WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN BUYING A CAMERA

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CAMERA BUYING TIPS

With new equipment budgets coming, schools may want to expand their arsenal of digital cameras. But before purchase orders are tsubmitted, there is some research to be done. Here are some questions to answer that will help you choose a camera that fits the needs of your program.

There are many options available in digital cameras, from point-and-shoot models to high-end digital single lens reflex (SLR) bodies. Most manufacturers divide their cameras into three groups – the under-$500 point-and-shoot models that produce high-quality candid photos, but won't work well for sports or action photos; the $500 – $1000 'prosumer' digital SLR designed for the more advanced amateur market and featuring interchangeable lenses; and the $1000+ models with the durability and the features the professional market demands.

When choosing a camera, the first question to ask is what purpose the camera will serve. If the staff is looking for a compact camera that works in a variety of situations, providing images for sections like academics or organizations, a point-and-shoot model may be the best choice. When selecting one of these cameras, check the following information:

1. Does the camera have a maximum aperture larger than f/3.5? The widest aperture, or 'speed' of the lens, will determine the maximum amount of light the lens can capture. An f/2.8 lens allows twice as much light to enter a camera as an f/4 lens, which means the f/2.8 camera will work in lower light conditions. Be aware that many zoom lenses raise their aperture as the zoom is used. For example, a lens with an aperture of f/3.5 could change to f/5.6 or higher when used at maximum zoom. Cameras that have built-in image stabilization, which helps keep the image sharp, can help minimize the negative effects of a slow shutter speed in dark surroundings.
2. Does the camera include a "digital zoom?" This means the subject is magnified electronically inside the camera, rather than through the lens. This produces a lower-quality image than a camera with an optical zoom. If the camera has a digital zoom, make sure it's always turned off.
3. Does the camera allow for manual control of exposure? Cameras that allow user-control of aperture and shutter settings give photographers maximum control over their final image.
4. Does the camera have a metal casing or a plastic one? Cameras with metal casings will stand up to student use much better but are usually more expensive than models with plastic bodies.
5. Does the camera use the same memory cards already being used in the classroom? If you have a variety of cameras, standardizing on one or two media types (i.e. Compact Flash, XD, SD, MemoryStick) can help with both purchasing and management of the cards.
6. What is the delay between the time the shutter release is pressed and the camera captures the image? This can be one of the most frustrating features of the point-and-shoot cameras. Because of a delay as the camera focuses the lens and captures the image, many photographers become frustrated with this type of camera. A moment is missed because the camera was late in capturing the image.

In the $500 – $1000 range, entry level SLR cameras with interchangeable lenses and other features such as built-in image stabilization, higher ISO capabilities and more manual controls

for exposure can be found. These cameras are generally a requirement for shooting sports and action photography for the publication. Along with considering the questions on the previous page, here are more questions to answer:

1. Do you have existing SLR lenses that might work on a digital body? If the school has an investment in some fast lenses, especially for sports, sticking with the same brand for the digital camera makes the most sense. If the lenses the school owns have a maximum aperture of f/5.6 or higher, then it is time to consider investing in some new lenses too.
2. Are you wasting money by purchasing something that you don't need? Many digital SLR cameras in this price range are sold as kits, with the camera body and a zoom lens. These kits are reasonably priced, but may feature a slower lens. If this is the school's first purchase, the kit is probably a good way to go. But if this is the second or third camera, purchase the body separate from the lens and get a lens that meets a specific need for the staff.
3. Do you need the most current technology? Did the company just introduce a new model, which might mean that you could find the older model for a discount? Many digital models are updated once a year by the manufacturers.
4. Does the camera have a line of lenses and accessories that could be used to expand the system? At some point an external flash, a battery grip or a range of lenses from extreme wide angle (10-20mm) to ultra zoom (300mm plus) might be good to own.
5. Can you save money by purchasing a different brand of lens that will work with your camera? Sigma and Tamron both make lenses for other camera brands that can be less expensive than the manufacturer's brand.
6. What ISO range is the camera capable of utilizing and does the camera feature built-in noise reduction? When using film, increased ISO results in a grainier photograph. With digital cameras, grain is actually called "noise" and shows up as pixel-sized spots of random color. Noise reduction helps remove some of these spots.
7. For more than $1,000, the school can purchase a camera just like the professionals use. What this usually means is a metal body camera with a wide range of customizable settings. The professional cameras are designed to handle the use and abuse of working photojournalists in a variety of environments. While some schools have chosen to invest in this level of camera, for most publication staffs it makes more sense to spend money on better lenses and then purchase a camera body in the $500-1000 range.

But if the staff has the funds available and already has some fast lenses, the professional cameras can provide a rich set of controls for the experienced photographer. When choosing one of these cameras, the basic questions to ask are what camera body will your lenses work with and how much do you want to spend.

Once the basic questions are answered, then it is time to read some reviews of cameras that meet your requirements and decide which one to purchase. Web sites that provide good reviews of cameras include imaging-resource.com, cnet.com, and steves-digicams.com. But the best resource can be other teachers or students who have worked with the camera and can share the pros and cons of what they've found.

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