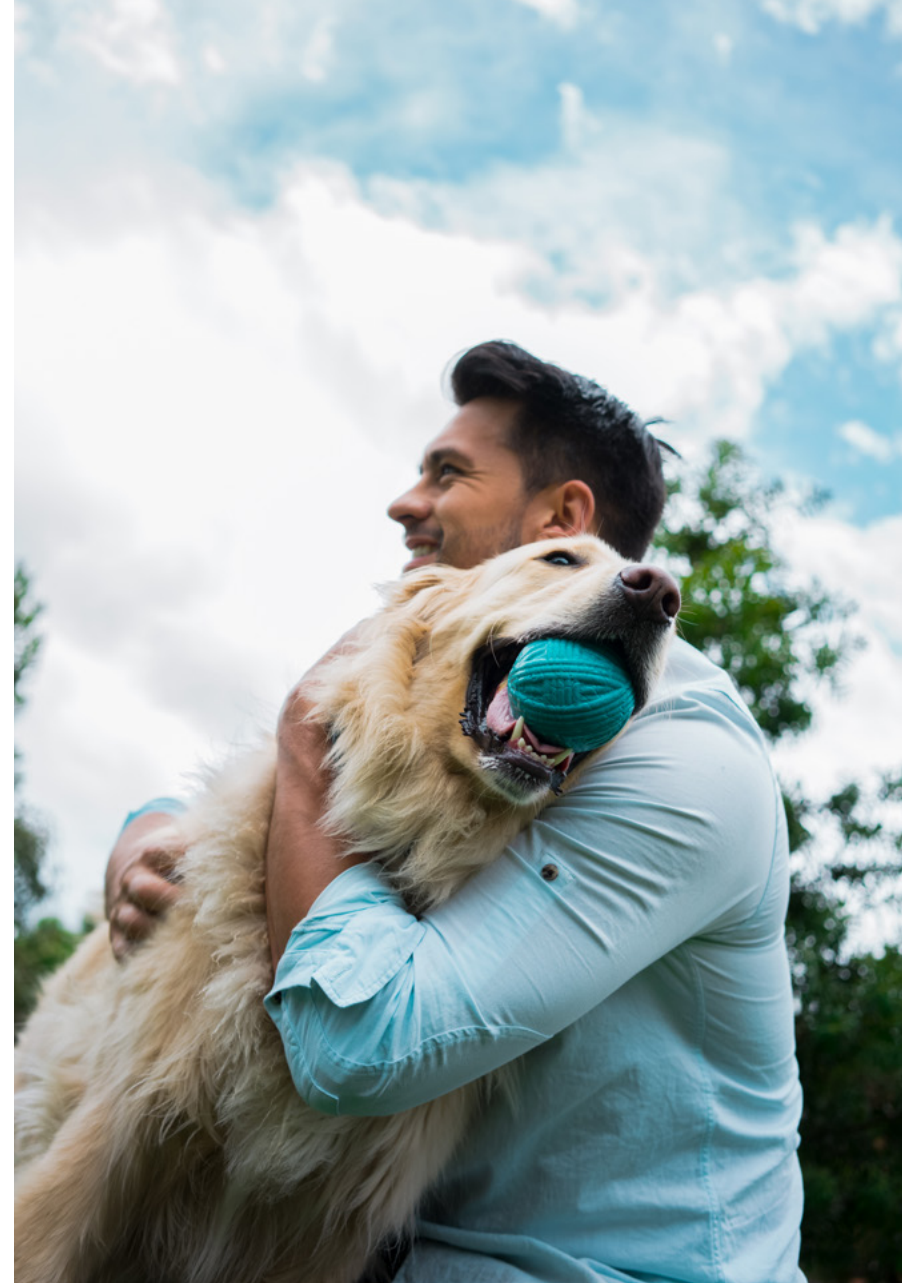


1159441480, Lyndon Stratford

What do they care about?

