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Digitize Your Memories
Dust off your old photos: There's now an easy way to get them onto your computer by Wilson Rothman

Remember the days before digital cameras, when you had to (gasp!) buy film and take it somewhere to have it developed? Undoubtedly you still have a relic of this now nearly antiquated technology. Several albums full of old photos and negatives, perhaps? It may seem dutiful to dust these off once a year (cough, cough), but sadly that's not enough to keep Grandpa's 80th, Baby's first Christmas and the blizzard of '66 from fading into folklore. Your treasured photos are deteriorating as you read this.

"When you put photos in an album or a box, the dyes react to heat and, over time, the images start fading," says Ed Deller, a product marketing manager with Kodak. Plus, high humidity—common in basements and attics—can cause warping. Digital photo files, meanwhile, maintain their color, sharpness and contrast if they've been uploaded to a hard drive (CDs too can wear down over several years' time). That's not to mention the fact that they can be catalogued and e-mailed.

With a flatbed scanner and a whole lot of patience, you could scan in your own prints. But in the past few years, a host of scanning services have popped up, all eager to do the job for you. You send photos or negatives...
and the companies burn the images to a CD or DVD, the contents of which you can upload to your computer, no sweat.

The results, as we discovered, were quite good with regard to picture quality—and reasonable in terms of cost. A few services have strange-sounding deals: “Fill the box: We scan as many photos as you can fit...for just $99.95.” And some shady-looking sites offered scans for as little as $14 each. Generally, though, prices range from $27c to 39c for a 4x6 print and 19c to 49c for each frame on a negative. Turnaround varies widely: We got some scans back in three days, others in four weeks.

When ordering, you’re often given a choice of resolution, or how much detail the scanner picks up, expressed in dots per inch, or “dpi.” The lowest option—often 300 dpi—is almost always enough for prints. (Exception: If you’re planning to blow it up to 8x10 or larger, go for 600 dpi.) Negatives are automatically scanned at a much higher resolution, but even then, the lowest—around 1,500 dpi—will suffice. If you can, it’s best to send the negative, as these tightly compressed originals yield the highest detail. Scanning from a print is like photocopying a photocopy. “You lose a little information and a little bit of sharpness,” says Deller.

Perhaps the hardest part of the process is stuffing irreplaceable images into an envelope and sending them off to some unknown location. Four of the services processed photos in the U.S., but BritePix’s labor is in Costa Rica, ScanCafe’s in India. Is there a risk of losing precious pictures to foreign—or even U.S.—mail systems? Sure, though a BritePix sales rep told us brightly, “We’ve been in business for over two years and never had an incident of losing photos.” And they send your package via DHL. (ScanCafe via a UPS affiliate) so photos are trackable. Even if you’re sending pics to a company that scans in the U.S., use a courier that will allow you to trace the package’s whereabouts.

And whatever you do, don’t forget to back up your photo files on an external hard drive. Even if your digital pics don’t deteriorate, your computer might.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Cost structure</th>
<th>Turnaround time</th>
<th>Scan quality</th>
<th>Bottom line</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ScanCafe</td>
<td>Prints: 27c each at 1,000 dpi Negatives: 19c each at 3,000 dpi Minimum order? None</td>
<td>Promises scans in four to six weeks; ScanCafe delivered ours in four weeks. Note: ScanCafe sends photos to India.</td>
<td>Crisp detail, decent contrast and realistic color. Bonus: You get to preview scans online and pay for only those you want.</td>
<td>Best quality and cheapest. You may have a long wait and you have to be okay with sending photos abroad, but it’s well worth it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>BritePix</td>
<td>Prints: 29c each at 300 dpi Negatives: 29c each at 1,500 dpi Minimum order? $50</td>
<td>Promised seven business days for orders of less than 500 photos; actual turnaround was three business days. Note: BritePix sends photos to Costa Rica.</td>
<td>The scans looked sharp, and the free image correction masked any imperfections. Good contrast and color.</td>
<td>Fastest turnaround and nice prints; but the $50 minimum means it’s only a good deal if you send more than 180 images.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Pickle</td>
<td>Prints: 59c at 300 dpi for less than 100 scans; 29c for more than 100 Negatives: 49c each at 1,500 dpi Minimum order? No, but 55¢ fee for orders under $50</td>
<td>Promises scans in one week, delivered ours in seven business days</td>
<td>Print scans were sharp with lots of detail. Some negatives had blemishes, but the automatic retouching program (19c) helped.</td>
<td>Good prices in bulk, though retouching adds up and you pay $10 for the CD. Still, scans were good. It’s the best of the in-U.S. scanners.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Memories Online</td>
<td>Prints: 49c each at 300 dpi or 600 dpi Negatives: 39c each at 2,000 dpi Minimum order? None</td>
<td>Promises scans within two weeks; delivered ours in four business days</td>
<td>The scans had realistic color, though they lacked some detail. Those from negatives were occasionally washed out.</td>
<td>The scans were good, but the (comparatively) high prices and the laborious multipage order form were turn-offs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DigMyPics</td>
<td>Prints: 99c each at 300 dpi Negatives: 44c each at 2,000 dpi Minimum order? None</td>
<td>Promised our scans in three to five days (turnaround changes based on how busy the company is); delivered them in five business days</td>
<td>Print scans lacked detail yet captured errors like dust or scratches. Negative scans were better.</td>
<td>Scans were among the poorest in quality, and the company was on the high end in terms of prices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larsen Digital</td>
<td>Prints: 74c each at 300 dpi Negatives: 99c each at 2,000 dpi Minimum order? $50</td>
<td>Promises scans within three weeks; delivered ours in eight business days</td>
<td>Colors were overblown, and images lacked a certain sharpness and detail.</td>
<td>Pics weren’t good, and the turnaround was slow; to top it all off, it’s the highest priced of the services we tested.</td>
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How we did it We sent about 40 prints and negatives each to six popular services.