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PhotoDisc file

Smile, you're on camera. But are your photos still online?

## Fading photos

Photopoint comes up blank, frustrating digital camera users

By Lisa Napoli  
MSNBC CONTRIBUTOR



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Jan. 4 — Richard Unten, a college student in Irvine, California, has friends all over the state and family in Hawaii. His Web site is a centralized virtual space where all the people in his life can see his pictures. Or, rather, could. The company that hosts his digital photo album disappeared just before the holidays.

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IF YOU TYPE the words “photo hosting” into the Yahoo search engine, Photopoint is the third listing that comes up. But if you try to access the site, you get nothing. Calls and e-mails to published contacts associated with the business have either not been returned, or have bounced back as undeliverable.

Industry analysts say the service boasted around 1.5 million members, including Richard Unten, who paid \$20 a year to store their photos online.

“As a paying member to the photo hosting service, I have no idea if Photopoint.com still exists. It seems that no one knows. Pantellic Software, the owners of Photopoint, doesn’t even have a statement available to the public, let alone its paying customers, about the future of the service,” Unten said in an e-mail interview.

Frustrated Photopoint customers experienced a similar blackout in service in July. Servers were dark and links were dead for about a week then. The explanation was that Photopoint was being acquired by Pantellic, the Nova Scotia-based company that had created the service in the first place. After the blackout, users got an e-mail from Dale Gass, Pantellic’s chief executive. It said, in part:

“I would like to apologize for any uncertainty that

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our members may have experienced during the transition of ownership. Your photos, albums, and memberships were never at any risk of loss. The safety and integrity of our members’ photos has always been, and will continue to be, our

number one priority. We understand how important your photos are to you.”

### DEAD PICTURE LINKS

Unten and others buzzing on Internet digital photography news groups take this as an empty claim, as their friends click on links that yield no pictures. Some Photopoint users used the service to house pictures for merchandise they were selling on eBay, making for not just an inconvenience but an economic wrinkle to the mystery for some.

In an attempt to vent and find some answers, many of these users have been calling and writing to

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EzPrints.com, an online service that makes prints from digital photographs which a partnership with Photopoint.

Jamie Bardin, chief executive of EZPrints, said he had no answers for them. One panicked user told him every photo he'd taken of his toddler was stored on Photopoint.

## DEVELOPING INDUSTRY

The larger issue is the transitioning business of digital photography. There are still “not enough people shooting digital,” Bardin said, although this past Christmas, digital camera sales made up 20 percent of all camera sales.

“We're still probably three, four years away from where digital cameras will outsell film. When you start to see that, that's when this industry will start to take off,” Bardin said.

And as with most things related to the Internet, there is strange post dot-com boom math involved. As the online photo industry takes off and matures, the number of players in the field decreases.

Whitney Brown, a spokeswoman for Shutterfly, a competitor of Photopoint, explained. “At one point there were 300 companies that did bits and parts of online photo processing,” she said, as eager entrepreneurs tried to hedge their bets and create new online businesses. Many of them didn't charge for services, in an attempt to create a buzz and online traffic — and found, as Photopoint did, that giving away services for free did not a business make. (They later started charging a fee.)

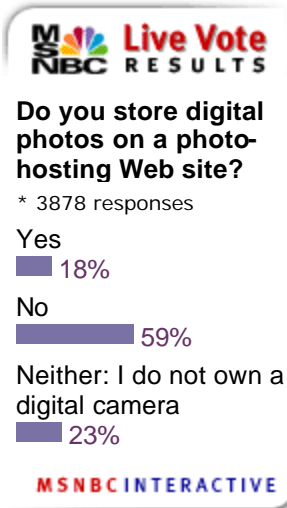
Says Brown, “The lunacy of those days has passed.”

The “lunacy” has given way to mergers of smaller companies and acquisitions by late-to-the-digital-game industry players like Kodak, which purchased a Shutterfly competitor, Ofoto, last year.

Now, consumers can more readily find photo processing services under one virtual roof — from the hosting of digital photos to the printing of hard copies to the transformation of a favorite snap into a t-shirt.

That still doesn't explain what happened to Photopoint, which Brown says her company has attempted to reach since its disappearance, with an eye toward picking up customers who were left in the dark. She's had no success, either. (Neither has Ofoto, said James Joaquin, the company's president.)

Epson, another of Photopoint's partners, makes a cryptic reference to the site's disappearance on its pages, saying that it's taking photo hosting services in-



Survey results tallied every 60 seconds. Live Votes reflect respondents' views and are not scientifically valid surveys.

house and that user photos won't be available until Jan. 10.

For many, it's the digital age equivalent of the local dry cleaners closing its doors — with your clothing padlocked inside.

“I would be panicked if I was a consumer,” said Brown of Shutterfly. “It's unfortunate.”

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