

Who Owns Your Listing Photos? Let's Talk Image Licensing

When you hire us to shoot a listing, what exactly are you paying for?

Many agents assume they “own” the images once they’ve paid for the shoot. But that’s not how image licensing works. What you’re actually getting is a **license** to use the photos — not the images themselves.

And honestly? That’s what keeps your cost low. You aren’t buying the images, you’re renting them. And just like with homes or cars, licensing your images is a much more affordable option than ownership.

How Copyright Works in Photography

Under U.S. copyright law, the person who creates the image — the photographer — automatically owns 100% of the rights to that photo the moment it’s taken.

That means we control when, where, and how the image can be used, reproduced, or distributed. This ownership isn’t transferred just because someone pays for a photo shoot — **what’s granted is a license**, not the copyright itself.

For us, copyright isn’t just a legal technicality — it’s an asset. It allows us to protect our work, maintain its value, and offer fair, tailored licensing for the people and businesses who want to use it. **We further protect our assets by registering each and every image we take with the U.S. Copyright Office**, ensuring full legal protection and enforceability in the event of misuse.





Why Licensing Real Estate Photographs Keeps Prices Fair and Reasonable

Real estate photography is priced for a specific, limited use: marketing one property. You're not paying for commercial rights or long-term branding. If we priced in usage by the builder, stager, designer, and seller, your cost would skyrocket — and that wouldn't be fair to you.

Image licensing allows us to keep pricing affordable while still protecting the value of the work.





What You Can Do with the Images

When you hire us, you're granted a license to use the photos in a limited number of ways for a specific time period — in our case, that's for one year or until the property sells, whichever comes first. This license allows you to:

-  Post on the MLS
-  Share on Zillow, Redfin, Realtor.com, etc., and your own (and your broker's) websites
-  Feature on your own real estate website and social media
-  Print in marketing materials for that specific listing, or in combination with other listings you have

What You Can't Do

Because the scope of licensing is limited, there are also a few things you **cannot** do. Some examples include:

-  You can't give or sell the images (sub-license) to anyone else — not the builder, stager, interior designer, or even the seller/buyer. **Any third party needs to contact us directly to get their own license and pay for their specific use.**
-  You can't use the photos beyond this listing — meaning not as a banner on your website, not in a portfolio of "homes you've sold," or as a general brand asset — unless we've arranged something prior to that usage.
-  You can't enter the images in contests without talking to us first — this is probably something we'd want to partner on anyway, so let's plan it together.
-  You can't submit the photos for magazine or editorial publication without prior approval — just loop us in and we'll make sure it's done right.

- 🚫 You can't use MLS-licensed images to market short-term, mid-term, long-term, or vacation rentals (like Airbnb or VRBO) — those are considered commercial uses and require a different, more expansive license.

But talk to us — if you need something custom, we're happy to work with you.

Think of It Like iTunes: Understanding Image Licensing the Easy Way

Licensing real estate photographs is a lot like buying a song on [iTunes](#). You pay to use it for a specific purpose — personal listening only. But you can't give that track to your friends, or make it the theme song for a video you're producing.

Same idea here. A builder using a listing photo on their website is like someone using a \$1.25 song in a feature film — a much bigger use that requires its own license. And no, that's not included in the base listing price.

Why We Retain Copyright

We retain full copyright on all images we create. Keeping our image licensing is standard in professional photography and ensures:

- ✓ The images aren't reused or misrepresented
- ✓ Quality control over edits or modifications
- ✓ Protection for **you** — so your listing photos don't end up in someone else's marketing
- ✓ The ability to offer licensing to others (like stagers or designers) if they want to use the images

We consider copyright a long-term asset — something that can carry real value well beyond the initial shoot. For you, the value of listing images usually ends the day the home sells. But for us, those images may hold future value we can't predict right now.

That's why we retain ownership and don't give up those rights without appropriate compensation. Just like the current license serves your immediate needs, potential future licensing holds value for us — and we treat it with the same importance.

About the “Work for Hire” Thing

Lately, some brokerages have tried to ask photographers to shoot under a “work for hire” model — meaning the brokerage would own the images outright.

We don’t work that way.

As a vendor, we only work under **our own contract**. That contract is designed to be clear and fair — it fully covers your needs for listing promotion while respecting the creative rights of the photographer. It even has a clause that holds you and your brokerage harmless for misuse by other entities.

Here’s the thing: we’re professionals, just like you. We’re not employees of your brokerage — we don’t get benefits, a W-2, or insurance coverage from your office. So, it’s not appropriate to ask us to work under terms that treat us like staff just to take ownership of our images.

We’re independent contractors. That means we bring our own tools, skills, and processes to the job — and part of that includes working under terms we’ve developed to protect everyone involved. If your brokerage wants to own the images outright, we can absolutely do that — but that’s a rights buyout, and it comes at an additional cost.

Rights buyouts are available, but they are not free. MLS photography is affordable *because* we retain the rights. If image ownership is important to your brokerage, we’re happy to quote a full buyout — but we never work under someone else’s contract, and we never give the rights away by default.

About Uploading to Third-Party Platforms Like ShowingTime

Some tools — including platforms like ShowingTime — may ask you, the agent, to agree to terms that include granting usage rights for listing media like photos and videos.

Please be aware: You do not have the legal authority to grant those rights unless you own the images outright — and with standard real estate licensing, you don’t.

We’re happy to work directly with third-party platforms when needed, but any requests for expanded usage, sub-licensing, or redistribution of images must go through us. Just because a

system prompts you to check a box doesn't mean you're legally allowed or empowered to check it.

If you're ever unsure, ask. We'll help you navigate it and make sure it's all good — for everyone involved.

Need Something Not Covered? Just Ask.

Sometimes you need a little more — an extension past the one-year mark, a different kind of usage, or something that falls outside the standard terms. That's totally fine.

Our contract is a starting point. It's there so we're all on the same page and know what to expect. But it's not written in stone.

If you've worked with us before, you know we're always willing to go the extra mile to make things work for you. So, if you need something special, just talk to us. We'll find a way to make it happen.

But please — don't just assume it's okay and do it without checking. We work with a great IP lawyer (his name is David Deal), and trust us... you really don't want to get an email from him.

Still have questions about image licensing or usage?
[Contact us anytime](#) — I'm here to help.

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