

Family Movies Find New Home on the Web

Sites Offer to Share Video Clips Online For a Fee, But Will Customers Tune In?

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Laura Houston's online album includes the usual suburban-mom fare: swim parties, afternoons at the country club, a day at the Dallas Arboretum. But visitors to Ms. Houston's album at Phanfare.com can also access more than a dozen short videos of her one-year-old daughter Emma -- trying out new words like "duck" and "dog," growling like a bear and practicing new tricks.

"She just learned to tickle," says the 32-year-old mother, who lives in Plano, Texas. "She'll say, 'Tickle, tickle, tickle,' and she'll tickle her stuffed animals or her dolls."

Ms. Houston is among a small but growing group of computer users who are trying to take home videos beyond the living room television set by sharing film clips through new Web services. Several sites with names like Phanfare.com and JussPress.com have surfaced in recent months, positioning themselves as the next generation of photo-sharing sites like KodakGallery.com and Snapfish.com. But unlike the latter sites, which are usually free and make their money by printing photos, many video sites charge monthly fees. They also impose limits on how much video can be stored, and often the videos end up smaller, and at lower quality, than the originals.

Putting home movies on the Web is not as simple as uploading digital photos. After shooting footage on a videocamera, users connect the device to their PCs with a cable. Then, they import the film using a program like Microsoft Corp.'s Windows Movie Maker, which is included with the Windows operating system, or any number of other video-editing programs. Videos can take up a tremendous amount of hard-drive space when converted to computer files, particularly if left at

their original size and quality. Many users shrink the videos down so that they can be transferred more quickly online. The last step is to upload the video file to one of the sharing sites.

In Silver Spring, Md., Ken Briefel pays Phanfare \$7 a month to post short videos of his son's baseball team's practices and games, taken with a simple point-and-shoot camera that also lets him capture videos. He organizes the clips in separate folders on the Web site for each player on the team. His son Steven has a private coach who can access the site from home and look at individual clips showing Steven pitching or batting. Often, he calls Steven in the evening after practice and offers pointers as they look at the video clips together. "Rather than waiting a week to see him in person, he can look at it right away," Mr. Briefel says. "It becomes much more efficient."

Sites like Phanfare are attracting more interest, but analysts say the nascent market faces plenty of hurdles. Perhaps foremost among them is that many mainstream users lack the technical skills -- or patience -- to move videos from camera to Web site, and are unaccustomed to the idea of sharing home movies online. "The [usual] workflow goes like this: You take videos, you hook up to your TV, and you look at them. That's pretty much it," says Chris Chute, an analyst at research firm IDC. A report published by IDC in May found that while 50% of digital videocamera users attach their gadgets to a television set at home to watch their videos, only 31% connect to their PCs to make their own DVDs. (That leaves several users who make movies and then, well, do nothing.)

Meanwhile, the costs of running a video-sharing business can add up fast. Video files are much larger than photo files, which means the Web sites that host them must find a way to keep file sizes down so that they can limit their costs for serving up the videos. Photo-

sharing sites, by comparison, often delete images after a certain length of time if users haven't purchased prints.

Many of the video sites are trying to stay ahead by limiting the size of videos that are uploaded: JussPress lets users store 10 videos at a time for free, and cuts individual clips off at two minutes. ("As a tip, usually videos get pretty boring after 30 seconds," reads a note in the site's frequently-asked questions section.) If a JussPress user wants to store more files, he can upgrade to a paid account for \$5 a month -- but the two-minute limit still applies. Phanfare, meanwhile, limits each movie file to 10 megabytes. Users can upload as many videos that they want, but there are monthly traffic limits on how often videos can be shown.

Meanwhile, some of the services convert video files into a lower-quality format that takes up less space, to reduce the time it takes for videos to load and the cost of storing them. That means when Aunt Linda watches the clip of your baby's first bite of solid food on her PC, it might look much blurrier -- and sound fuzzier -- than it does on the screen of your videocamera.

Some sites are giving away their service for free now, in hopes of luring users before they start offering premium services. Vimeo.com, a free site launched in June by New York-based Connected Ventures LLC, allows its 800 users to store a total of eight megabytes of video, or about five minutes of footage, at a time. ClipShack.com, started in May by Reality Digital Inc., sets a storage limit of 50 megabytes. That site says it has about 1,000 registered users.

Adding to the video-sharing sites' challenges, competition is about to get much tougher. Until now, the start-ups that are charging for video-sharing have been helped by absence from the market of heavyweights like Eastman Kodak Co.'s KodakGallery and Hewlett-Packard Co.'s Snapfish. Those sites have largely steered clear of video.

But now, established companies are tiptoeing into the market -- and a few are offering video-sharing services for free, with few or no size limitations. Search giant Google Inc. is experimenting with a new service that lets users upload videos of any size for free. The clips are stored in a public database and available for anyone to view.

Meanwhile, Kodak is looking into integrating video into its KodakGallery site, and charging people to post videos or to get a DVD from clips uploaded to the site. KodakGallery -- formerly Ofoto -- already lets users upload short clips taken with Kodak still cameras and with some cameraphones, though the snippets are usually no longer than 30 seconds. H-P, meanwhile, has developed technology that will let visitors to its Snapfish site create their own printable photos by pausing videos as they play. Both say they hope to launch the services by next year.

Some technophiles are bypassing the video sites entirely, using software called ShareGear from XFormx Inc. of Wellesley, Mass. The program converts a user's PC into a Web server, so online visitors can connect directly to the computer to watch videos that the owner has chosen to store and share.

In McKinney, Texas, Scott Enriquez and his wife use ShareGear to chronicle their one-year-old daughter's daily life on a Web site, WeLoveCharley.com. ("I had an Eggo waffle on the way to school," reads one photo caption.) The site contains links to videos of Charley that are stored on Mr. Enriquez's work computer. The benefit for Mr. Enriquez, vice-president of a technology consulting firm, is that he doesn't have to pay a monthly subscription fee or deal with outside storage limits. But it means his PC must be turned on and connected to the Web in order for visitors to watch the videos; and if too many people are watching at once, it can slow down his Internet connection.

Mr. Enriquez's site and others like it raise the question: Do people really want to watch videos from strangers? While most of the video-sharing sites let users keep their videos private and password-protected, some encourage people to open their albums to the public. The result: Clips like "hard core sister," which shows a young girl dressed in an oversized sweatshirt, headbanging her way around a kitchen as she sings her own theme. So far, more than 150 people have viewed the publicly accessible clip on ClipShack, and several have posted comments including: "your sister is soo

hard core!! dude right on! i wish i could mosh that great." Vimeo features clips of kids giving each other haircuts and the view through the windshield of a moving cab.

"There's not too much stuff that I would say has mass appeal, but that's kind of what's exciting about it," says Jakob Lodwick, Vimeo's 23-year-old co-founder. "It sort of gives you a window into people's private lives that you wouldn't normally see."

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