

Do You Need A New Camera?

Used to be, back in the [35mm] film days, that a top drawer camera would last for many years, and then sometimes be salable for as much or more than what you paid for it. The shooters I looked up to mostly carried black cameras rather than the chrome ones, and had used the same cameras long enough that the brass showed through where the paint was worn by heavy use. Not a lot changed between models, which came out every few years; a little improvement here and there, and sometimes people still preferred the previous model to the current one.

That's all changed now. You can hardly get your new all singing, all dancing gigamegapixel beauty out of the box before it has been surpassed in the spec sheet sweepstakes by the next model coming up. And don't bother to try to sell the newly old one for more than a tiny down payment. So what do you think? Do you need a new camera?

Like so many other things in life, the answer is a resounding maybe. Factors to consider are how old your present camera is, what you do with it, and what better you could do with a newer model. Being interested in both Porsches and photography, I'm going to assume that you'd like to shoot speed events, concours, rallies, and Parades as well as do the usual family photographic things.

Its only fair to start with the observation that a good photographer can make a good picture with pretty much anything that functions; equipment is secondary to the vision and ability to execute. That said, its also true that a toy plastic camera is good for only a very few things, that a \$30,000 digital-backed medium format camera is useless at a race, and that a camera that's too heavy or bulky is liable not to be with you when you need it.

What to do? Here's my highly opinionated take on the matter. First of all, if you're still shooting film, you need a new camera. There are simply too many advantages to digital to ignore, the technology is quite mature and stable enough to justify the investment, the transition not that difficult, and the quality is spectacular. If you have a point and shoot and wish for more, you need a single lens reflex, or "D" digital camera. Typically, this will give you bigger pixels (as distinguished from more) which is important for quality, provide the ability to use different lenses if you like, and permit faster focusing and shooting. Keep the PS for portability and backup.



Many newer cameras offer in-camera picture modification, which could be a help in underexposures.

If you have an older digital SLR, the biggest change for my money is the enhanced sensitivity of the chips in the newest high end cameras combined with better on-board processing of the images. This has produced an ability to “see in the dark” (relatively, of course), which means that you can get better shots without a tripod, shoot later in the day, use a higher shutter speed if desired for your speed event pictures, and get enhanced shadow detail. The need for strobe at social and family events can be lessened, yielding more natural looking shots.

The next big change for some people will be the addition of the ability to get reasonable quality video. The first D-SLR with video ability, the Nikon D-90, has led to a variety of SLR cameras from different manufacturers with the ability to do both still pictures and to offer reasonable quality video. These are not cheap, but can now be had for less than \$900, if you already have lenses. Want to put some motion onto your region’s website? With many of the newer machines, you can use the same camera and lens to get both high quality still shots and action video. A quick look at PCA’s new website gives an idea of how important video has become in our world.

A major change would see you buying a camera with a different sized sensor; the full size sensors can offer better quality and light sensitivity and use the lenses you may have from your SLR film days with the same effect, meaning that that a 50 mm lens is pretty much “normal”, and that the 24 and 28 mm versions are quite wide. The (generally less expensive) smaller sensor cameras have the advantage of amplifying the other end of the scale: your 300 mm lens that is a favorite for races now will function in about the 450-480 range. With these cameras, 35 mm is more or less the “normal”. The smaller sensor cameras can typically use the lenses designed for the larger, but not the other way around, at least not without quality penalties.



The smaller sensor cameras lend themselves to racing because of their increasing the effective focal length of the lens; larger sensor cameras tend to be better for light sensitivity and detail; they give a wider angle view.

Leonard Turner Photo

People who don’t want to get involved with Photoshop or a similar computer-based imaging program could find the in-camera editing features of the newer cameras a plus, particularly the ability to brighten up the shadows, and the

self-cleaning features that help prevent the need to periodically clean the sensor—always a scary job if you do it yourself—seems a good addition. Raw files are important in my world, and if your current camera can't shoot raw, that's a biggie; raw means that you get the entire, unedited image to work with rather than the camera's best estimate at what you need, and it can save a marginal photograph.

Some new features seem a bit more window dressing. I'd sooner not have "face detection;" I can already do that pretty well by myself! Likewise, the ability to tag an image with gps coordinates doesn't strike me as a major reason to spend money, although perhaps future developments will make it more important. I do see an advantage to a faster firing rate; if you shoot races, it can be a big plus. The ability to select from a series of shots during an action sequence is a good way to capture the best moment of the action, and more shots mean more choices.

So, do you need a new camera? You tell me. Remember, you can always use the old one as a backup!

Have comments or questions? Let me hear from you. I'm leonardt@pca.org.