Picture perfect Presents

Websites allow you to create custom gifts using your own photos

Yesterday was Black Friday, which means that Thanksgiving has passed. That means I can finally start getting into the Christmas spirit. It seems that retailers would like to start the holiday shopping season right after the back-to-school sales end, but I prefer to give Thanksgiving its due.

Over the next four weeks this column will be devoted to websites with gift ideas for the winter holidays. I'll look at sites that help you create your own gifts, sites that allow you to help the less fortunate in the world, and, of course, sites that help feed the commercial monster that the season has become.

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InSites

The first group of sites allows you to use your own photographs or artwork to create gifts for family, friends or associates. Almost everyone has a digital camera of some sort these days. Digital photography is a bit of a double-edged sword in that it allows you to take many pictures cheaply, but lots of those images end up stored on a computer never to be seen again.

The following sites allow you to use all those pictures to create books, cards, calendars and more:

www.picaboo.com

All of these sites function in a similar fashion, and Picaboo is no exception. Premade templates are available with many different designs to choose from. You simply insert your own photos into the projects and add appropriate captions.

There are tools on the site to edit your photos as far as size, brightness, color and rotation. You can also choose from many different fonts for your captions and headlines. The color of the type and backgrounds can be customized to match your pictures. There are also many background images and textures to choose from, or you can use your own images for backgrounds.

Picaboo requires you to download and install a free application to build your projects. The program is both

Windows and Macintosh compatible. You can only use photos stored on your hard drive, so you can't pull images from Facebook, Picasa or any of the other online photo sites.

Picaboo has templates for books, cards and calendars. Book prices range from $5.99 for a 20-page, 6-inch-by-8-inch softcover, to $449.99 for a 20-page, 11-inch-by-14-inch leather hardcover, with custom stamping, and premium paper and printing processes. Cards range in price based on size, quality and quantity from 47 cents to $2.31 apiece. Calendars come in two sizes: 8.5-by-11 inches for $11.99 or 11-by-14 inches for $17.99. Both sizes have 12 pages.

Once you build your project, you click on the order button which takes you to a registration page. Most of the products have a three- to four-day production time, plus shipping time which varies depending on the method you choose. Some of the specialty books have longer production times.

www.lulu.com

Lulu's website is a little more involved than Picaboo. It's main purpose is to help authors and musicians self-publish and sell their work in traditional and electronic formats. You can also buy books on the site. But it does have features that allow you to create your own picture books or calendars.

The method for making your projects is similar to Picaboo as far as templates and tools go. The main difference is that on Lulu you build everything online instead of downloading an application. You can also use photos from most of the online photo sites like Flickr and Facebook, as well as from your computer.

Book prices range from $9.99 for an 8.5-inch-by-8.5-inch softcover to $49.99 for a 12-inch-by-12-inch hardcover (both 20 pages). Calendars come in two, 12-page sizes: 11-by-17 inches for $12.49 and 13.5-by-19 inches for $23.49. Books and calendars are supposed to ship in three days.

www.shutterfly.com

Shutterfly is a one-stop, digital photo marketplace. It started as a site where you could order prints online from digital photos. It has grown into a site where you can store photos, make books, cards, calendars and other photo-themed products, sell photos, and yes, you can still order prints. The site has tips for taking photos, and has even published a book on the subject.

The templates and tools function much like on the other sites. You build your projects online in Shutterfly from photos stored on the site, on Facebook, or on your computer. You need to register in order to store pictures on the site and to buy items.

Prices for 20-page books range from $12.99 for 5-by-7 inches to $64.99 for a 12-by-12-inch padded, hardcover. Cards range in price depending on size and quality form 32 cents to $1.04 each. There are wall calendars starting at $21.99, desk calendars starting at $17.99 and poster calendars starting at $19.99.

Shutterfly has many other products you can customize with photos. There's stationery, notepads, mugs, ornaments, mousepads, puzzles, posters, life-size cutouts, playing cards, shirts and more. I couldn't find how long it takes to process orders on the site, but I assume if you order something it will tell you somewhere during the process.

I've made a few books and cards online and was very pleased with the results. It's a great way to create one-of-a-kind, personalized gifts that are relatively inexpensive.