

Seven Things to Look for in a Video Camera

1. High-Definition

Any camera you purchase at this point in time should definitely be high-definition, which means it will have at least 720 or 1080 lines of vertical resolution.

2. Media Cards

Any camera you purchase moving forward should record to some type of digital media cards, not mini-DV tape. There's nothing wrong with continuing to shoot on tape for a while longer, if you already own a good mini-DV camera, but any new camera you get needs to record to a media card like an SDHC card, compact flash card, P2, or a SxS card also known as a "PC Express" card.

3. Manual Controls

Most auto functions are generally for amateurs. It's absolutely essential that a camera intended for pro use allows you to manually control vital functions such as focus, exposure, white balance, audio level, etc.

4. Ability to Shoot in Low Light

Documentary, broadcast, and corporate video work will almost always involves some shooting in low-light situations. Check the cameras "lux rating" to see how the camera performs in low light relative to others in its category. (Companies fudge these a lot, so check reviews from users as well.)

5. XLR Audio Inputs

Most professional filmmaking microphones and sound gear have XLR connectors. If you want the best quality audio, you need to roll like the big boys. If your camera only has a mini-stereo mic input, you can get an XLR adapter box, but it will cost you more and it's still not as good as the real thing.

6. Big Imaging Chips

Imaging chips in video are the same as negatives in film. It's where the image is actually captured. The bigger the chip, the better your image—just like a negative. And of course the bigger the imaging chip, the more expensive the camera. So a big imaging chip is a very good thing to have...if you can afford it.

7. Peaking

Peaking is an increasingly popular feature to help you focus. It's especially handy on HD cameras with large chips and small LCD monitors. Peaking shows crisp colored outlines on every part of the image that's in sharp focus, so you can better judge focus with more than just your naked eye.

Also, see my free Camera Buyer's Guide at DownAndDirtyDV.com for some specific camera models that I recommend from a variety of manufacturers.