

"I am looking for a new camera. What should I get?" "Top Gun"

by Jim Lee

Continued from page 17

Often, when friends learn that one of my hobbies is photography, I am asked this question. It is not always easy to answer without some serious discussion. If you are thinking about getting rid of the "old" film camera and going digital, here are some things to consider. First, you should ask yourself what you intend to use the camera for and what type of photos will you be taking. Is it important to have a small, camera that will be easy to slip into your pocket or handbag when traveling and ready at a moment's notice? Or are you interested in getting into photography as a serious hobbyist and will need to be able to use interchangeable lenses, specialized flash attachments and other accessories to make high quality photographs?

DSLR is short for "Digital Single Lens Reflex" and is generally meant to describe somewhat larger, and often more expensive cameras with detachable lenses and a host of available accessories designed to help the serious amateur or professional take good photographs. This does not mean that you cannot take quality photos with a small "point and shoot" camera. A small, inexpensive camera, if used properly is capable of producing stunning results. So, if your goal is to be able to take reasonably good photos and have fast, easy access to your camera, perhaps you should consider one of the many excellent "point and shoot" models available.

Wait, before shopping we need to talk about a few more things. When you walk into the store, whether it be a specialty camera shop or one of the so called "big box" stores, such as Wal-Mart, Best Buy or Target, don't always expect to find a knowledgeable, helpful, unbiased salesperson to guide you. On more than one occasion, I have been shopping in a store's camera department and overheard conversations between a clerk and prospective buyer and have been amazed by the inaccurate information that was given. So, let's talk about some of the things that you will hear about and what they mean.

Resolution/Megapixels—This is the first thing that you will see. Manufacturers will use it to showcase their models. Don't get me wrong; it is important, but

don't make your decision based on this alone. A high pixel count only matters if you intend to make extra large prints of your photos. Today, most digital cameras offer at least 8 megapixels, which in my opinion is adequate for most casual photographers.

Optical or Digital Zoom—Optical zoom uses the lens to "bring you closer" to your subject, whereas a digital zoom uses the electronics built into the camera to enlarge and crop the subject, much as an enlarger would do for a film print. Generally speaking, a higher quality result can be expected from optical zoom. Some cameras are available today with both optical and digital zoom features.

Exposure Settings—Many of the models available today have different settings that have been pre-programmed for different types of photos, such as sports, landscapes, portraits, etc. These are designed to make it easier for the novice. Look for the little images on the camera, but you might also make sure that there is a "Manual" setting that allows you to make adjustments once you understand how to accurately set things such as aperture and shutter speed. Some cameras will have more of these settings and you should consider whether you will actually use these features if it means spending more money for these features.

Viewfinder—The size and brightness of the viewfinder is important when you are viewing your photo. Once you do get to the store, try to view it in a bright spot, even outside if the store will allow it.

Image Stabilization—One of the most common causes of out of focus pictures has nothing to do with the focus adjustment, but is caused by "camera shake" that is the result of small movements by the photographer. Many cameras now offer this feature and in my opinion should be strongly considered.

OK, so now hopefully you are a little more knowledgeable, but I would suggest one more step. Let your fingers do the walking (on the internet) and visit a couple of online merchants such as Adorama (www.adorama.com), B&H Photo (www.bhphoto.com) or

Best Buy (www.bestbuy.com) and look at some different models. Some of these websites allow you to sort their products by price or manufacturer. This is helpful if you have set a budget (a good idea) or if you want a camera made by a particular manufacturer such as Canon or Nikon. Once you have come up with a few models that interest you, I would suggest one more step. There is an excellent web page (www.dpreview.com/reviews/sidebyside.asp) that will allow you to select several cameras and compare their specifications side by side. Warning: There is more information here than you will ever want, so just look at the things we discussed above. If you are not sure about a particular feature, clicking on the "?" next to the name will give you a description of that feature.

With a good idea of what you want—and hopefully some written notes—you are ready to shop. Don't be shy about asking to see and hold the camera—maybe even snap a couple of shots in the store. I haven't covered things like warranty and service here as these issues should be considered when buying any product.

Finally, invest in a larger storage card immediately. To keep their costs competitive, camera manufacturers almost NEVER include a large capacity card with their product. For obvious reasons, you should buy an extra battery as soon as you can—with the camera if possible. Some stores, especially internet merchants will "bundle" camera, case, extra batteries and storage cards at a "special price." I have not found these to really be good buys since the extra batteries and storage cards are often of a lesser quality than the original equipment. There are lots of things that I could have talked about in this article and it would have taken up the entire issue of this publication. I have touched on the things that I feel are most important. I have purposely not mentioned brand names here because most of the major manufacturers have excellent products. I do not necessarily recommend the online merchants that I mentioned above, although I have purchased equipment from all of them in the past.



Top Gun: Joan Lamson is all smiles after receiving the Top Dog award from Don Patience, Eastern Carolina District Director of SCORE.

presentation to the group on "Facilitated Roundtables." Lamson stressed the importance of creating an oversight structure, such as the Small Business Resource Alliance, to sponsor and monitor the Roundtables and to encourage a 100% participative format. She commented that some of the Roundtable participants had attended every meeting for nearly 10 years and claimed that the reason they were "still in business" was because of the Roundtables." At the conclusion of the presentation, she received a standing ovation.

Due to the strong success of these local SCORE Roundtables, the national SCORE organization announced that they would establish up to 10 BETA sites around the country for those SCORE chapters that wished to replicate the success of the Coastal Carolina Chapter.

Founded in 1964, SCORE, the "Counselors to America's Small Business," is a nonprofit association dedicated to educating entrepreneurs and the formation, growth and success of small business nationwide. SCORE is a resource partner with the United States Small Business Administration. Headquartered in Herndon, Virginia, and Washington, DC, SCORE has 370 chapters throughout the United States and its territories and 11,200 volunteers nationwide. Both working and retired executives and business owners donate time and expertise as business counselors.