

Wishing You a Year Filled With Joy, And a Photo-Filled Card to Prove It

By ELIZABETH HOLMES

Cindy Pastorius spent days sifting through hundreds of holiday card designs online. She narrowed her options from 20 to 10 to three, before settling on her favorite, a colorful 5-by-7-inch card with spaces for six photos.

"There were just so many options," the 25-year-old administrative assistant says.

More is more in holiday photo cards this year, with more spots for different shots and more designs to complement them.

Thanks to designs available at online card services like Tiny Prints, Minted and Paper Culture, the need to look perfect in a single holiday photo has been multiplied several times over—with the need for an art director thrown in.

The new chapter in holiday cards is an outgrowth of all the photo sharing and information swapping people do year-round, with little self-editing, on Facebook and other social-media sites. In an age when all your acquaintances may know what your kids look like or where you went on vacation, both your holiday card and the photos on it have to be high impact.

Card-design companies are catering to the new demands with multiphoto layouts and endless design options.

Tiny Prints, the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based service Ms. Pastorius used, has more than 2,500 designs, including 473 accommodating three or more photos. Its parent site, Shutterfly, more than doubled its design offerings this year to more than 3,100, including a style that holds 14 photos. Snapfish has a horizontal year-in-review card with space for 20 photos.

With so many choices, producing a standout holiday card, already a stressful game of one-upmanship, gets even tougher. Many of the new incarnations are showcased online using magazine-like professional photo shoots.

The cards come in all shapes and sizes, from greetings that also work

as ornaments to annotated, accordion-folded timelines. Color schemes have expanded to include runway-inspired hues of pink and gray. Sentiments run the gamut from "Joy to the World" to "Happy Everything."

"I take it as a reflection of that person's personality, what they see about their family that's so fun," says Shruti de Silva, a 38-year-old physician in Menlo Park, Calif., who has sent out photo cards for most of the past 15 years.

Older-style photo cards, typically a single image printed on 4-by-8-inch photo paper, sell for as little as 30 cents each. The new cards can easily cost five times as much, depending on the number of photos and the weight of the card stock. Additional design features—rounded corners, decorative back, an envelope liner—push the price even higher.

The price tag is daunting for some. Aimee Carpenter, a mother of four from Darien, Conn., who sends out 100 or more cards a year, mocked up a miniature photo book on Minted—and then abandoned the project when she saw the price of \$3.50 a pop.

Multiphoto cards are a tangible way to display the tremendous number of digital photos many people take each year. "It helps indecisive parents like myself get out of a quandary of having to pick one," says Christopher Wu, chief executive and co-founder of Paper Culture, in Millbrae, Calif., which says it has seen a four-fold increase in multiphoto card orders this year.

Designers walk customers through the process of picking the photos,

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with the aim of cohesion, not clutter. They try to explain that each photo in a multiphoto card is like one idea or one part of a story, Mr. Wu says. "The more photos you have, the less you're trying to capture with each individual picture."

"We're almost psychologists as much as we are designers,"

Mr. Wu says. "We talk them through the process of picking their photos. They want to know which one looks better."

The maximum number of images Paper Culture will put on the front of a card is eight, Mr. Wu says. Any more than that is too noisy. It also uses visual tools, such as matching colors in the design elements with shades found in the photographs.

Brenda Sheridan, a stay-at-home mother in Haymarket, Va., used her new Nikon D3100 to snap pictures of her family dressed in coordinating shade of blue and playing in the autumn leaves for their first multiphoto card.

Late one night, after her two sons were in bed, she sifted through the design options on Shutterfly and settled on a 5-by-5-inch red-and-blue card with six photos. "It was different than what I'd seen or done before," she said.

Multiphoto card designs are capitalizing on another trend—the lifestyle of family photography. Casual, candid outdoor shots take the vision of a posed family, musing it up a bit and add some action.

Angela Ferrara, director of product development at Pear Tree Greetings, of North Mankato, Minn., says some customers mimic the style of the photographs used in the sample cards. If a mock-up features a child lying in the grass, many shoppers will recreate that scene for their own card.

Some people pull out all the stops. Leigh Anne Wilkes, from Portland, Ore., arranged for a professional photographer to meet her family, including her four children, ages 27, 25, 22 and 18, while they were all visiting relatives in Utah over Thanksgiving. She meticulously planned the snow-themed shoot. She scoured clearance

racks for four new scarves and two new bright-colored coordinating coats. For props, Ms. Wilkes bought three giant kraft paper letters—J-O-Y—and carried them with her on the plane. "They fit in the overhead compartment," she says with a laugh. Once in Utah, she laid out all of the outfits on the floor to make sure the colors were sufficiently complementary.

The shoot cost her about \$300. She and a friend designed the cards and had about 100 printed on Overnight-Prints.com at a cost of about \$50. Months after the holidays, Ms. Wilkes says she still sees her photo card on friends' refrigerators. "It becomes a keepsake more than a card," she says.

Courtney Spencer, a wedding planner from Richmond, Va., was still pregnant when she began wading through options for birth announcements on Minted this fall. She wanted her birth announcement also to serve as a holiday card but figured she wouldn't have time or energy to pick the perfect layout after her daughter's October arrival.

By the time her daughter was born, Ms. Spencer had selected her design and added

the card to her online shopping cart. "I just needed to drop in the picture and the weight and the date," she says. She had two dresses and a pair of bloomers ready for the subsequent photo shoot.

Card sites offer convenience options that are hard for busy people to refuse. Susan Duncan, of Marietta, Ga., had Tiny Prints address and mail 180 holiday cards. "I could have saved money by doing it myself, but they made it so easy," she says. The company says it charges 50 cents per envelope for address printing and 44 cents for the stamp.

Elaborate holiday photo cards aren't just for newbies or new parents. Hallie Bezner, a 26-year-old attorney in Chicago who grew up with the holiday photo card tradition, felt a little envious of married friends who were sending out their own. "I kind of felt left out—like, 'Oh, poor single girl,'" she says. Then she had an idea: "I'll send out a damn picture with my dog."

She tied a bow around her companion's neck and hired a photographer for a photo shoot. "Lots of Love," the card reads. "Hallie and Elle Woods Bezner."

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Leigh Anne Wilkes arranged a photo shoot with her family over Thanksgiving in Utah. She hired a photographer, planned the wardrobe, brought props and designed the card.



Clockwise from left: A card from Pear Tree Greetings in the shape of Christmas tree lights; Cindy Pastorius's Christmas card, which she designed on Tiny Prints; Hallie Bezner's holiday card from Tiny Prints features her dog; the holiday card Courtney Spencer designed on Minted is also her daughter's birth announcement.

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