

The Myth of the Megapixel

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I'll be the first to admit that I once fell into the trap ... the Megapixel Marketing trap.

The first thing I would proudly say to fellow digital photographers was always, "My new Coolpix is 4 megapixels. How many is yours?" I invariably received ego-deflating, smug retorts from them where they would boast about their 6 megapixel model. Must be a guy-thing.

I, like many, was taken in by the marketing hype where the megapixel count was positioned in digital camera ads in such a way that it always looked like the primary reason to buy a particular model. Indeed, camera manufacturers have relied practically exclusively on megapixel ratings to market their wares. It's the usual american bigger-must-be-better syndrome.

I am happy to report that I leave my early experiences behind, comfortable in the knowledge that I have become wiser and more practical with respect to my technological prowess.

Just as personal computer manufacturers now realize that the processor speed measurement in megahertz is not a true indicator of computer performance, camera makers know that there is more to ultimate image quality and camera performance than the sensor megapixel count.

What makes a camera great is what I call technology mix. Certainly, the megapixel count of the image is indeed a vital component of the camera's technology mix, but not to be overlooked are the sensor construction and proprietary features, the camera's microprocessor, the built-in computer programs (the "firmware" that contains all the instructions for how the images are processed), the electronic circuitry, noise reduction features, the lens quality, the chassis construction and the quality and speed of the memory media used.

A good example of a failed technology mix in a camera system can be seen in the camera cell phone where some manufacturers are advertising high-resolution cameras of over 6 megapixels. In the interest of miniaturization and economy, they lack adequate processors and programming as well as sophisticated lenses. The end result is a bunch of high-resolution files consisting of inferior images.

To the dismay of many, physical sensor size is also not indicative of image quality. Nikon and other camera makers have repeatedly proven that with the right technology mix, small sensors are capable of producing images superior to their larger, full-frame siblings.

In conclusion, when you are shopping around for that next digital camera, try very hard to avoid all the megapixel marketing hype and give more study and consideration to the technology mix the manufacturer has imbedded into its offerings.

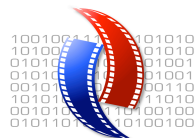


References

Tim Grey, "Pixel-Safe Workflow," *The Digital Image*

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