

Love and Hate Those Digital Cameras

By Stephen Ruback, Professional Inspector [TREC License 6030]

Some pictures are worth a thousand words, some more and some less. Digital cameras are here to stay. They are revolutionizing the photo industry, and are the leading edge of instant gratification. No more waiting for developing, waiting to finish a roll of film or even wondering if the pictures will turn out like you imagined. The instant feedback can also help you quickly become a better photographer. With the advent of electronic connectedness, we are flooded with pictures of everything imaginable and then some. Pictures are the life blood of sales and communication in the real estate industry.

Along with popularity comes a multitude of camera choices. Prices have dropped dramatically and functionality has risen to new highs. As with anything electronic, whatever you buy will be outdated in a year. Are your pictures already digital, or are you still waiting? Perhaps it's time to upgrade? With hundreds of models available and the offerings constantly changing, making the "right" choice can be a challenge. There are some basic principles that can help you select a camera best for your needs.

Resolution

How many megapixels can you afford? Pixels are individual dots that form your pictures. The more the better, but more pixels cost more money. More pixels generally mean clearer pictures with larger print sizes possible.

If you never want a picture larger than about 4 x 5 inches, have a low budget, want the smallest camera feasible and plan to take mostly snap shots, then maybe a 1 megapixel camera will suffice. Anything less is really suitable only for computer monitor display.

Keep in mind, whatever you buy, you will find new uses for for it, and your performance needs will expand more than you originally envisioned. One example of this is the *digital* zoom function. The fewer pixels, the less useful this can be. A little zooming and all you see is pixels. The optimum resolution range for most users is 3-4 megapixels providing nice 8x10 prints and a useful 2-4x *digital* zoom. This gives great flexibility in photo manipulation and is commonly available in cameras under \$500. The next step is the 7-9 megapixel range for typically twice the price. The difference between 3 and 4 megapixels is discernible but other camera features may be more important.

Memory

Compact flash is one of the most widely used memory devices, and readily available. Whatever camera you buy will not come with much memory, so more memory is a necessary addition. Several memory cards take the place of multiple film rolls. If you start with one kind of memory card, and your next camera uses a different type, you get to buy a whole new set. On the other hand, electronics stuff is always changing. More pixels require more memory for each picture. Bigger memory cards are more expensive. Shop around

for memory cards at the same time you shop for a camera.

Power supply

Older digital cameras were real power hogs, sucking batteries dry in a hurry. Newer ones are better. Your best bet is still rechargeable AA size, NiMH types with a good charger. Many of the newer cameras can even use alkaline batteries, in an emergency.

Another approach is the camera specific battery, usually lithium ion type. These have much larger capacities, and tend not to self discharge as quickly. The down side is they are very expensive, and not interchangeable for any other uses. In essence, you'll be out another \$75 bucks or more just for a backup battery and you can't get one just anywhere.

Also available are aftermarket lithium universal battery packs that attach to the bottom of your camera, plug into the camera power socket, and provide oodles of power. At \$100 a pop, and fairly bulky, this is probably a choice for the more serious photographer.

You can also buy plug in power supplies. Unless you plan a lot of inside shots, with an extension cord, you may not want to spend the extra money.

Computer interface

Most cameras today seem to be standardizing on a direct USB connection to computers. Plug in your camera with the USB cable, and download your pictures directly into your computer. This works well with Mac OSX and Windows XP. Any other computer operating systems require you to fool with some additional software so your computer will recognize the camera. It still works, but takes more effort to set up.

Optical zoom

This is your opportunity to reach out and "pix" someone or something. Three X is common, inexpensive and compact – fine for a pocket camera, but not all that special. Six X or more gives you good visible reach. For real estate pictures, there is no substitute for at least 6X. Ten – twelve X is at least twice as good, especially for those times you can't get in a good place for the best picture.

The greater the magnification, the steadier you have to hold it. Newer models with telephoto zooms are now available with anti-shake technology that is very helpful. Don't buy a telephoto without it. The anti-shake feature also helps a lot in low light situations – like inside a house – so you may not want to consider any camera without it.

Hidden Gotchas

Pictures devour of lots of computer memory, so you may need another hard drive, or find a new computer appearing on your wish list. By the way, how's your color printer with photos? Good prints require special, expensive paper too, and suck lots of ink.

While you can get prints directly from your compact

flash card, or a CD, they are not cheap, plus, you have to send out for them and wait. There is nothing like taking a few pictures and having prints in your hands a few minutes later.

Storage

Once you start taking pictures, you will need to store them somewhere. Hard drives fill quickly. The best way to store pictures is on CDs or DVDs. Does your computer have a CD burner? If not, you need to get one. Does that spell “new computer”?

The pictures come out of the camera identified by numbers. You will have to rename them with understandable titles and organize your files so you can find them later. You will also need some way to organize and protect your growing CD collection.

Software

Most cameras come with some sort of rudimentary photo manipulation software so you can rotate, crop and adjust pictures. In time, you will want to play with exposure and color as well. That usually calls for more sophisticated [expensive] software too.

Then you can get a good scanner and convert old pictures to digital for family albums on CD. What's next? How about sound and movies? Time to restart.

Internet bargains

Most discount stores sell cameras with some small profit margin. Bargains abound on the internet, but be careful. The really low prices are at or below cost. The seller survives by selling accessories, not always at bargain prices. Buyer beware!

Digital cameras are fun, readily available, affordable, powerful, and useful. They can also be addictive and a serious money vacuum. Choose carefully, and try them out in a store before you buy.

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