

# Computers

## Why Buy a Digital Camera

by Joe Stoddard

You may have already bought an inexpensive digital camera to take quick photos of your jobs for documentation. But if that's all you're using the camera for, you're missing the real advantage of the digital format: instant feedback. I like to think of digital cameras less like film cameras and more like a cell phone or e-mail — a communication tool that can be used to keep everyone involved with your projects on the same page.

### Sharing Images on the Web

Before digital cameras, sharing job-site photos meant making extra prints, paying for postage, and then waiting. Thanks to the Internet, it's now possible to show your customers, subs, suppliers, and employees digital images of anything happening on your jobs almost instantly, and for little or no cost.

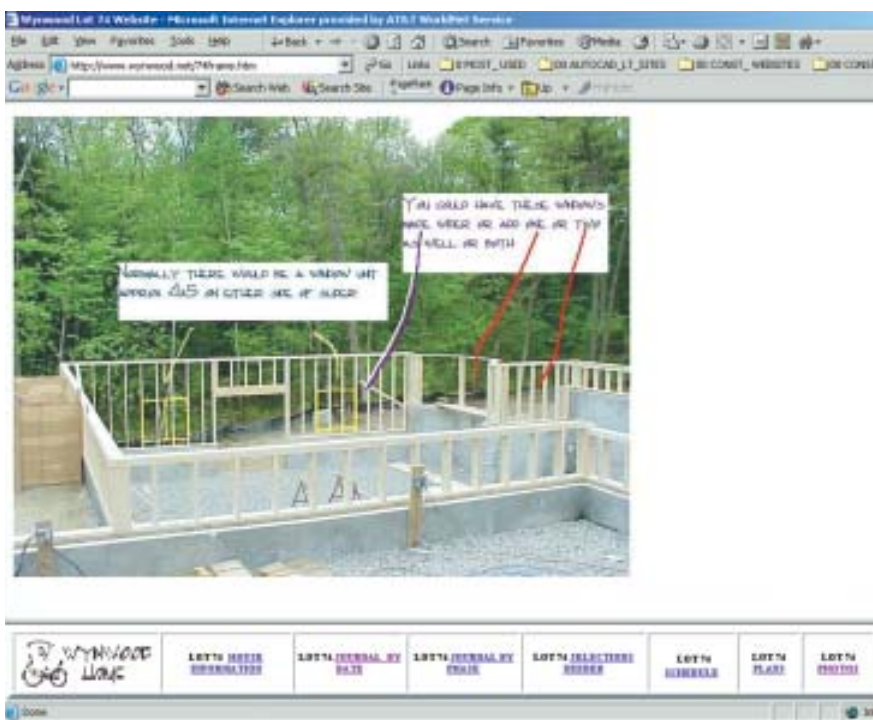
It's not even necessary to have your own website. Free online photo albums like Yahoo Photos (<http://photos.yahoo.com/>) and MSN Photos (<http://photos.msn.com/>) will get the job done (see Figure 1). If you're looking for something a little more professional but don't want to build a website from scratch, starting at about \$50 a month Intranets.com ([www.intranets.com](http://www.intranets.com)) not only gives you a way to share photos and other files, but also provides an online project calendar, task list, and contact management tools. Digital pics can be easily attached to e-mail for distribution even if you use no site at all.

### A Stitch in Time

By using his laptop computer equipped with a wireless modem card, custom builder Todd Wacome, of Andover, Mass., can upload his photos without leaving the job site. "I can



**Figure 1.** Using Yahoo Photos is a great way to start sharing digital images on the Internet, as long as you can tolerate the ads, and it's free.



**Figure 2.** Custom builder Todd Wacome uses his digital camera to keep his customers' selection process moving forward — in this case, an alternative window placement.

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take a photo of a problem area or missing or damaged component, upload it right away, then call up my sub or supplier on my cell phone to go over the situation," says Wacome. The same strategy could be used to document a shipment, to resolve a ductwork clearance problem with your hvac contractor or a tricky structural issue with your engineer, or to get input from clients on proposed changes (Figure 2, previous page). Issues that used to require days of scheduling site visits and in-person meetings can now be resolved in minutes, once everyone can see the problem.

By using the software that comes with many digital cameras or imaging software like Paint Shop Pro ([www.jasc.com](http://www.jasc.com)) or Adobe Photoshop ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)), it's easy to add notes and other markings to the pictures, then prepare them for uploading (Figure 3).

### Next Best Thing to Being There

A picture of a happy family in their new room addition is a powerful sales tool, but imagine how much more powerful it would be if the picture could come to life and your prospects could hear your clients' testimonial in their own voices. Many newer digital cameras have the capacity to record brief video clips, complete with sound. Those clips can then be used for sales and marketing, as training tools for your greenhorn carpenters, or even as part of an end-of-job package for your customers.

Customer relations management consultant Norm Seff ([www.9dots.com](http://www.9dots.com)) suggests using Microsoft PowerPoint to create a CD-ROM presentation of digital images, contract documents and project schedules, and multimedia interviews with project managers, key tradespeople, and satisfied clients. "Customers form real relationships with their project managers and craftsmen. Preserving the good memories is a surefire way to raise your referral rates," says Seff.

### Buying a Digital Camera

Trying to figure out which camera to buy is a lot harder than figuring out how to use it. If you're new to digital cameras, here's what to look for:

**Small size.** It's a pretty good bet that the camera you can tuck in your shirt pocket will be the one you use most often day to day. Always choose small and light over bells and whistles.

**Enough resolution.** The maximum size of the image a digital camera can capture is stated in "mega-pixels" — millions of dots. Right now, a 2- or 3-mega-pixel camera represents the best value. A 2-mega-pixel camera can produce a maximum image size of 1,600 x 1,200 pixels — way more than you'll ever need for anything you're going to send by e-mail or put on a website. It will produce an excellent 4x6 print and a decent 8x10 print.

If you use a CAD-assisted estimating system like CAD Estimator ([www.cadestimator.com](http://www.cadestimator.com)) or need large high-quality prints, 4- and 5-mega-pixel cameras are available and will rival film quality. There is a downside, though: High-resolution digital images create gigantic file sizes that are frustrating to work with and hard for plain-vanilla computers to handle. Plus, the cameras are often bulkier.

**Enough storage.** Compact Flash, Memory Stick, and stamp-sized Secure Digital Cards are all types of solid-state storage used by digital camera manufacturers. Don't worry about the format (they all work fine), but buy the most storage you can afford: A 128MB (MegaByte) storage card should cost around \$100 and will store hundreds of Internet-sized images.

**Zoom.** Camera manufacturers pump up their specs by combining the optical zoom with digital zoom. Digital zoom degrades image quality, so the optical number is the one you should care about. Remember you



**Figure 3.** Missing or damaged components can be easily documented using a digital camera and an image-editing program that can add captions and markup.

can always enlarge and manipulate images once they're transferred to your computer.

**Batteries.** Some digital cameras use special rechargeable batteries, which tend to run out of gas when you need them the most. Consider purchasing a couple of extra rechargeable batteries when you buy the camera. 

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