



Digital photography has changed the way we manage the family album. It's instant, it's easy and you can be your own retoucher. [David Smiedt](#) takes a snapshot of an image revolution.

Pretty as a PIXEL

A sweeping transformation has taken place in photographic technology. Not only do the hoards of Australians who've bought a digital camera get to unleash their inner Bill Hensons, they can store their masterpieces on CDs, PCs and iPods, enhance them with forgiving software, distribute favourite shots via email and only pay for the printing of pictures they really, really want.

According to the Photo Imaging Council Australia, 2.2 million digital cameras will be sold this year, up from 400,000 in 2002, and Canon estimates that Australians spent \$222 million on them in the lead-up to Christmas. Mark Allister, national product manager photo/video for Ted's Cameras, says that while many of the past three years' sales for his chain were upgrades, "for about half of our customers, it's their first digital camera."

That's a lot of inexperienced snappers. "It may take a bit of time to get your head around digital photography," says Jack Atley, the host of *Digital Snap* on Foxtel's How To channel. "But once you do, the freedom and creativity it offers are unparalleled. Press the shutter and half a second later, you have the image."

The man awarded Australian Press Photographer of the Year in 1995-96 for his images of Cambodian landmine victims is quick to add that aside from the instant gratification, "you're often in the right place at the right time to take another photograph if the first one isn't right. You can look at the shot and decide whether to move the camera up, down, left, right, put your subject somewhere else and so on."

As more manufacturers enter the digital-camera market, punters are finding greater value for money. "It's not so much that the prices are dropping radically," says Allister. "It's more a case of people getting more bang for their buck. Two years ago, an entry-level camera costing \$300 would have had about two megapixels power; now it has four.

"As the quality increases, the set-up costs are becoming comparable with a traditional camera," he notes, "but the ongoing expenses are far lower."

But how do you choose the right digital camera? Atley suggests that as well as consulting consumer websites such as www.photoreview.com.au and www.dpreview.com, buyers put traditional brand loyalty aside. "The companies that lead the way in digital photography are those with electronics backgrounds, such as Panasonic, Hewlett-Packard and Sony, while Kodak was a bit slow off the mark and has been playing catch-up for a few years."

Atley's next tip is to consider your subject. "If, for example, you want to take pictures of the kids playing sport on the weekends, go for a bigger zoom lens. You want to look for a 10x optical zoom from a brand such as Nikon, Canon or, if you can afford it, Leica." If you enjoy shooting detailed objects such as flowers, "ensure your camera has a 'macro' choice in its mode settings. One of the best at the moment is the Nikon Coolpix range. If the camera's primarily for travel, make sure it's rugged." You can stick with a compact model but "look for

The other side of the camera

So, someone in your life has just splashed out on a digital camera but in every shot you look like a zombie on a Quaalude bender. How do you look your best every time? Fashion stylist Tavlin Charter suggests finding a pose that suits you and sticking with it. "Instead of directly facing the camera, orient your body so that it's three-quarters to the lens or even halfway," she says. "It's also important not to cross your arms as this negative body language comes through in the photo. Instead, open up your body so it's not static. Even just bending one arm on a hip can give you an elegant line. Finally, look for flattering, soft light – stay away from windows."

According to model Kenneth Beck, few people are naturally good at posing for photographs. "As strange as it may sound, there's no harm in practising in front of a mirror to figure out which facial expressions and postures you do best," he says. Posture, he adds, "is important. Everyone's body looks better when their shoulders are back. And don't cast your eyes downward. Instead, focus on a point just above the camera lens."

Practise in front of a mirror to figure out what facial expressions and postures you do best.

words like 'weatherproof' and metal casings. One of the tougher digital cameras is the Olympus Mju."

One of the key areas on which to focus your selection criteria is "modes". "Most digital cameras come with a range of in-built settings for best results when taking portraits, landscapes, night shots, action photographs," he says. "Don't leave the shop without knowing how to use these."

For versatility and value, Atley suggests buyers consider a compact digital camera in the mid-range of \$500 to \$1000. "Have a look at the Sony Cybershot, Nikon Coolpix and Canon PowerShot models." If that's a bit steep, he says, "you can still get easy-to-use point-and-shoot digital cameras for under \$500. However, the quality will diminish when you blow up your shots." He says the Kodak Easyshare System is a good start-up package.

The key difference between these categories comes down to that scary word: megapixels. Simply put, a pixel is a chunk of digital information;

a three-megapixel camera can capture 3 million pixels to make up a photograph. The more megapixels in the camera, the more information can be recorded on the computer disk and the sharper, brighter and more vivid the images will be.

Atley says the average punter looking to email happy snaps or blow them up to A4 size should opt for a camera offering three to six megapixels, which should cost about \$500. Those with up to \$1000 to spend might consider five to eight megapixels. For professional results, Atley believes you need at least eight to 10 megapixels and about \$2000.

The next factor to consider is how to store digital photos. Enter memory flash cards or memory sticks. "These are available in various sizes measured in megabytes, such as 16, 32, 64, 125, 256 and so on," says Atley. A 256MB card costs about \$80, while a 512MB will set you back about \$150.

A 256MB card will accommodate roughly 250 images, while a 125MB card can store 125. Says Atley, "The more you spend, the bigger the card and the less often you have to transfer its contents onto a PC before you can wipe it clean to start shooting again." The beauty of these cards is that they can be used over and over with minimal deterioration.

But regardless of technological advances, the fundamental rules of photography still apply. "Light – or, more specifically, even light – is crucial," says Atley. "Pretty as it might be, dappled light won't do the person you're photographing any favours; they'll just look splotchy." He also recommends avoiding the midday sun. "This can accentuate bags under the eyes or result in unflattering squinting. At sunset or in the early morning, the light is more forgiving."

If it's dark, don't put more faith in a flash than it deserves as most illuminate an area of only a metre or two. "Instead," notes Atley, "set it to a 'night' mode, which will slow down the shutter speed and allow more light to be recorded. In fact, turn off the flash if you want to capture what's in the background and set the camera on a solid object like a wall. Then, use the self-timer function as this will cancel out any blurriness that might result from shaking the camera slightly as you press the button. Remember that the slower the shutter speed, the stiller the camera has to be."

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of digital technology is what you can do to the pictures after you've taken them. Once on your computer's hard drive, they can be manipulated in ways that were once the sole domain of photographic labs and magazine retouchers. In addition to resizing images, most photography software also allows you to erase errors. On the Apple iPhoto program, for example, simply selecting the "enhance" option can saturate your shots in deeper colour and make focus sharper. Or, you can adjust the brightness and contrast of the shot or click on the retouch option and painstakingly brush away imperfections.

So, if your magnificent shot of the bridesmaids has been ruined by Uncle Frank leering down their dresses, a simple mouse click will crop Frank out of the picture, if not the bridesmaids' memory. ●