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Enlarging Simple Cameras

By ALINA DIZIK

Makers of simple, pocket-sized cameras busy worrying about the challenge from cellphones with cameras face an attack on a second front this holiday season: large, more traditional-looking cameras.

Sales for cameras with detachable lenses are up 19% over past year, while point-and-shoot devices have declined 4%, according to research firm NPD Group. The digital single-lens reflex, or SLR, cameras are the means to producing "a better quality image and being able to capture an image more quickly," says Liz Cutting, NPD's senior imaging analyst. She adds that quality of cellphone cameras also has played a role, minimizing the difference between cellphones and simple digital cameras.

Manufacturers are marketing simpler professional-grade cameras to consumers who don't want the hassle of learning how to operate one (or pay top dollar for the bells and whistles). The SLR cameras offer the best of both worlds: automatic settings that are as easy to use as a point-and-shoot's, and larger sensors and detachable lenses that produce quicker, clearer shots.



Sony

This year digital SLR cameras like Sony's DSLR-A580 are being targeted toward holiday shoppers.

Unlike a point-and-shoot, a digital single-lens reflex camera has powerful zoom capabilities, quicker shutter speeds and more adaptability in dim lighting. This year, digital SLR cameras like Canon's EOS Rebel T2i, Sony's alpha A580 and Nikon's D3100 are being targeted toward holiday shoppers.

Last year, Nikon added a Guide mode to its \$550 D3000 digital SLR. The feature, which is also on the \$700 D3100, helps users pick a shooting mode and to learn about advanced techniques without reading a written manual, says David Lee, Nikon's senior vice president.

"DSLRs are getting easier to use," says Gwen Vannelli, senior merchant for DSLRs at Best Buy, who says the stores have expanded their offerings. "A lot more built-in functions take the intimidation out of the product."

Chuck Westfall, technical adviser for the consumer-imaging group at Canon USA, adds that falling prices on the bigger cameras have encouraged shoppers to upgrade. Ten years ago, a professional-grade large digital Canon cost \$3,500. Two years ago, the company started offering three digital SLRs priced at less than \$1,000 for the first time since 2003 when Canon first started offering digital SLRs. Sony began offering digital SLR cameras in 2006 and now has eight models with six priced under \$1,000.

To appeal to cost-conscious beginners, Canon uses a polycarbonate exterior on the Rebel series of digital SLRs versus metal shells on higher priced cameras. The camera weighs 16 ounces.

The willingness to trade-up is especially visible in purchasing decisions of families eager to capture their young active kids. "We're seeing a lot of acceptance from the parents of school-aged children and youth sports," says Canon's Mr. Westfall.

Parents also like models that double as high-definition video cameras for their children's games, Mr. Westfall says. In 2010, 62% of detachable lens cameras offered HD video versus 26% in 2009, according to NPD.

Sleekness and portability, once a big appeal of cameras, are no longer the main draw. Some consumers are willing to tote a larger camera as a sign of their ability to take high-quality photos, says Pete Palermo, Eastman Kodak Co.'s director of future product marketing. "They want to be recognized that they know what they are doing," he says.

Carrying a bigger camera adds an air of professionalism to his hobby, says John Lord, a 56-year-old freelance language instructor and amateur photographer. He says gets acceptable quality images with his iPhone and takes his larger digital SLR Sony camera on special occasions. "The quality is way more than I needed, [but] I love having a real camera in my hands," Mr. Lord says.

A point-and-shoot camera he bought a few years ago just sits at home: "It just feels like a Brownie [or] Instamatic."

Mr. Lord is already looking to invest in a third lens since buying his camera a year ago. While traveling in Mexico, "I need to photograph from the top of pyramids."

Some are simply interested in the perks of a slightly larger device without the professional-level quality. Bridge cameras and interchangeable lens cameras are also emerging for consumers who don't want to invest in a complicated SLR but appreciate their larger image sensors, for example. With cheaper prices and fewer professional parts these cameras aim to bridge the gap between a pocket-size and complex digital SLR.

At Eastman Kodak Co., 95% of the photos taken on its Z-series bridge camera are shot in automode, estimates Mr. Palermo. Target customers want to "use the camera to document every activity in the life of the family," he says.

The camera provides a long zoom without a detachable lens and the ability to quickly share photos via social networking sites. The target shopper is a busy mom who wants to take high quality pictures with out too many manual options or switching lenses, he explains. Sony began launched its NEX series of interchangeable lens cameras this year.

Nikon's Mr. Lee adds that he sees more pocket size cameras getting into the hands of younger, less camera-savvy family members. His own daughter, he says, graduated from a cellphone camera to a point-and-shoot and now shoots with a larger camera. "Back in the days of film the entire family had a camera—now cameras have become more individual," he says.

Unlike a point-and-shoot, detachable lens cameras aren't the "sole point of revenue," says Mark Weir, Sony's product manager for the alpha line of cameras. Shoppers "are very likely to buy additional lenses, flashes and other accessories," he says. Sales for tripods increased 28% and zoom lens sales increased 21% over last year, according to NPD.

Canon estimates selling two lenses for every one camera sold, a ratio that was 1.3 lenses per camera just three years ago.

For Hilliard Williams, the slimmer, tinier point-and-shoot camera he bought a year ago feels out of date. Like any proud pet owner, Mr. Williams sought to capture his 11-year-old African Grey parrot, Spyro, in his true form.

One particular moment Mr. Williams aimed to record: When Spryo hears his favorite music, he reacts by tilting his head to one side. So Mr. Williams went to his local Best Buy in New York City to get a camera with some heft.

The 57-year-old crisis management consultant in New York says investing in a larger camera will give him the megapixels and speed needed to photograph hard-to-capture images like the bird's emotion. "I know him better than anyone else," Mr. Williams said. And "it's more intimate" than taking Spryo to a professional photographer, which Mr. Williams said he considered.

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