

Dell's Wasabi printer loses on price and quality

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Dell Wasabi PZ310

When a successful gadget is launched, expect a knock-off to follow. So it goes with two photo-themed products, one that mimics a hit from last year and another familiar to our popular culture. But should we embrace these imitators?

Dell's Wasabi printer is similar to the Polaroid PoGo, an instant printer that works with cameras, phones and computers. Similarly, Fuji offers a new (and cheap) camera that will resonate with anyone who had fun creating instant memories.

- Dell Wasabi

The Wasabi connects to digital cameras via USB for direct printing and can print from camera phones via Bluetooth wireless. That means you can take images off a phone and share the 2-by-3-inch prints (they double as stickers) with friends, family or on the inside door of a high school locker.

Unlike the PoGo, which comes only in black, the Wasabi offers black, blue and pink versions. It has a slightly bigger paper capacity: 12 sheets to the PoGo's 10.

However, price and quality favor the PoGo. The Wasabi sells for \$99, but I spotted the PoGo for \$79 at Best Buy.

I used both portable printers to make images from a Canon camera and from three camera phones. The Wasabi's performance was inconsistent compared with the PoGo.

That raises the question: Why review the Wasabi?

The gadget is Dell's first step into "mobility" products. Dell hopes to offer a range of products aimed at teens and road warriors, said Cecilia Eklund, a Dell product manager who declined to be more specific.

Dell also considers it a tag-along for "netbook" computers, which are smaller and more portable than laptops. It's conceivable the Wasabi will be bundled with a netbook as an incentive.

Attached to a digital camera, the Wasabi worked well. But using it with camera phones proved taxing.

I used three models to make prints _ a 3-year-old Sony Ericsson, a nearly

year-old LG Dare and the new 8-megapixel Samsung Memoir. (These printers don't work with the iPhone because Apple didn't include a Bluetooth profile for wireless printing.)

At first, I had trouble getting the Wasabi to work with the Samsung or the Sony Ericsson phones. Oddly, when I sent two images to the Wasabi, I could get one - but not both - to print.

Also, some images sent via Bluetooth would not go through. If I turned the printer off and on and resent the image, it generally worked. The more I printed, the Wasabi's performance improved. But the inconsistency was annoying.

Image quality was a draw. The PoGo's images are heavy on the reds while the Wasabi is heavy on the blues. Sharpness was about the same.

These printers use a technology called Zink, for zero ink. Crystals are embedded into the paper and the printer heats the paper to create the images. You need special paper, not ink cartridges. Best Buy sells a 30-pack of paper for \$13. Dell sells 24 sheets for \$12 and 48 for \$20.

The PoGo remains the top choice but if you want a portable printer in pink, consider the Wasabi. I just hope the next Dell "mobility" product offers more innovation.

- Fuji Instax 200

If you just want a camera that prints what you shoot, like the original Polaroid, Fuji offers the Instax 200 Instant Camera.

It's a boxy camera that makes 2.4-by-4-inch prints with surprisingly nice color reproduction. Just point, shoot and a print emerges.

The Fuji is different than the Polaroid PoGo camera (recently reviewed; find it at chicagotribune.com/eric). The PoGo camera is digital, meaning it has a display screen, selectively prints images and plugs into a computer to download images.

The Instax 200 does none of that; it's a throwback for businesses _ real estate, insurance _ that want a print when the shutter is snapped.

Kids will love it because it's big and toylike. You can find the Fuji for less than \$50 online or at local photo retailers; film packs with 20 prints (the camera holds 10) sell for about \$20.

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