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### Say Cheese! How to Choose a Digital Camera

Buying a digital camera to capture your holiday memories can be a daunting experience. The huge number of features offered on digital cameras today can overwhelm consumers. In an effort to differentiate its products in a highly competitive marketplace, each digital camera manufacturer seems to emphasize the importance of different features. Unless you’re an experienced photographer, it can be difficult to tell which features will actually help you take a better picture. A 2009 survey by *Consumer Reports* magazine found that nearly half of digital camera owners only used their camera’s most basic features. Few knew what special features their camera offered and even fewer understood how to use them.

The five most important things to consider when choosing a digital camera are: Price, Use, Performance, Features and Design.

**Price.** Let’s start with price because there’s little point in drooling over a digital camera you can’t afford. Even if you’re shopping at the low end of the scale, you’ll find many excellent point-and-shoot cameras on the market. Better picture resolution (how sharp and clear photos appear), a greater number of features and longer zoom range are the primary features that drive up price. SLR digital cameras, which offer the greatest versatility and best picture quality, command the highest prices. If you’re an avid photographer or professional, a SLR’s premium features may be worth the added cost; but the average consumer will find the features and picture quality of less expensive point-and-shoot cameras more than adequate. Fortunately, you’ll find great deals on digital cameras this year. Many retailers are already offering Black Friday prices both in-store and online. To lure online shoppers, quite a few retailers are offering online buyers additional discounts and free shipping.

**Use.** How you plan to use your camera should be your most important considerations when evaluating camera performance and features. The majority of consumers purchase easy-to-use, point-and-shoot digital cameras that automatically adjust camera settings for each shot. Even low-priced, basic digital cameras do a good job of taking 4x6-family scrapbook pictures. If you plan to focus on action shots, panoramic landscapes, close-up photography or regularly enlarge your photos, you’ll want to purchase a high-end point-and-shoot camera or a digital SLR camera that offers a wider range of features and superior picture quality.

**Performance.** Today’s digital cameras are easier to use, offer better picture quality, have faster shutter speeds (less blur when photographing moving subjects), and offer special features that automatically adjust the camera for available light and subject matter. Image quality is the most important performance attribute. As a rule of thumb, you’ll find that the greater the resolution (measured in megapixels), the sharper the photo image. For 4x6 photos, you won’t notice an appreciable difference in photo quality between 10-pixel and less expensive 7- to 8-pixel cameras. However, if you regularly enlarge your photos to 5x7 or 8x10, you’ll want a camera that offers 10 or more pixels. Choose the superior resolution of an SLR digital camera if you want sharp images on photos enlarged to 12x16 or poster-size.

**Features.** Digital cameras offer an astounding number of features. Consumers find the following features to be most useful:

- Image stabilization which corrects for shaky hands or zoom motion so pictures don’t blur.
- Wireless capability that allows photos to be transferred to a PC without a cable or card.
- Touch-screen display for fast, easy use. Larger display screens also make menus easier to read and show greater image detail when composing or reviewing photos.

- Face detection that automatically adjusts focus and exposure settings to concentrate on faces, not background.
- Zoom button that allows you to easily zoom in for close objects or zoom out to bring distant objects into focus.

Unfortunately, digital camera makers seem to be phasing out two features that are popular with 75% of camera users. Digital cameras that offer these features are worth considering:

- A viewfinder that allows you to compose photos the old-fashioned way by peering through a small viewer when bright light makes the LCD screen hard to see.
- Ability to take high-quality photos in low-light without a flash.

Personal use and preference determines how valuable other features may be to a consumer. Day/date stamping is a common feature, but some cameras also offer geographic tagging which imprints photos with the location where they were taken, a feature few consumers use. Smile detection and panoramic mode are two other features rarely used by mainstream consumers. Features that can be handy to have are:

- Landscape mode for taking wide-angle photos of scenic views and large family groups.
- Action/sports mode that allow you to capture fast action by taking photos in quick succession.
- Timer which gives the photographer time to jump into the photo.
- High-resolution zoom for photographing distant objects like birds or wildlife.
- Low-light capability without flash, allowing unblurred pictures of sunsets or birthday candles.

**A note about video recording**, a popular novelty feature. The ability to take short movies with your digital camera is fun and good for capturing your child's first steps to share with relatives; but even high-def video on pricey SLR cameras can't compete with the most inexpensive camcorder.

**Design.** It's easy to get so wrapped up in the features a digital camera offers that consumers often neglect to consider the camera's design. A digital camera should fit comfortably in the hand, be easy to hold while pressing buttons, be of a comfortable weight, and have intuitive controls that are positioned logically so you don't have to think about what you're doing when you snap a picture.

Compact digital cameras are the most readily-available size and will offer consumers the best price discounts this holiday. If you plan to carry your camera in your pocket or fanny pack, you may want to pay a little extra for a small, thin, light-weight subcompact digital camera. If you want the professional features of an SLR digital camera, expect it to be bulkier and heavier.

Don't neglect to consider the type and cost of the batteries and memory card the camera requires. Specialized batteries can be fairly expensive and difficult to find when you're traveling. Frequent travelers may want to choose a digital camera that uses readily-available AA batteries. When purchasing a memory card, consider how often you'll be able to download photos to clear the card. A 4 gigabyte memory card will hold about 1,144 high-quality photos, ample capacity for most consumers. Frequent travelers, however, may want to purchase multiple memory cards or a card with a higher gigabyte capacity. You'll pay more but find a single card more convenient.

Online sites are already offering excellent prices on digital cameras. Shop now for the best selection and don't forget to put an "Open me first!" sticker on your gift.