
Your Bottom Line

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Purchasing equipment intelligently

While professional photographers search for fresh studio promotion ideas to attract new customers, photographic equipment manufacturers apply similar techniques for enticing photographer business. Although many product innovations are beneficial, studio owners should be wary of manipulative promotions encouraging photographers to purchase costly, unessential products.

A prime example of manufacturers creating unrealistic need in the photography industry, is the "watt-second race"—an intense, ongoing battle among electronic flash manufacturers. Every few months, photographers are bombarded with new company claims that one particular flash unit is more powerful than another. The issue of how much power a photographer needs has become so extreme, that many now believe it imperative to have 1,000- to 5,000-watt-second flash units to produce quality photography.

Many photographers have forgotten the days when a 100- or 200-watt-second studio power pack was the norm, and a 400-watt-second unit was "dynamite". There was a time when top photographers produced beautiful portraits with a mere 25 to 50 watt-seconds of power per strobe, while maintaining adequate aperture settings. In fact, today, photographers generally operate power packs on low settings, using 25- to 200-watt-seconds of power.

I know photographers who struggle to reduce power levels on 1,000-watt-second units. When they find that the unit can not generate a power setting low enough to create the desired image, they are forced to pull light sources away from subjects to successfully use wider aperture settings.

We are living in a world where car manufacturers sell consumers 300-mph automobiles to be driven on highways with 65-mph speed limits. Why do we pay for the additional power? Because we believe manufacturers who tell us we must have it!

Perhaps the only justification for using high-power lighting equipment is that it

takes pressure off photographers. With these units, they have more flexibility when positioning light. Photographers can employ large diffusers, and pull light sources further away from subjects, without being concerned with exposure setting adjustments. But this is self-defeating, since photographers use large diffusers to soften the light quality. When large diffusers are used far from the subject, they cease to produce the soft effect desired.

Manipulating characteristics of lighting to create quality photographs is what professional photography is all about. After all, isn't photography essentially "painting with light"—not "blasting with light"? What happened to photographer concern for the quality of light? Why so much concern for brute power?

Many wedding photographers lug bags of batteries and capacitors, to have access to big-flash power. Yet, they usually operate lighting equipment at quarter- or half-power settings, since full-power requires working with f/16 and f/22 aperture settings, which often results in dark backgrounds. Why do photographers carry around all that heavy-weight flash power? Because I think they feel it is required. I had difficulty switching from a powerful, battery pack to small, lightweight, self-contained units, until I realized that my images were equally as professional as those made with large power packs. As an added benefit, I no longer suffered with a sore back every Saturday night.

Most contemporary wedding photographers also rely on automatic-exposure flash units, instead of selecting specific apertures—based upon subject distance and an evaluation of natural light conditions. Too many depend on a flash unit's thyristor circuit to make all their decisions. Unfortunately, the electronic circuit can not creatively evaluate a specific lighting situation the way a skillful photographer can. Although an automatic flash exposure device may be superior to an inept photographer, I believe that a creative professional photographer is more intelligent than a thyristor circuit.

Photographic equipment manufacturers are also enticing photographers into relying totally upon autofocus and auto-exposure cameras. With so many 35mm SLRs on the market today, many new photographers consider manual-focus SLRs obsolete antiques. They can not imagine the advantages of manual systems in the hands of true professionals.

Autofocus lenses target only on subjects in the center of the viewfinder. Photographers interested in having more control over their photography find it requires additional steps to override or bypass an autofocus computer. When a camera is in the autoexposure program mode, a computer chip selects aperture and shutter speeds for the photographer.

Professional photographers are sold equipment with exciting—but often unnecessary—features because many manufacturers convince the pros that these innovations are imperative. If this trend continues, photographers may become mere "expression getters," who need not acquire any photographic expertise. Simplifying photography to this degree enables anyone to be a "pro".

Future photographers may never know what it means to be true professionals and understand the value of doing for themselves what is now done automatically.

I am not against all technical innovation. In fact, my own company specializes in the design and manufacture of innovative equipment. But, to attain a strong bottom line, professional photographers must make intelligent decisions based on common sense, not advertisements or shortcuts. 