People are drawn to visuals that resonate with them for one reason or another. Maybe it's something about the light quality or color palette; the angle, composition—or maybe it's the subject matter and the figures they see.

Customers clicking on photos of real-life people are twice as likely to convert⁴, so forget about perfectly-posed models and product shots. Instead, aim to mirror the lives and values of your viewers with imagery that tells a story relevant to their everyday.



1148255431, Ricardolmagen



1158242307, Ridofranz

Where do they live?

Figure out where and how your audience prefers to consume content, whether it's on Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest or elsewhere. Boosting your cross-channel efforts helps reach more people—and more kinds of people—so you can begin to tailor your content accordingly.

While researching your competitors, pay attention to their digital presence. Where have they built a strong sense of community? Which platform seems to be the most engaging? By targeting your efforts based on your findings, you too can reach that target audience.



518250304, JANIFEST

Take note

User research, sales insights, competitor analysis, and similar efforts are key to understanding your target market. Do your homework, put a documented strategy in place, and commit to sourcing quality visuals that fall in line with your goals.

Genuine imagery ignites an audience's emotions and passions, encouraging them to connect with—and share—the story you're trying to tell. Real feeling, captured in a flash of time; that's the making of a super shareable image.

Explore iStock's collections to get a feel for what's available, and what makes sense for your brand. They're organized by themes like lifestyle, nature, business and beyond, with categories dedicated to particular professions as well as moods and feelings, illustration and artwork, videos, and more.

1179773952, Salvideo



901870436, monkeybusinessimages



1146077080, Yana Tatevosian



1197166101, Nadzeya_Dzivakova



Tell a Tale

Craft your story

Images can be used in many ways to engage, connect, and build meaning. In blog posts and long-form content, they illustrate ideas while providing visual cues and steady breaks that keep people scrolling for more. And in social media and email marketing, they catch the eye and drive traffic back to your site.

Your audience interacts with your brand in many different spaces, so you need to be telling a unified story. That goes for your voice as well as your visuals.



1191755232, Drazen Zigic

Use authentic imagery

Select images of real people who reflect your audience and the world beyond. Meaningful photos frame real folks in ways that convey an evocative story and echo real-life experiences.

If your audience can identify with the individuals they see in your imagery—or with the feeling that an illustration, abstract, or landscape shot evokes—they're bound to make an emotional connection. And that's key to building a memorable brand.



1077244886, PredragImages



1179131092, Deagreetz

Be timely and relevant

Choose images that feel of the moment—in their quality and subject matter. Remember, it's okay to take risks with your visuals if you know they'll resonate with your audience. These choices can earn you respect and generate valuable brand affinity.

Whether you're planning a seasonal campaign or taking a chance on real-time marketing, the right picture can make an unforgettable impression. So be a thought leader, even if you're starting small.



614214170, Rawpixel

Take note

Your unique visual language—a consistent aesthetic and quality level—should be present across all your efforts. That kind of consistency leads to faster recognition and boosted brand awareness.

Depending on your market, cultural considerations are a must. Libraries like iStock’s feature diversity in all forms as well as an extensive collection of varied illustrations, vector art, and abstract graphics.

Try keywords that narrow down certain demographics or parts of the world, and use terms like “family,” “office,” and “small business” to get more specific. Searching for illustrations by style or subject matter is also easy; check out collections of [doodles](#), [silhouettes](#), [retro and vintage looks](#), and [much more](#) on iStock.

1167527105, IMR



1129306933, elenabs



1134102363, elenabs



1186850628, Ponomariova_Maria

Get Strategic

Brand values

Brand values are about who you are and what you care about as a company. They create a link between a business and its customers.

Once you define your brand values, a powerful visual language can start to emerge. You may then consider: What do your images say about your business? Do they capture your brand personality? Do they deliver your company promise?



