How to outsource a chore

"This is too good to be true," I said to myself, when I met Sam Allen at a restaurant in Santa Monica, CA.

Allen told me that his 18-month-old start-up, ScanCafé, would digitize negatives for 19 cents apiece, and slides for 24 cents.

"Yeah, right," I said. "The going rate is around a buck, and often you pay more."

That's why most of us with hundreds—if not thousands—of analog images do it ourselves. In fact, my July Editorial was loaded with tips for the high-volume scanning DIYer.

But Allen insisted that ScanCafé scans each slide and neg individually at 3000 dpi on a Nikon Coolscan 5000 ED. Plus, there's Digital ICE automatic scratch and dust removal, as well as a bit of manual clean-up in Adobe Photoshop. Also, the files would be burned to a DVD, and all the original material safely returned to me.

"C'mon," I said. "Gimme a break!"

But Allen is a dead-serious former Marine with an MBA from the Wharton School, and he seemed quite sincere.

Then he mentioned India, and it all became clear—Allen would be shipping my priceless images off to India, and in exchange for the risk, I'd get cheap scans.

But before I could get up to leave, Allen began explaining that the India connection was really the beauty of his business.

Unlike operations in everything from manufacturing to customer service that are outsourced to lowest-bidder contractors in the developing world, ScanCafé has its own 165-person staff and its own facilities in India, managed on a day-to-day basis by an Indian-born Wharton grad. I took the bait.

Using my wife's credit card and name (not Owens), I registered at www.scancafe.com. Then I stuffed 365 sleeved slides into a box.

Pulled from my attic, these slides were Kodachrome, Ektachrome, and Agfachrome from the early 1970s to mid 1990s. Some were pristine, others fairly dirty. I printed out a UPS Ground label from the ScanCafé site, taped it to the box, and handed the package over to the guys in brown uniforms. The box went to ScanCafé's California facility. They sent my wife an e-mail when it arrived, and charged her credit card for shipping and half the scanning cost: $52.64.

Forty days later, an e-mail announced that the scans were posted. That is, they were available for review on the ScanCafé site. Looking them over, I could decide which to take and pay for. That's right—only after they're scanned do you have to commit; ScanCafé lets you dismiss up to half the scans. But I can't resist a bargain, or my own photos, so I bought them all.

Soon after, UPS delivered a package containing a DVD of the scans and all of the slides returned to their original sleeves.

The attention to detail was impressive. And so were the scans. JPEGs averaging 2700KB, they were at least as good as I would have done. And the dust and dirt that marred some of the original slides were gone in the files. Nice.

Elapsed time: 61 days. Total cost: $105.46

In all, I'm a believer. So now, when Allen says his operation can do pro-caliber work (make 4000-dpi scans of slides and negs, serve up TIFFs), scan prints at 600 dpi for 27 cents (1200 dpi for a little more), clean up b&w negatives (typically a challenge for Digital ICE), and guarantee that my pictures will make it back from India, I don't doubt him.