

Seduced by Specifications

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People rate everything on its details, from digital cameras and computers to new cars and stereo systems. It goes like this: You look at the specification sheet, compare it to that of other products, and buy the best one. Sounds simple enough, right? Using the "more is better" theory, you could easily imagine that the digital camera with the most pixels, the fastest recycle time, the biggest memory card, or the most features must be the best. While this sounds logical enough, allow me to paraphrase Mark Twain: There are liars, damned liars, and statistics. In other words, don't judge a digital camera solely by its numbers. Rather, look for the small details that really indicate how well a product is designed.

Digital DejaVu

Most good digital cameras share common design features and functions; some even have identical elements. For instance, it's not a coincidence that a number of 3-megapixel digital cameras roughly resemble one another in size and shape. This is because they have the same CCD, lens, and basic electronics. Developing and manufacturing all the components that make up a digital camera is an extremely expensive process, beyond the research and development budgets of many companies. To save time and money, they purchase the basic CCD, lens, and electronics as a kit from a single supplier, then they customize these components. But just because they share some of the same parts doesn't mean these cameras are identical.

The Art of Nitpicking

One of the first things I look for is a tiny, almost insignificant detail: the threaded socket on the bottom of the camera used for attaching to a tripod. To save pennies, some manufacturers substitute a plastic socket for a metal one. While this won't matter one iota for most users, those who shoot from a tripod are constantly attaching and detaching their equipment, and this may eventually strip the plastic thread off a digital camera.

Another detail is the optical viewfinder. As one of many millions of Americans on the downhill side of 40, my eyes aren't what they used to be. Consequently, I tend to have a better opinion of any digital camera that has an optical viewfinder with a focusable diopter so that I can clearly see the subject.

The same is true with frame markers, those tiny lines in the optical viewfinder that show exactly what you're capturing. To save money, some manufacturers don't put frame markers on the viewfinder, and you're left guessing what part of the picture will be cut out. Even in many of the cameras with them, the frame markers are dark stripes, which are impossible to see in low light, instead of the more expensive, easier-to-see, frosted-glass, etched lines.

LCD viewfinders are wonderful for previews and playbacks--as long as you aren't shooting outdoors. Good cameras have solutions such as a high/low switch to change the LCD viewfinder's brightness, a pivoting LCD viewfinder, or a rotating camera body. Personally, I prefer digital cameras with a knob or button that changes LCD brightness at a touch rather than having to do it through menu commands.

Another tiny yet telling detail is the way a digital camera feels when you hold it. Is the camera shaped to fit your palm, or is there a grip or indentation provided on which your fingers can rest, and is this covered with a nonslip material or just with ornamental, dark-plastic trim? Is the Capture button placed so that your index finger automatically rests on top of it? Can you hold the camera firmly yet naturally for several minutes without becoming fatigued? It's best to use a digital camera that gives you a sure and safe grip and that neither cramps your hand nor crowds your fingers.

Here are a few other details to look for which, all other things being equal, can be helpful in narrowing down your choice of a digital camera:

Where is the battery compartment positioned? If it's on the bottom, the batteries may inadvertently fall out when the door to the compartment is opened.

How is the camera lens protected? Look for a camera with a shutter or a plate that automatically covers the lens when the camera is turned off or a lens cap that's tethered to the camera so that it can't get lost. The same applies to the rubber or plastic plugs used to keep dust out of the USB, video, power, and auxiliary flash ports; if these aren't physically attached to the camera body, they're sure to soon be lost.

Are the control buttons large, well placed, and well shaped? Small, recessed buttons, or buttons that are jammed too close together can be hard to operate.

How are the controls and buttons labeled? Simple, unambiguous icons and clear identification in the language of your choice are preferable to abbreviations and obscure symbols.

Remember to take your time to look at the big picture when camera shopping. Don't be fooled by all the statistics,

numbers, and minutia. What matters is how the equipment is put together, how it feels in your hand, and of course, how it performs.