1141671061, monkeybusinessimages



1077691330, monkeybusinessimages

Cohesive storytelling

Successful cross-channel narratives start with a curated selection of quality imagery. Narrow down the aesthetic that makes sense for your project and commit to editorial

guidelines that ensure your content looks on point—on-site, across social, and wherever your audience sees it.



1135314857, Yulia Glotova



1151571123, anderm

Color matters

Color is a great way to convey your unique brand identity while expressing certain qualities, tones, messages. Keep in mind that when it comes to marketing, different colors carry different connotations:

- A blue signals strength and trust
- Red stands for excitement and action
- Yellow conjures warmth and optimism
- Orange evokes confidence and friendliness
- Green says peace, health, and growth
- Purple sparks knowledge and imagination
- Gray expresses balance and calm
- Black embodies sleek and modern
- White reflects serene and minimal



953709586, gerenme

Take note

If you're feeling stuck, take a deep dive into what your competitors are doing. And many top brand style guides are available online. See how the best create what they do, and apply the same ideas to your own efforts.

Have a look at some of your favorite Instagram accounts. What do the most visually appealing have in common? Usually, it's a dedicated color palette. But don't pick a color just because. Instead, think of the impression it'll make—and whether it makes sense for your brand.

See what's available when searching by color once you have a palette. For cohesive storytelling, try adding keywords that focus on moods, feelings, and certain tones—or, better yet, find a photographer or artist you love and browse their series of work.

1148913573, Edalin



1136275398, FamVeld



1209940241, Edalin



1167195361, max-kegfire



1139461907 FXQuadro

Technically Speaking

Light the way

Light quality is a great way to immediately set the tone for an image, page, post, or particular piece of content. Soft tones from a natural light source create a warm effect that invites viewers in. And a hard flash and high contrast can quickly grab attention and set the scene for something else entirely.

Utilize crop

Ever find the perfect image—if only it were cropped? Don't underestimate the power of a close-up or detail shot, or how easy they are to achieve. Whether you're working with an illustration that's made up of various elements, a busy photo, or any kind of visual, cropping couldn't be more simple.



1164950306, jacoblund



1068078944, FatCamera

Consider composition

Many elements dictate a visual's composition: the rule of thirds, symmetry (or lack thereof), textures and patterns, lines, white space, and so on. Used effectively, these make the eye linger and encourage viewers to read on or click through.

Certain spatial relationships can even improve understanding and create hierarchy, balance, or focus, depending on the visual at hand.



816692254, Wavebreakmedia

Take note

You don't need a professional designer, photographer, or editor to curate and publish professional-looking images. Just a quality visual library like iStock's and perhaps a few simple tweaks.

Once you purchase a stock image, you're free to do with it as you please. Maybe that's a crop, a full tint, a flip, or collage. Think outside the box and don't hesitate to get creative when it comes to branding your visuals; it couldn't be easier with iStock Editor.

Don't forget the power of "negative space" (also known as "white space"). Add these keywords to your searches to discover images that offer space for headlines or chunks of text—or that simply fit your look.

1182702031, Edalin



1141394668, Ridofranz



670564412, GreenArtPhotography



1157735036, eggeeggjiew

Formatting + Optimization

Now that you know what you're looking for, let's dive into some details. Proper formatting boosts engagement, so it's worth knowing how to optimize your work. Here's what you need to maximize your success and reach your imagery's full potential:

Image dimensions

Dimensions are critical when it comes to sharing visuals on social media. Different platforms have different guidelines, and you should keep informed of what they are. Profile pictures, header images, shared posts, Instagram squares, and Instagram Stories shots all have set measurements that should be followed for optimal viewing.

A quick search will reveal what's relevant to your efforts. Keep the information bookmarked for quick and easy reference, and pay attention to sizing on your own site and landing pages as well. Hitting the sweet spot in terms of dimensions can lead to increased conversions, so spend some time getting it right—and always optimize for mobile.



