

## Digital cameras

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### Digital cameras, camcorders & photography

We help you find the right equipment and advise on what's best to buy.

November 2004

## Ratings *Photo finishers*

### CR Quick Recommendations

See a [summary of test findings and Quick Picks](#)--the choices that merit first consideration.

### PHOTO FINISHERS

**Availability:** Most models at stores through March 2004.

Key numbers with a \* indicate Quick Picks.

**Within groups, in performance order.**

Excellent 
 Very good 
 Good 
 Fair

Key number	Service (Internet access)	Price	Overall score					Test results		Life
			P	F	G	VG	E	Photo Print Quality	Web Site Features	
*1	<b>Shutterfly</b> ( <a href="http://www.shutterfly.com">www.shutterfly.com</a> )	3.99								
*2	<b>Snapfish</b> ( <a href="http://www.snapfish.com">www.snapfish.com</a> )	3.79								
*3	<b>ez prints</b> ( <a href="http://www.ezprints.com">www.ezprints.com</a> )	2.45								
4	<b>Searsphotos.com</b> ( <a href="http://www.searsphoto.com">www.searsphoto.com</a> )	2.49								
5	<b>Ofoto</b> ( <a href="http://www.ofoto.com">www.ofoto.com</a> )	3.99								
6	<b>Kodak Picture Center Online</b> ( <a href="http://www.picturecenter.kodak.com">www.picturecenter.kodak.com</a> )	3.79								

### Recommendations & notes

**1 Shutterfly** Has Mac drag-and-drop file transfer, shows user-defined image name, separate description box, can move image within an album, shows resolution, shows byte size, and has search function. Shows image name on back of the print. Has add unique borders. Fujifilm Fujicolor Crystals Archive used for 8x10 glossy photo paper. 20x30 largest size available.

**2 Snapfish** Can upload more than jpeg format, shows user-defined image name, and can move image within an album. Has add unique borders. Kodak or Kodak Royal used for 8x10 glossy photo paper. 20x30 largest size available. Owned by District Photo Inc.

**3 ez prints** Also produced a consistently excellent black-and-white photo with the most neutral grey. Can upload more than jpeg format, view all images in all albums, and shows user-defined image name. Shows image name on back of the print. No film support or slideshow capability. Fujifilm Fujicolor Crystal Archive used for 8x10 glossy photo paper. 30x40 largest size available

**4 Searsphotos.com** Has add unique borders. Lacks album management. Kodak used for 8x10 glossy photo paper. 8x10 largest size available. Uses District Photo Inc.

**5 Ofoto** Can move image within an album, and shows resolution. Has add unique borders. Kodak DuraLife used for 8x10 glossy photo paper. 20x30 largest size available. A Kodak subsidiary.

**6 Kodak Picture Center Online** Shows user-defined image name, separate description box, and can move image within an album. Has lighten or darken image control in lieu of color enhance. Kodak Royal used for 8x10 glossy photo paper. 16x20 largest size available.

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## Photos over the Internet

### We rate the leading sites for prints, online album

Walk into any store that processes film and you'll see a kiosk or station that accepts CDs, DVDs, diskettes, and various types of digital-camera memory cards. Online photo finishers have taken that service further by allowing you to order high-quality prints without leaving your chair.

Sending, or uploading, your photos is fairly easy. Finished prints arrive by mail; some photofinishers give you the option of picking up your prints at a nearby store. All provide rush service. Most of the online photofinishers we tested delivered excellent prints (see Ratings). They're made on Kodak or Fuji photo paper, using a chemical process that's akin to film printing. We saw no evidence of fading after exposing the photos to daylight-balanced fluorescent lighting round the clock for just over six weeks. The prints were generally more water-resistant than ones from an inkjet printer.

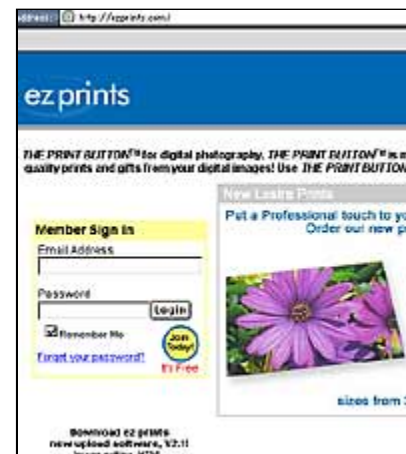
Another big attraction of online photofinishers is picture sharing. You can store your photos on the services' Web sites and organize them into virtual albums, complete with captions and colorful borders, that can be viewed in slide-show fashion by anyone you choose. The sites send e-mail with links that take invitees to the album. Other online extras can put your photos on calendars, coffee mugs, and other keepsakes.

