

Tips on shopping for your next camera

I recently had the opportunity to attend the PhotoPlus Expo in New York City, which is the largest photographic trade show on the east coast. After walking the trade show floor, I have to tell you, there is no shortage of new camera products for you to spend your money on. So with the holidays soon to be upon us, perhaps you have been giving some thought to getting a new digital camera. Here's a run down of some of the important features you will want to consider to be a savvy shopper.

Megapixel capture is often touted as one of the biggest selling points of cameras. However, it is now probably not as an important feature as it once was. In the early development of digital cameras every gain in megapixel was a giant step forward in image quality. But once 6 megapixel (MP) was reached, it satisfied the needs of most photographers. Most cameras now exceed this amount, so unless you plan on making very large prints, or plan to make a sizeable image from small part of the picture, a term called cropping, you may not see any difference with a larger MP capture camera. Put a higher priority on other features for comparison.

With regard to this specification, one term that may cause confusion is the use of effective pixels. To claim a higher MP capture, camera manufacturers will list the total number of photodiodes that the camera sensor has even if they are not all used. So the effective pixels are the ones actually used, giving a more accurate specification.

The zoom range or the X factor in lens power is one feature that is usually high on the comparison list. However, simply comparing the X factor number between models doesn't represent the whole story on this feature. In the days of 35mm film cameras, there was a standard way of gauging the angle of view by the millimeter rating of the lens. With the way newer cameras are designed, there is no uniform way to simply compare the mm range given to a lens. Usually the compact point and shoot cameras work with very low numbers when compared to 35mm film cameras. So usually you will need to look for the 35mm film camera equivalent specification. This will allow you to compare the range of views various cameras can



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capture. The X factor represents how many times the image can be magnified over its widest angle of view. The lower in mm rating the lens has, the wider its angle of view. If a camera has a 25mm lens with a 10X magnification, then the zoom lens ranges from 25-250mm. Also note that if you are shopping for a Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera you also will have to look for the 35mm equivalent rating as most DSLRs use smaller sensors than the size of 35mm film which magnifies the effect of the lens.

One feature often mentioned is that of digital zoom. The digital zoom feature just crops and enlarges the image in the camera when it cannot get close to your subject with the camera's optics. The digital zoom feature does not add any additional information to the picture. This is not a feature worth comparing, as you can get better results using a photo-editing program to accomplish the same.

You may not give it much thought but something to consider with your next camera is what type of memory card it uses. Compact Flash (CF) was once the standard and still is, on pro level cameras, but Secure Digital (SD) is now the mainstream method for storing images. For years, many laptops have even included built in card readers for this type of media. Some manufacturers make their own proprietary cards, which you may want to give thought to when purchasing. These less common formats will usually result in being more costly and hard to find should you need to purchase one on a vacation trip.

One of the most appreciated developments in digital cameras is in the increase in size of the LCD screen on the back of the camera. The typical 1.5" screen of a few years ago could only give you an idea of what your final image might look like. With large 3" screens that nearly cover the entire camera back, the camera can now double as a device for showing off your images.



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Large LCD screens on cameras not only assist in better photography they can also double as a playback device for sharing with friends.

Some cameras have built in slide show software where you can set the camera up to play back your images and hand it off to a friend.

If you have worked with only using an LCD screen in digital photography, then you probably know how difficult it can be to see the image in bright light. For that reason you may want to consider a camera that has an optical viewfinder. Even though they can only approximate the composition of your image, most cameras provide enough extra pixels that cropping your image will not result in a loss of quality.

Lens quality is one thing that may not get much attention in camera ads. There are many manufacturers of digital cameras, and at one point there were more digital camera manufacturers than film cameras, but the lens quality on cameras is not equal. A good quality lens on a lower MP camera may give you a better image than that of a lesser quality lens on a higher MP camera. You may come across a camera with a lot of great specs, only to find the actual quality of the image is mediocre. Do a little research in this area and see if you can actually

examine images taken with a camera you are considering. One lens rating you might not be aware of is the maximum opening of the lens. The larger this opening, the less light the camera needs to operate. The rating is called an f/number and a smaller number is better.

A manual focus option is an important feature when the auto focus control cannot select the right subject for focusing. On a recent zoo trip, a little point and shoot camera I carry, inevitably kept selecting the bars of the cage instead of animal behind them. Switching to manual focus allowed me to focus on the subject. Having this feature can save you from having a bunch of useless images.

Image stabilization is a feature that is becoming more commonly found in cameras and also very much appreciated. In short, the camera tries to offset the movement caused by the photographer resulting in sharper pictures. Using slow shutter speeds or shooting with a long telephoto lens causes this movement. When holding a camera by hand, image stabilization may give you better results which would

normally require the use of a tripod.

Another camera selling point is how high the ISO setting can be adjusted, allowing the camera to take pictures in very low light. Some cameras boast speeds of ISO 3200 and higher, but often the quality suffers dramatically when shooting above 400. You might want to actually see the results of images taken at high ISOs, if this is an important feature for you. Again, not all cameras are created equal.

As wonderful as these pocket cameras can be, they can be fooled into giving less than optimum results. This is when you need to take the camera off the automatic controls and explore the manual controls. Being able to override the auto features, and the ease at doing so, can make or break getting that great shot.

Many still photo cameras now have the ability to record video. A few years ago the quality was none too exciting with 15 frames per second and Web quality recording. Newer cameras have the ability to record full frame digital video and are only limited in sound quality and the length of time they can record. A top end SLR that came out this fall is not only a top still camera but can also record Hi Definition video and has the option for external microphones. If your demands for video recording are light, you may find that a still camera that can also shoot video may be all you need. It will be interesting to see what the future brings as photo and video technologies are merging.

