

Get the Picture

A buyer's guide to the camera phone

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ONLINE

March 22, 2004; Page R8

Don't confuse point-and-shoot with click-and-buy.

Though camera phones are becoming increasingly popular, affordable and fun to use, you'll still want to do a bit of homework to find the one that's best for you.

"There are lots of different bells and whistles on these things," says Stephen Jacobs, assistant professor of information technology at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York.

And while the camera is the fun part, "at the end of the day you need this to be a camera and a cellphone," says Delly Tamer, chief executive and president of LetsTalk Inc., a privately owned company in San Francisco that posts consumer reviews and sells wireless products and services.

This kind of technology is still relatively new, and plenty of jargon comes with it. But don't be overwhelmed. Camera-phone experts and analysts offer advice that will make it easier to navigate the sea of choices.

Read all about it:

It's best to start sifting through your options on the Web -- particularly if you're just entering the wireless world. Camera phones, just like cellphones, come with competing service plans as well as features.

Laura Burstein, a 27-year-old media-relations coordinator in Palo Alto, Calif., is an avid user of her camera phone. "I think it's good to find features you like online and narrow it down to a few key models," Ms. Burstein says of her own shopping experience. Last summer she bought a Sanyo 8100, which Consumer Reports rated the best of five camera phones in 2003.

Start on the Web sites of the big carriers, like SprintPCS.com, from Sprint Corp. PCS Group of Overland, Kan., or Cingular.com, from Cingular Wireless, a joint venture of San Antonio-based SBC Communications Corp. and Atlanta-based BellSouth Corp.

Also check out third-party sites like LetsTalk.com or San Francisco-based CNET Networks Inc.'s CNET.com, a reviewer and marketplace for personal-technology products.

And for comprehensive details on the different models, you might try Nokia.com, SamsungUSA.com or Panasonic.com, the sites of, respectively, Finland's Nokia Corp., Samsung Electronics Co. of South Korea and Panasonic, a unit of Japan's Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. Be aware that the model you buy may dictate what carrier you use.

What features do I really need?

Start narrowing your choices by determining your priorities. The key features usually are ease of use, high picture resolution, a good screen and a sufficient amount of storage memory.

But can I afford all of that?

Many experts and analysts make picture resolution their top priority. The better the quality, the more costly the device. For now, the highest resolution available in camera phones in the U.S. is 640 x 480 pixels. Pixels are the tiny dots that make up the photo. The more pixels, the better the resolution.

Go with high resolution if you care a lot about the quality of your photos and plan to post many on the Web. Otherwise, save some money and opt for medium or low resolution.

Next consider the screen type and phone design, which come in various combinations. Two screen types are available: internal and external. Then there are basically three types of phone styles: candy bar, clamshell and swivel. Verizon Wireless's LG VX6000 is considered a clamshell phone. When the phone is flipped open, the screen -- which serves as the camera viewfinder -- faces you above the keypad. The lens is on the opposite side. If you want a picture of yourself, you'll have to turn the camera around; a tiny mirror fixed next to the lens allows you to see yourself when taking the picture. This differs somewhat from the candy-bar design, which is flat and doesn't flip open. The screen and keypad are on one side, the camera lens is on the other.

An external LCD is found on flip phones with two liquid-crystal displays -- one on the outside of the lid and one on the inside. This makes self-portraits easier. The external screen sometimes can also function as a photographic caller ID: If you have a picture of a friend on your phone, for example, you can program the phone to show the picture when that friend calls you. Ms. Burstein says an external screen was one of the features that sold her most on the 8100 model from Japan's Sanyo Electric Co. It "allows you to be a much better photographer," she says.

Swivel screens are flip phones with a lid that rotates 180 degrees when opened. There's only one screen, but you can close the phone with the screen on the outside or inside. You also don't have to move around as much to position the camera when you take pictures, says Chris Bucsko, a technology expert with Consumers Union, the Yonkers, N.Y., nonprofit consumer-advocacy group that publishes Consumer Reports.

Once you've decided on a screen, check out how much storage memory the phone has. Memory is less of a priority if you plan to send most of your photos right away, or to upload them to a computer. But if you plan to use your camera phone more as a picture wallet, you'll need more storage space.

More storage tops Ms. Burstein's wish list for her next camera phone. On a recent trip to New York, she says, she was limited to taking 16 or 17 photos. To take more, she would have to delete those already on the phone to make room, or upload the existing pictures to a Web site for storage -- a time-consuming task she didn't want to hassle with because she was on vacation. The bottom line is, for both spontaneity and the ability to take lots of pictures, more memory helps.

You should have at least one megabyte of memory for storage, says Mark Spoonauer, editor in chief of Laptop magazine. And if you'll be storing lots of photos, you may want a phone with a slot for a multimedia card, the same storage device most digital cameras use.

Batteries are important, too. Again, Ms. Burststein recommends paying a little extra to increase your options -- in this case to purchase an extended-life battery. She says the battery she started with was drained after roughly two to three hours of heavy use, particularly when sending photos. Her new battery gives her about four hours.