To help you decide which online photofinisher is best for you, we tested six of the most widely used: EZ Prints, Kodak Picture Center Online, Ofoto, Searsphotos.com, Shutterfly, and Snapfish. Most make prints under their own name and handle the processing work for other well-known online services. For example, Ofoto is a Kodak subsidiary that provides the processing for the iPhoto service available to owners of Macintosh computers. Ezprints.com also does the printing for more than 300 other companies. Snapfish is owned by District Photo, which provides photofinishing and digitizing services under several brand names; District Photo does the processing for SearsPhotos.com.

We sent each service the same suite of nine images each week for five weeks. Eight images were color photos, one was black and white. They were indoor and outdoor photos, taken with various 3-, 5-, and 6-megapixel cameras. We ordered 8x10 prints of each image; that's the same size print we use to judge image quality of the cameras themselves.

Our testing led us to these conclusions:

**You're still in charge of quality control.** You need to be sure the color is set to your liking and that annoying flaws such as red-eye are removed before you have an online service make prints. When we deliberately sent out photos with a bad case of red-eye, none of the



online services fixed the problem. Most sites have basic image-editing tools, but some provide more than others. See [Features](#).

**Ease of use varies.** The best online services make it easy to move images from one album to another and view or edit images; the rest have only rudimentary capability. All have suitable privacy safeguards.

If you want to store images in an online album, most sites allow you to put your own name on the images--a very handy feature. It's easier to go back and identify, say, "Anniversary Party 4" than "032700434.jpg." Some sites put the image name on the back of the print, a nice touch.

**Price and quality aren't related.** High-rated ezprints.com delivered excellent 8x10 prints for only \$2.45. By contrast, Kodak Picture Center had good print quality but charged \$3.79 for an 8x10.

## HOW TO CHOOSE

**Be sure your computer can handle the traffic** These online services work best if you have a high-speed Internet connection. Uploading photos on a slower dial-up connection is possible but painfully slow. If high-speed access isn't available, you can transfer images to a CD-ROM and mail them to the services; most will provide a mailer. But that could extend your wait for prints from days to weeks. It might be better to use a local photofinishing service.

**Consider how much you want to edit the images.** If you're satisfied with the image-handling software that came with your digital camera, you can use it to clean up photos before sending them to an online service. Then, picture quality and price will influence your choice of service more than the set of editing tools available. Otherwise, consider a service with a good range of easy-to-use editing tools.

**Decide how much you value online sharing.** A virtual photo album matters only if you have lots of friends and family members who want to see your photos (and have an Internet connection that will let them access your album). As with editing, if sharing isn't important, then let picture quality and price influence your choice.

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## CR Quick Recommendations

Most of the online photofinishers did an excellent job of printing our photos. Other features that set them apart varied more widely. These include the ease of uploading, organizing, and viewing images, and the number and type of photo-editing tools. All the services have sharing and most have slide-show capability. Prices are subject to change.

With any service, check for specials or package deals; they may be attractive options if you aren't a rush for prints. And even though we evaluated only six sites, they are used by dozens of other online photofinishers. It pays to compare prices.

The [Ratings](#) rank the services strictly by photo print quality. The **Quick Picks** also consider factors such as price and convenience.

### Quick Picks

#### Best for image organizing and editing features:

[Shutterfly.com](#)  
[Snapfish.com](#)

Both delivered excellent prints and have versatile album-management and editing tools. However, they are expensive, charging \$3.99 and \$3.79, respectively, for 8x10 prints. Shutterfly and Snapfish offer up to 20x30-inch prints. Shutterfly shows the image name on the back of each print.

#### Best value overall, especially when you need little editing: [ezprints.com](#)

Ezprints.com produced excellent photos, and it wins on price, with an 8x10 priced at \$2.45. It offers up to 30x40-inch prints and shows the image name on the back of each print. But its Web site isn't as full-featured as Shutterfly's, and it has limited editing tools: you can enhance the color, for example, but you can't fix red-eye.