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Happy Holidays... From My PC

Greeting-Card Companies Add Personalized Features To Computer-Generated Cards

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Kyle Sheldon-Chandler doesn't typically send holiday cards since buying, writing and addressing them gives her a headache. But this year she's found a way to mail cards to family and friends without picking up a pen. The 51-year-old from Grand Junction, Colo., will outsource most of the task to **Send Out Cards** LLC, a Salt Lake City-based company that allows you to write and mail paper greeting cards to everyone on your list through technology over the Web.

This season, several greeting-card companies are trying to fight the perception that a paper card that is signed, sealed, and delivered from the Web is less personal than a handwritten one. They say they've got the best of both worlds—the convenience of the Internet without the impersonalization often associated with email greeting cards.

The services typically work by having customers select online a paper card they want to send. Then, they type in a personalized salutation or draft the text of a custom note to include on the inside flap. When it comes time to send the card, users select the names of any of the recipients whose addresses they have loaded into the Web site and the system prints, stamps, and mails the cards for each entry automatically. Send Out Cards will even create a front of your own handwriting or signature from a sample you send them in the mail, meaning that the recipients may never discover that the note they receive wasn't written, signed and sealed by hand.

The efforts come as the process of sending out holiday cards has grown increasingly tedious to a culture used to dashing off emails or making a quick phone call. (Many people these days don't even know the mailing addresses of friends or relatives.) It used to be that senders painstakingly planned every detail of their holiday cards from the image on the front to the color of the pen they use. That was eventually replaced by those long "Dear Friends" letters recapping

the year's highlights from the kids' accomplishments to the dog's antics. In recent years, attention has shifted to finding that perfect family photo, meaning cards could take months of planning before you even sit down to send them out.

Now, by slashing prices, streamlining online address books and offering features such as custom fonts, online greeting-card companies hope that paper cards sent via the Web will finally gain widespread acceptance.

So far, the online market that handles the printing and mailing of customized cards is only a tiny portion of the \$7.5 billion greeting-card industry. But as the market for traditional greeting cards is expected to remain flat, card companies are forecasting strong gains for the online segment.

Among the companies pushing the service are leaders in the traditional greeting-card market, such as Cleveland-based American Greetings Corp., as well as smaller companies formerly focused on personalized printing for corporate clients. Even the U. S. Postal Service is making a big push for its NetPost card service, which offers customized greeting cards and postcards fulfilled by cardstore.com, a division of Touchpoint Inc.

This holiday season, several companies are offering new promotions and services that promise to save time and money. Cardstore.com this month relaunched its new consumer site, cutting the per-card price for some frequent users by more than half to \$1.40 from \$2.99. The company also launched a streamlined version of its address book that makes it easier for users to save addresses from year to year, and has added 150 new cards to its collection of more than 2,000 cards. The U.S. Postal Service site offers roughly the same selection as cardstore.com but with different features, such as a variety of different postcard options. This year, it plans to promote the service through its home page and a holiday mailing.

With its printed cards in 70,000 retail stores nationwide and a growing e-card business, American Greetings is focusing new attention on its remote-printing business, where consumers can customize and mail hundreds of cards directly from the Web. Through mailings to all its members and by displaying it prominently on the Americangreetings.com home page, the company will market it as a convenient holiday time-saver.

The moves are taking hold as customers gravitate to the Web for convenience, says Patti Freeman Evans, an analyst at market researcher Jupiter Research. But she says the challenge for online-generated cards is to prove that they have a personal touch.

One factor that may help these sites attract new customers is lower prices. High-end cards customized with a family greeting can run \$10 each or more at a fine stationery store. At sites such as Sendoutcards.com, a card with your own personal greeting is 98 cents plus postage.

If you order even just two dozen cards from most of these sites, the average

custom card sent from online is likely to be cheaper than even a generic card bought at a stationery store. Those cards average \$2 to \$4 a card, according to the Greeting Card Association in Washington, D.C., while most online card sites will charge you less than \$2 for a card with your own greeting if you purchase more than a few dozen.

Customizing your holiday cards online yourself may save you some money and a trip to the stationery store, but it still requires several steps. First, users are prompted to select a preprinted card or even design their own before customizing it further with a greeting and a personal message. At most sites, users can then upload family photos on the front or inside of the cards and even squeeze a full-length holiday letter on the inside flap. Many greeting-card sites help eliminate another holiday chore by offering gift certificates from vendors such as Barnes & Noble Inc. and Sharper Image to include with the greeting.

When it comes time to send cards, customers can have them sent directly to the recipients or back to themselves. (In the first case, the consumer is normally charged an additional 37 cents a card for postage). If they want the card sent directly, they simply type in the recipient's address as well as their own and click "send." Or, if they have entered their addresses into the site's online address book, the same generic fields can be filled in for hundreds of recipients automatically.

Other sites allow you to set alerts to remind you about important occasions, and most allow you to choose the date you want the cards to be sent so that the cards arrive any time you wish.

But even as companies launch and market their new services, those using them still face several hurdles. Conscientious consumers may be irked to find that they cannot center or rearrange their text, leaving some cards with awkward layouts. If your addresses aren't already in digital form, entering them all into the computer may not be worth the time.

And an obvious problem for online card companies is likely to be tradition. While she sent her husband a card off Sendoutcards.com last Valentines Day, Paula Fehringer, a Web-site designer in Denton, Neb., says she will continue to do her holiday cards by hand. "Every year my husband and I sit at the table and do them," she says. "I am not willing to give that up yet."

Furthermore, customers willing to send cards from online should be cautious about how they may be received. When Stephanie Morris of Centreville, Va., sent her mother-in-law a birthday card from Cardstore.com, her in-law complained that it was too impersonal. Ms. Morris says that she still plans to use the service for around 100 holiday cards this year, but for her mother-in-law, she'll probably still sign and seal the card herself.

Holiday Card Catalogs

Web sites that allow you to send custom holiday cards to everyone on your list simultaneously.

COMPANY/WEB SITE	PRICE	PERSONALIZATION	GIFT CARD	COMMENTS
Cardstore.com	Ranges from \$2.99 to \$1.29 plus postage depending on number of cards.	Can add text to the inside flaps of the card or put a photo on the front.	Selection includes Blockbuster, Old Navy, and Marriott.	New holiday card club gives you free postage and discounts between 25% and 50% for ordering 12 to 100 cards.
American Greetings Corp. Americangreetings.com	Ranges from \$2.95 to \$1.66 per card, including postage	Allows you to add text, digital photos or graphics to the front, inside, and back of your card.	Selection includes Waterford, Barnes & Nobles, and Napster.	You can view copies of your custom cards by automatically having them sent to yourself for the same price.
Send Out Cards, LLC sendoutcards.com	Standard card is 98 cents plus postage.	Can add text to the inside right and the inside left of a folded card or provide custom artwork for the front for an extra fee.	Borders and Circuit City may be available soon.	Company will create a custom font of your own handwriting for \$49.
U.S. Postal Service usps.com/cardstore	Folded cards range in price from \$2.86 to \$1.66 including postage depending on number ordered.	Can add photo to the front and text on the inside flaps.	Selection includes Footlocker, Circuit City, and Sharper Image.	Some cards can also be sent as postcards for a discounted price.

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