Finally, if you want to be able to take pictures with your cellphone but don't want a built-in camera phone, consider buying a camera attachment -- a camera that connects to the phone. These, however, are becoming harder to find.

Some health clubs and other venues prohibit camera phones, so having an attachment allows you to, say, leave the camera in the car and still have the phone with you in the gym. Attachments also can be cheaper than camera phones. T-Mobile USA Inc., a unit of Germany's Deutsche Telekom AG, sells the T722i attachment from Motorola Inc. for \$79.99 after a \$100 mail-in rebate. This model is smaller than a disposable camera and attaches to the bottom of your phone. LetsTalk.com sells the same attachment for \$99.99, and says it can hold up to 48 photos.

Which plan is best for me?

Picture plans are sold separately from calling plans, though you have to use the same carrier for both.

There are basically two types: those that charge per photo, and package deals. That means you'll need to estimate ahead of time how many photos you plan to send each month.

If you'll be sending more than 20 pictures a month, a package is probably the way to go. For \$4.99 per month, a Verizon Wireless plan lets subscribers send and receive 80 pictures per month through Dec. 31, 2005. Or subscribers can pay 25 cents (plus airtime charges) per image sent or received, or uploaded to Verizon Wireless's Web site for storing photos, Pix Place. Verizon Wireless is a unit of Verizon Communications Inc., New York. Cingular has a pay-as-you-go plan for 25 cents per image and no monthly fee.

Get hands-on experience

Now you're ready to head to the store, where you can find out in person how the models that interest you work. Ease of use is crucial in a camera phone.

"You shouldn't have to whip out directions" to snap a photo, says Joni Blecher, CNET's camera-phone expert.

If the handsets on display aren't turned on, ask the salesperson to let you try one out. "You have to test them," says Alan Reiter, a wireless-data consultant in Chevy Chase, Md., who examines camera phones.

Count the number of steps it takes to snap a photo. The fewer the better. Some models have a dedicated camera button, which takes you directly to the photo menu. Others force you to go through the main phone menu, adding an unnecessary layer of complication.

Check out the quality of the images on the screen. "Don't be fooled by the bright, crisp display in stores' indoor light, because it may wash out in bright sunlight," warns Consumers Union's Mr. Bucsko. Ask the salesperson if you can take the phone outside or stand by a window when you snap photos.

How much should I spend?

Prices range from roughly \$50 to \$400, depending on rebates and special offers. David Heim, deputy editor of Consumer Reports magazine, recommends staying between \$100 and \$200. You won't necessarily get a better phone or camera if you spend more than \$200, he says.

"You have to really go out of your way to pay full retail," he adds. For instance, the Sanyo 8100 has a \$229.99 price tag on Sprint's Web site, but you save \$130 if you sign up for a two-year Sprint contract.

Also, because you can now keep your number if you switch cellphone carriers, providers are rolling out discounts to attract new customers and keep the ones they have. "If you can get one at a good price, get it now," says Jack Gold, vice president of research and consulting firm META Group Inc., in Stamford, Conn., who analyzes camera phones and wireless mobile devices.

What features can I skip?

You can get accessories such as picture borders and frames, flashes and zoom lenses. The caveat is they drain your wallet and your battery.

Flashes on camera phones are weak, illuminating objects only a couple of feet away. You won't be left in the dark without one. Many phones offer features like "Twilight Mode," a setting on Panasonic's GU87 that helps adjust for darkness.

Some camera phones allow photos to be sent with voice messages attached. But you'll pay extra for this, too. Some services include text messages for free.

Should I buy overseas?

More-advanced models are available abroad, particularly in Japan, where consumers can already buy megapixel camera phones with zooms, flash and video. (A one-megapixel photo has about three times the resolution of a 640 x 480 pixel photo.)

But if you buy a camera phone abroad, you probably will pay more. You also run the risk of it not working in the U.S., says the Rochester Institute's Mr. Jacobs.

Then again, Jeffrey Lin, a 22-year-old computer science major at Columbia University in New York, bought his phone on www.Expansys.us, a Web site of eXpansys UK Ltd., a wireless retailer of cellphones that aren't available in the U.S. and that work world-wide. Mr. Lin shelled out \$680 for an SX1 camera phone from Germany's Siemens AG with high resolution and video capability. And when he landed in Hong Kong on a recent trip, he says he was able to switch on his phone and connect to a local network.

He had to pay hefty roaming fees for calls at \$1.49 per minute. But at the same time, he was able to snap away and send photos at the rate of 1.5 cents per kilobyte, or about 30 cents per picture.

What's to come?

The U.S. will see multimegapixel camera phones by Christmas 2004, says Seamus McAteer, senior analyst at Zelos Group Inc., a San Francisco-based research company. But this shouldn't deter you from buying one now. Consumers tend to change phones about every 18 months anyway, Mr. McAteer says. So, "If you want a phone, you may as well ensure it has a camera."

--Ms. Sterling is an editor at The Wall Street Journal Online.