

Head2Head

A showdown among natural competitors

THIS MONTH: Online Photo Services

You've got the killer digital camera and you've taken the incriminating bachelor party photos, but when you try to e-mail them to your buddies, their mail servers choke on your 3MB files. Sure, you could fire up *Photoshop*, resize the hell out of the images, and then hack some HTML to post the pics on a web site, but then your friends would have to burn a disc, and trudge down to the Fotomat every time they wanted a print.

The solution is simple: online photo services. These web sites

automagically create online galleries of your high-res pics, which your friends (and victims) can peruse at their leisure. Once they've chosen their favorite shots, they can buy paper prints directly online. These services (often free) are packed with near-limitless storage, offer fast-loading thumbnails, and sometimes include whistles and bells, such as rudimentary image editing. Let's take a look at the current field of competitors.

—BRAD DOSLAND

YAHOO!

Online experience: Suffers the worst web interface in this roundup: It's crowded with ads pimping sundry Yahoo! services, and image uploads are the slowest of the bunch (with progress feedback that's cryptic at best). Even guests viewing your gallery will be harassed with advertising.

Prints: Despite being the least expensive, Yahoo! prints are middle-of-the-pack in a very tight race. Colors are accurate and details are sharp, but some highlights are blown out.



Cost: With no service charge and the cheapest prints across-the-board, Yahoo! walks away with the best-value crown. Shipping charges add some tarnish, as Yahoo!'s are at the higher end of the spectrum.

Extras: In addition to offering mugs, mouse pads, coasters, calendars, aprons, and ornaments bearing your photos, Yahoo!'s service features an integrated link to the incredibly robust My Yahoo! service.

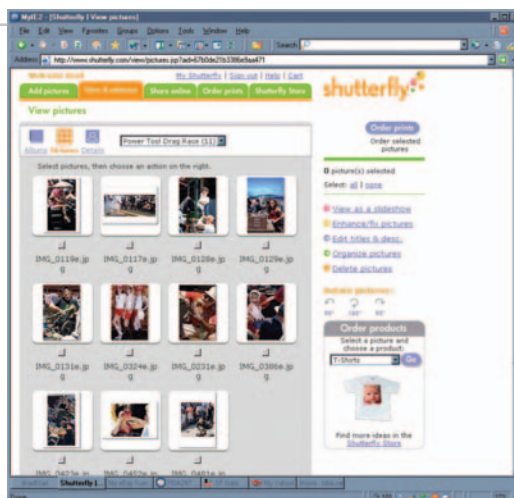
MAXIMUM PC VERDICT **8**

<http://photos.yahoo.com>

SHUTTERFLY

Online experience: Site access was spotty; at various times the service was simply unavailable. Once accessed, the actual site looks similar to Snapfish—nondescript.

Prints: The gap between the best and worst prints in this roundup was not dramatic, but Shutterfly's output trailed the pack. Color was accurate, but sometimes dark areas were so dense that all detail was swallowed up.



Cost: In addition to being the worst looking, Shutterfly's prints are also the most expensive. For example, Shutterfly's weak 8x10s are four times more pricey than Ofoto's excellent \$1 8x10s.

Extras: In addition to the standard array of mugs and such, Shutterfly offers framed prints (a great convenience) as well as archive CDs of images (although DVDs, which Smugmug offers, are preferable).

MAXIMUM PC VERDICT **5**

www.shutterfly.com

SNAPFISH

Online experience: Interface is gunked up with nearly as many ads as Yahoo!, and invited guests must register before viewing galleries. Otherwise, the site is generic in function and appearance.

Prints: Snapfish gave Shutterfly the biggest competition for worst print quality with images that had a distinct green cast. The rule of thumb with printing is to err toward the more flattering red tones, but Snapfish went the other way.



Cost: Basic service is free, but prints are among the most expensive. This is somewhat offset by the least-expensive shipping rates by far (half the cost of Yahoo's \$2 first-class rate, and \$6 less than Yahoo's \$15 overnight rate).

Extras: Once again, mugs and cards with your pictures on them are available—as are custom ties! PhotoCDs are offered for archival use, and Snapfish's *PhotoShow Express* desktop software is available as a free download.

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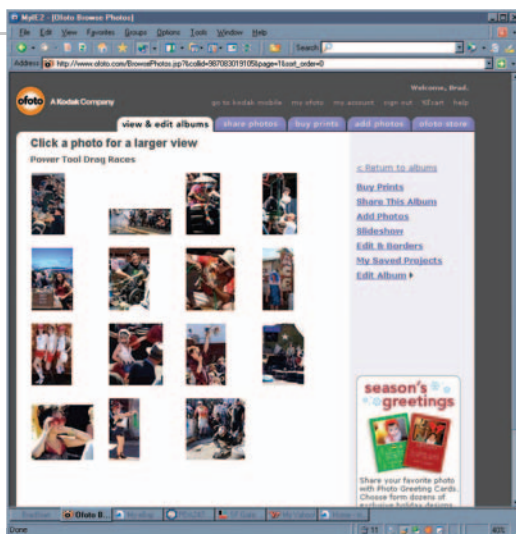
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www.snapfish.com

OFOTO

Online experience: Ofoto features a clean interface with a bare minimum of ads. Ordering prints is a snap. Best of all, visitors are not required to register in order to view galleries.

Prints: You'd expect a service run by Kodak to produce impressive prints, and you'd be right. With bright, accurate colors, Ofoto's prints come in a close second only to Smugmug's.



Cost: The service is free with unlimited storage, but the prints are a mixed bag, price-wise. The prints themselves are the least expensive, but shipping is the most expensive, which equals out in the end.

Extras: With a nationwide network of local printers, Ofoto is far and away the fastest online print service around. In our tests, Ofoto beat the competition by three days on so-called "Overnight" delivery (the others fail to make clear that their printing process takes a few days).

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www.ofoto.com

SMUGMUG

Online experience: Far and away the best interface—clean and uncluttered by the hordes of ads that plague the other services' sites. In fact, Smugmug is as pristine as a hand-coded gallery page. Stepping up to the Power User (\$44.95) or Pro (\$99.95) packages allows you to completely customize the interface.

Prints: The race for best prints was a runoff between Kodak's Ofoto service and Smugmug, but we give Smugmug the nod for better color saturation and detail.



Cost: At \$29.95 annually, Smugmug is the only pay service in this roundup, but you get what you pay for. In this case, you're paying for the best online interface, the best sharing format, and the best print quality.

Extras: With visitor commentary areas, photographer bios, and referral rewards, Smugmug delivers the goods that count (as opposed to kitsch such as mugs with your pictures on 'em). Plus you can order backup discs on DVD.

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THE UPSHOT

There's no such thing as a free lunch, and there's no such thing as a perfect free online photo service, especially when you have to choke down a wad of obnoxious ads. Smugmug may sport a price tag, but you'll be grateful every time you access the buttery-smooth service. And with room to grow your hobby into a professional business with just a few mouse clicks, **Smugmug** walks away with the other guys' lunch. If we were cheapskates, we'd go with Kodak's **Ofoto**—but we wouldn't feel as good about it.

Category Winners

Online experience	Smugmug
Print quality	Smugmug
Cost	Yahoo!
Extras	Ofoto