

# Why a picture is worth only 96 words

Don't plan to shoot your documentary on a mobile handset camera.

**Bad** The International Conspiracy for Bad Photography has been making serious headway.

You can see the evidence of their work in various television commercials. Take, for instance, that would-be Tom Cruise who parks his car on a freeway fringe, hops up on the hood, strips down to his boxer shorts, takes a self-portrait with the camera embedded in his phone and transmits it by MMS (Multimedia Message Service) to his girlfriend.

The actual communication has nothing to do with the picture, of course. It is one of those displays of choreographed spontaneity that the advertising industry has packaged up as "personality" and is successfully selling to people who don't have one.

These expensive commercial replacements for genuine character, ingenuity and even thoroughness are mobilising large sums of money in other areas of the mobile phone industry. Young people happily spend their salaries and who knows how much bandwidth on "personalised" ring tones, operator logos and flash animations to demonstrate what Shellfield Car Radio describes on its website — apparently without shame — as a means of expressing customers' "individual character".

We have nothing against the personality prosthesis industry, or even the spontaneous combustion of money that it generates, but we hate the pictures.

Even *The Guardian* recently declared that these handset cameras allow people "to document more of their lives and capture important events live as they happen". They

don't. If you are interested in turning your life, and the lives of your family, friends and workmates, into a documentary. Bleeding Edge suggests that you are likely to be disappointed with the cameras embedded in or offered as accessories for mobile handsets.

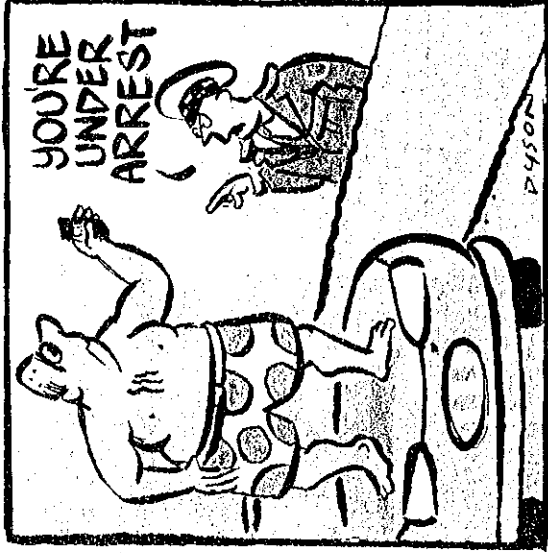
The resolution of digital cameras is determined by what is essentially the equivalent of a frame of film: the number of light-sensitive picture elements or pixels on the surface of the camera's image sensor — usually a CCD (charge coupled device).

The typical embedded cameras are "sub-megapixel" cameras that produce 640x480 pixel images through low-quality lenses. The images are comparatively dull and grainy.

These cameras are primarily intended to generate MMS traffic at 75 cents apiece for the phone networks. (If you think about it, MMS charges seriously devalue the accepted exchange rate entailed in the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words": at three times the rate of an SMS message of 160 characters, and given an average of five characters per word, a picture these days is worth only 96 words.)

It is not until you try to print something from one of these images that you realise that documenting a life and capturing important events requires something much more substantial than your Nokia, Ericsson or Siemens handset.

You are never going to obtain a passable postcard-sized print out of a 640x480 image. They are fine for a webpage or somebody's mobile phone — although there is no certainty at the moment, given handset and network incompatibilities, that they will



1.3-megapixels PowerShot A50. Today's entry-level PowerShot A200 delivers two megapixels for \$399. It will produce images up to 1600x1200 pixels. We are not convinced that you will detect much difference between a two-megapixel camera and a three-megapixel camera, although you will get even bigger, sharper prints from a four to five-megapixel camera. But expect to pay from about \$1300 for that quality.

We prefer digital cameras from manufacturers who also produce film cameras. Look for something from Nikon, Canon, Fuji, Pentax, Minolta, Ricoh or Kodak. Sony is perhaps an exception to that rule.

If you are in the market for a digital camera, delay your purchase for a few weeks. All the manufacturers will be announcing new product lines at the PMA 2003 trade show organised by the Photo Marketing Association International in Las Vegas. It starts on March 2.

In most cases you will get more features or better resolution at a lower price after the new products are announced — which does not paint a pretty picture for the International Conspiracy for Bad Photography.

**Charles Wright appears regularly in Tuesday's Next section.**