

Consumer test DVD rental companies

Latest prices

Prices and offers change constantly – to see the latest club comparison go to UK-DVD-Rental-Guide.com It also shows which sites users like and which they are unhappy with.

Why internet-based film rental sites are taking over from the high street

Traditional video/DVD rental shops on the high street may be about to join the list of endangered species. Attracted by cheaper prices and a lack of late return fines, British consumers are abandoning their local stores in favour of internet-based DVD rental companies that will send you your evening's viewing in the post.

According to a report published earlier this month from market researcher Screen Digest, more than half the UK's film rental spending will be online by 2009. DVD clubs are already sending out a film every second.

The most enticing thing about these clubs is that they are super-convenient. You simply log on to the company's website, open an account, pay, and select a list of the films you would like to watch. The company sends the film to you first class and you return it in the pre-paid envelope. Once the company receives back the first film, it sends out the next. Most clubs offer a free trial of between 14 and 28 days.

Those signing up to the biggest companies now have a choice of 46,000 titles – many clubs also offer TV series, box sets, and now even games. If you are happy to have just one DVD at a time you will pay £8-£10 a month for the service – serious film fans have the option to pay more to receive a greater number of movies at any one time. If the film at the top of the list is unavailable, the firm sends out the next. You get to keep the DVD as long as you want.

To find out which is best, Guardian Money has teamed up with the independent website UK-DVD-Rental-Guide.com to test each of the 38 big

companies currently sending out films in the UK. The table (right) lists them in order of merit. Screen Select comes out, top narrowly beating LoveFilm.

One of the odd things about the market is the fact that the two biggest companies now provide DVDs on behalf of other firms. Tesco's club is managed by ScreenSelect, while Sainsbury's is operated by LOVEFILM – and both are cheaper than the original.

When we quizzed both firms on the differences, it turns out they are few. The main one is that the supermarkets don't provide adult (soft porn) titles offered by the companies themselves, and the websites are slightly different, and don't offer some of the more film-buff content. In other respects the service is the same – the processes work in exactly the same way.

UK-DVD-Rental-Guide.com says it gets more negative feedback about the supermarket sites than their parent firms. If you are happy to forego the pleasures of Playboy et al, Tesco offers the best unlimited deal.

Amazon does it differently from the others in that you pay a monthly fee for a set number of films – all to be watched over the month. It has been praised as offering the speediest service. For those happy with six discs a month, its £9.99 package probably represents the best deal. Users also get a discount on DVD purchases.

Movie Mine has a smaller but loyal following – Blockbuster does not fare so well according to the website.

easyCinema has a different approach – users buy credits to rent films – four, seven or 10 films at a time. Infrequent users may find this the best option, just make sure you watch them inside the three-month time limit.

Miles Brignall

Rental Companies	Service rating	Titles	Phone support	Free trial?	Monthly price (by discs out at one time)			Rating moves (in last 3 months)
					One	Two	Three	
BEST SITE	★★★★☆	44,500+	Yes	21 days/5 discs	£9.99	£12.49	£14.99	-
	★★★★☆	46,000+	Yes	14 days	£9.99	£12.99	£14.99	●
	★★★★★	30,000+	No	None	£5.99 for 3 total*	£7.99 for 4 total*	£9.99 for 6 total*	-
	★★★★☆	Unknown	Yes	1st month half price	£9.99	£12.99	£14.99	●
	★★★★☆	15,500+	No	second month free	£9.49	£7.99 for 4 total*	£9.99 for 6 total*	▼
BEST VALUE <small>Powered by Screenselect</small>	★★★★☆	44,500+	Yes	14 days	£7.97	£11.47	£13.97	-
<small>Powered by LoveFilm</small>	★★★★☆	43,000+	No	14 days	£7.97	£11.47	£13.97	●
	★★★★☆	22,000+	No	4 discs or 14 days	-	-	£14.99	●
	★★★★☆	32,000+	Yes***	14 days	£9.99	-	£14.99	●
<small>Powered by Screenselect</small>	★★★★☆	44,500+	No	7 days	£7.96 for 4 total*	£13.96 for 7 total*	£19.90 for 10 total*	●
<small>Powered by LoveFilm</small>	★★★★☆	43,000+	No	30 days 3 DVD's only	£7.99	-	£13.99	-
<small>Powered by LoveFilm</small>	★★★★★	43,000+	No	6 discs or 14 days	-	£12.99	-	-

*Capped at the number of DVDs shown

Need to know

To sign up you need access to the internet, be over 18, and have a credit or debit card. The fee is debited to your card each month, and the consumer can cancel the service at any time – there are no minimum contracts.

Importantly, if the DVD gets lost in the post, the company does not charge you for it. Once you have an account you will be asked to compile a list of requests – the sites offer a search engine to enable you to find your favourite film. You can search by actor, genre etc. Some will let you set the order of preference.

The main source of complaints seems to relate to companies not sending out the latest releases, for which there is always a high demand. If you must have a particular film on a certain date you probably should head down the high street. Those with less contemporary tastes will not have too many problems.

Another thing to consider is whether the company will take phone calls in the event of a problem.

Both LoveFilm and ScreenSelect do, as does Tesco and the highly-rated Moviemine – but lots don't.

Some of the sites offer extra discounts if you pay six months or a year in advance. Equally, if you don't want to pay at all there is nothing to stop you taking advantage of all the free offers. There are at least 38 companies sending out DVDs and most offer at least 14 days free.

Run through the whole lot and you've got a lot of free viewing – just remember to look at the terms and conditions.