1082456906, jacoblund



1132990983, YakobchukOlena



500649837, pixdeluxe

Alt text input

From an SEO standpoint, optimizing the alt text of your images (every one of them) can also lead to more traffic. Search engines can't recognize visuals, so alt text provides readable information that signals what the image adds to the content. Visuals can then be filtered and ranked in image search results, providing an additional traffic source for content creators.

In terms of accessibility, alt text is key for users who are blind or otherwise visually impaired. It's what screen readers use to relay information, and when a page loads with missing images, it's what appears in their stead to give readers context. It should be concise and speak to what the visual depicts—not to your product or the content on the page.

Alt text

High angle view of small boy playing with a kitten while relaxing in bedroom.



Ads + A/B testing

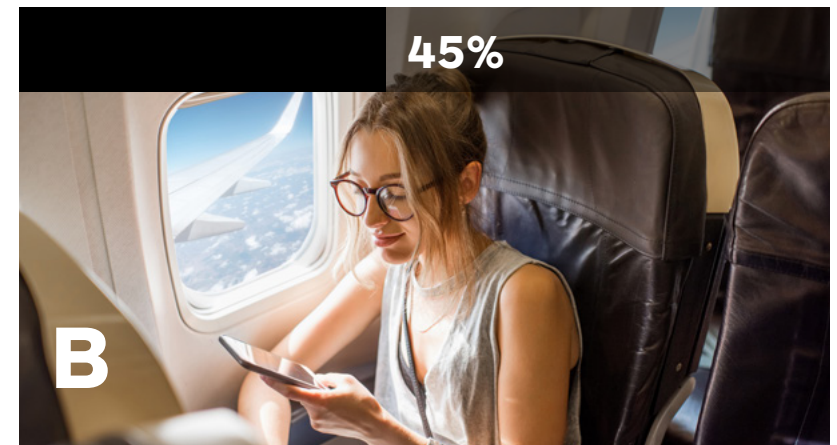
An image has to stop a reader in their tracks, or else it gets ignored. And the fastest way to see what does that best is an A/B test. This can be done with any images that affect your business and conversion rates, whether you're working on social, product pages, display advertising or all of the above.

The easiest place to start is with social media ads. Unlike A/B tests for websites and landing pages, which require

much more time and effort to reveal similar findings, testing across social lets you quickly and easily understand which imagery is most engaging and effective with your audience. So you can make better, insight-driven decisions across the board. Remember, there are no set rules. What works for you depends on your aesthetic, your audience, and what's on offer. Don't be afraid to experiment with different looks before finding out what works.



1157137642, hudiemmm



868607330, RossHelen

Take note

Always consider how an image will appear when viewing on mobile. Unwanted cropping can spoil an otherwise powerful visual. If you have a vertical file that's perfect for Stories, chances are it won't look the same in another post. iStock Editor gets rid of the guesswork with automatic crops for the web's most popular platforms.

Focus on developing visual content for social media that you can then use to support wider marketing efforts. Different segments of your readership consume content in different ways and on different channels. Make sure there's something for everyone, and when you find what works, give it your all.

Visuals that succeed on social aren't necessarily the best choice for a header image or in-line shot—and vice versa. Don't forget the importance of tailoring your efforts to particular platforms, depending on your audience and goals.

1093909192, GoodLifeStudio



985118742, shironosov



1145256211, PIKSEL



963427874, pixelfit



1162165049, Jose Juan Garcia

In Summary

Your imagery is the first thing an audience sees. That's why it should be extraordinary—and well within your rights to use. When you license a visual from a royalty-free library like iStock's, those images and illustrations are yours to publish, share, or repurpose as needed (within the terms of the license, of course).

Use these materials to elevate your marketing efforts on any channel, platform, or vertical. The right visuals are a vital part of your content output, so don't let them be an afterthought. When they speak to the interests of your audience and of your business, the story you craft will be stronger than ever.

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