
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photos.

Practice what you preach

Many professional photographers include in their advertising some variation of the adage, "you get what you pay for". While pros are usually anxious to relay this price-justifying message to customers, they often disregard it completely when purchasing their own equipment. These same image-makers are frustrated by consumers who apparently don't recognize the difference between a 98-cent-discount-store photo and a \$200 carefully crafted portrait—but the situations are entirely parallel.

Being involved in the manufacture and sale of photographic equipment, I continually come in contact with photographers making buying decisions, and am privy to their comments and decision-making processes. All too often, these professionals make price the deciding factor in a purchase.

Sometimes, price is important. Suppose, for example, a photographer has only \$200 to buy a direly needed studio flash. In this case, the photographer doesn't have the luxury of considering more expensive units, but must buy the flash that will perform best for his \$200 allotment.

But when sufficient funds permit a choice, the decision-making process should be altogether different. Instead of buying the cheapest unit made, seek the best value—with the specific features, quality, performance and reliability you need. With all the choices on the market, this can be as complex as buying a new car: neither a Hyundai nor a Rolls Royce may be the most intelligent choice, but after determining particular needs, a four-door sedan or high-performance coupe will best fit the bill.

Back to electronic flash units, which serve as a convenient example of how this decision-making process should work. A single flash unit ranges in price from a few hundred dollars up to \$2,000, with products at both ends of the scale boasting the same amount of light output. What's the difference? The manufacturer of the lower-priced flash would like

customers to believe that the more expensive model simply represents about \$1,500 of additional profit for its maker, but is this really the case? Probably not. A careful study of the two pieces may reveal more significant differences.

Two flash units advertised to yield 400 watt-seconds of illumination may, in fact, measure different actual light output. The discrepancy can stem from blatant misrepresentation to different light measuring techniques. For example, using a large, soft light reflector will yield a lower light output at any given distance than a small, shiny-surface reflector; in addition, the quality of light from each source will be infinitely different. Even if each light is tested with its own 16-inch parabolic reflector, the light quality may still vary considerably.

Complicating the matter further, each lamp features different technical specifications suited to various kinds of image-making. Photographers in the market for a flash might ask: Does the light feature variable output? For what *f*/stop range? Is the range continuous or incremented? Does the unit automatically increase and decrease power when the switch is moved, or does it require dumping one flash to get the desired level? Is the modeling lamp proportional to flash output? Can reflectors be changed easily? What kinds of accessories are available? What is the recycling time? Questions like these apply to any studio equipment, and help determine the most appropriate model.

Operating conditions should also weigh in the decision to purchase certain equipment. While less-expensive flash units may seem durable under light stress—only an occasional flash—the real test of a unit is whether it will function under heavy-duty use—a full-power flash every 10 or 20 seconds. Often the size, weight and price of an item is related to its sturdiness. Some costly lamps may go on flashing for years, while cheaper, light-use units overheat quickly and break down under intensified operation.

Even manufacturer warranty does not always indicate quality accurately. At one time, most flash units carried a 90-day or six-month warranty. Now, some companies warrant products for three years or longer, but a longer warranty does not necessarily mean a better-built product. Some companies bank on their products receiving only light use, and so are prepared to repair only occasional breakdowns—so they may advertise an extended warranty. Newcomer companies, as well, may not last long enough to cover a repair when it is needed—negating the value of an extended warranty. Above all, no warranty will help a photographer whose flash breaks down in the field—and the dollars lost on the assignment probably could have been saved by investing in a heavy-duty flash unit.

Buying a piece of equipment conscientiously requires a great deal of careful research. First, determine how much money you can invest, which options you would like, and which you must have, keeping in mind that each "extra" adds possibility for a breakdown. Then, consider each company's reputation for reliability. Finding a helpful, responsible dealer can be invaluable—many discount dealers are not interested in hearing from customers after making the sale. Decide if saving a few dollars is worth giving up dealer service and assistance.

Purchase equipment as you would like customers to purchase photographs—base your choice on value, not simply cost. Decisions about a flash, camera, light stand, tripod, or any tool you use to make a living deserve careful thought. Take time to make an intelligent decision—your bottom line depends on it. ■