So with all this said, where do you shop for your next camera? Well, if price is your only concern, then definitely check out the Web and the big box stores. However with one of them just filing for Chapter 11, you may want to consider a local vendor. If you want an experienced sales representative that can intelligently answer your questions and guide you through the process of picking your next camera, I have to recommend a gem of photo store right here in our own town, Hoyer's Photo Supply. I can tell you first-hand from my many years of working in the photo industry that this is the best-stocked photo store in over a 100-mile radius. So happy shopping!

Again keep those ideas for articles coming. They can be sent to me at pml@palmermultimedia.com.

Activist group in New York town sees future in podcars

By WILLIAM KATES
Associated Press Writer

ITHACA, N.Y. — The thought of a driverless, computer-guided car transporting people where they want to go on demand is a futuristic notion to some.

To Jacob Roberts, podcars — or PRTs, for personal rapid transit — represent an important component in the here-and-now of transportation.

"It's time we design cities for the human, not for the automobile," said Roberts, president of Connect Ithaca, a group of planning and building professionals, activists and students committed to making this upstate New York college town the first podcar community in the U.S.

"In the podcar ... it creates the perfect blend between the privacy and autonomy of the automobile with the public transportation aspect and, of course, it uses clean energy," Roberts said.

With the oil crisis reaching a zenith and federal lawmakers ready to begin fashioning a new national transportation bill for 2010, Roberts and his colleagues think the future is now for podcars — electric, automated, lightweight vehicles that ride on their own network separate from other traffic.

Unlike mass transit, podcars carry two to 10 passengers, giving travelers the freedom and privacy of their own car while reducing the use of fossil fuels, reducing traffic congestion and freeing up space now monopolized by parking.

At stations located every block or every half-mile, depending on the need, a rider enters a destination on a computerized pad, and a car would take the person non-stop to the location. Stations would have slanted pull-in

bays so that some cars could stop for passengers, while others could continue unimpeded on the main course.

"It works almost like an elevator, but horizontally," said Roberts, adding podcar travel would be safer than automobile travel.

The podcar is not entirely new. A limited version with larger cars carrying up to 15 passengers was built in 1975 in Morgantown, W.Va., and still transports University of West Virginia students.

Next year, Heathrow Airport outside London will unveil a pilot podcar system to ferry air travelers on the ground. Companies in Sweden, Poland and Korea are already operating full-scale test tracks to demonstrate the feasibility. Designers are planning a podcar network for Masdar City, outside Abu Dhabi, which is being built as the world's first zero-carbon, zero-waste city.

Meanwhile, more than a dozen cities in Sweden are planning podcar systems as part of the country's commitment to be fossil-fuel-free by 2020, said Hans Lindqvist, a councilman from Varmdo, Sweden, and chairman of Kompass, an association of groups and municipalities behind the Swedish initiative.

Cars have dominated the cityscape for nearly a century, taking up valuable space while polluting the air, said Magnus Hunhammar, chief executive officer of the Stockholm-based Institute for Sustainable Transportation, the world's leading center on podcar technology.

"Something has to change," he said. "We aren't talking about replacing the automobile entirely. We are adding something else into the transportation strategy."

Carmakers' crisis deepens Detroit's despair

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high, especially after Detroit won praise for hosting Major League Baseball's All-Star game in 2005 and the Super Bowl in 2006.

Luxury homes and condominiums have been built and others still are planned for downtown. And the last of the city's three casinos is expected to open its luxury hotel early next year.

But 2008 has been rocky for Detroit, beginning with the sex scandal that cost Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick his job and freedom. He was sentenced Oct. 28 to four months in jail as part of a plea in two criminal cases.

The mismanaged and often-criticized public schools are in line to lose millions of dollars in state aid because enrollment dropped below 100,000. And Detroit's chief financial officer has said the city faces a \$125 million budget deficit that could force layoffs and cut services for residents.

"The mood in the city now is not good," 76-year-old retired carpenter Glen White said. "A lot of people are losing their homes. A lot of people are losing their jobs."

"I'm making it all right, but it's tight."

Misfortunes and missteps by the auto industry add to the woes, and Thomas said this past week's last-minute plea from the auto chief executives is typical of how things are done in Detroit.

"We wait for something bad to happen before we do something," he said.

"Everybody is scared," said Nikollbibaj, concerned about keeping his restaurant afloat following shift and job cuts at two east side Chrysler plants.

His eatery, Joseph's Coney Island, and others like it sprang up near car



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Business owner Anton Nikollbibaj prepares a skillet at his Coney Island restaurant in Detroit Friday. The country's leaders need to look past mistakes by GM, Ford and Chrysler and focus on what's best for people, said Nikollbibaj.

factories around the city, most staying open 24 hours. "Business is less than half of what it used to be since the late '90s," Nikollbibaj said. "We did really good until

2002. It's been getting worse since. I don't know where the bottom is going to be. I hope when the bottom hits I'm still going to be here."

But auto executives also

need to shoulder some of the blame for their failures, Bill Fink said.

"I think they shouldn't get paid more than the highest paid worker on the line," said Fink, 51, a former food deliverer who has been unemployed for months and spends two days each week shopping his resumes online.

"It's frustrating. I don't want to go back to what I was doing before," Fink said. Still, he said, "My wife works, so I'm not going to lose my house or anything."

The auto industry's trouble and deteriorating local economy have been a reality check for a lot of people, Fink said.

"For way too long people were thinking as long as they have a job they don't have to worry about the guy down the street until it affects them," he said.

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