

# The measure of a meter

Better performance, lower cost

It's not unusual for a manufacturer to borrow the technologies of a high-end product, reduce the capabilities, and release a product that sells at a lower price.

Consider the Canon EOS-1Ds, EOS 10D and 300D cameras for instance.

It is unusual for a manufacturer to re-evaluate its top-end product, add some features, improve its performance, remove some marginal features, replace a lower-end unit, and bring the price down. But that's what Sekonic has done with this with the L-558 DualMaster meter. Officially, the L-558 replaces the L-508, but it shares so many features with Sekonic's flagship meter that it can be considered as a virtual replacement for the L-608 Super Zoom Master meter as well.

The L-558 is really two meters in one body, incorporating a 1-degree spot meter and an incident meter. Using either spot or incident meters, the L-558 reads and analyzes either continuous light only or a combination of flash and continuous light. With flash, the L-558 automatically displays the flash as a percentage of the overall exposure. You can read, enter the reading into memory, and then average up to nine readings, then see the relationship between these readings on an analog scale at the bottom of the display.

You can set the meter to cumulatively read an unlimited number of flash readings when you have to multi-pop, something I find useful in architectural and some large-format product photography. An optional PocketWizard 32-channel transmitter module plugs neatly into the battery compartment.

Sekonic claims the meter is weatherproof



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**Using the Sekonic L-558 as an incident meter, I carefully adjusted the position, angle and output of the two strobe heads to retain reproducible detail in both the highlights and deep shadows. Lighting: a single 1200-watt-second Profoto Acute 2R pack with two heads; standard reflectors with no diffusion were used on the heads. The pack was triggered with an LPA PocketWizard MultiMAX attached to the camera.**

and splash proof, and the sensitivity ranges for the different metering modes (ambient reflected, ambient incident, flash reflected and flash incident) are huge. ISO settings range from 3 to 8000. You can set the meter to choose from two ISO sensitivity settings—a really nice feature that's useful when switching between film and Polaroid or between two digital camera bodies or backs. This can be more important than you might think: I've noticed in shooting digitally that no two individual digital capture systems interpret the same ISO



setting the same way; each has a unique personality. I'm not just comparing a Canon EOS-1Ds to a Nikon D1X; I mean there can be differences between two cameras of the same make and model.

The backlit LCD display on the L-558 shows the *f*/stop in *f*/stop +  $\frac{1}{10}$ -increments (e.g., *f*/8.4), as well as displaying the shutter speed, ISO, percentage of light coming from the flash, current metering mode, and either an exposure compensation setting or a filter factor setting. When using the spot meter, the viewfinder for the spot meter displays *f*/stop, shutter-speed and any exposure compensation or filter factor setting. Yes, you read right: You can program in a filter factor, a bellows compensation factor or an exposure compensation factor without changing the ISO setting. And you can do it over a 9-stop range in  $\frac{1}{10}$ -stop increments.

Moreover, you set exposure compensation separately for the ambient and flash components of your lighting. There are three ways to tune the meter: a global adjustment that affects all modes, separate exposure compensation factors for spot and incident readings in both flash and ambient modes, or you can program in a bellows factor or a filter factor. There are also six custom program settings for your most frequently used setups.

One of the coolest functions of this meter is using it as part of what Mamiya America Corp. (Sekonic's importer) calls the "Digital Wireless Freedom" system. In essence, this is a built-in LPA Design PocketWizard transceiver in the camera, a transmitter module in the meter, and a receiver in the electronic flash. There are now several digital cameras that can be purchased with or modified to take an internal 32-channel PocketWizard transceiver. The Mamiya 645D, the Nikon D1, D1X and D1H, and the Kodak DCS Pro 14n can be fitted with a transceiver that's useable over an official range of 1,000 feet. For use with electronic flash, the Profoto Acute 2R and Profoto D4 packs come with a receiver module built in. New Dyna-Lite and Balcar packs and (soon) Norman packs can be ordered with the PocketWizard Inside option. And for metering, there are the L-358, L-608 and L-558 models.

I've found the LPA Design PocketWizard Digital Radio Triggering systems to be 100 percent reliable since I began using them in the mid 1990s, but the weak link—as in all electronic flash systems—has been the sync cord. Eliminating sync cords lightens my load, reduces setup and strike time and just makes things neater on set. But it gets much better.

With channels 17 through 32 on the PocketWizard system, you can do Selective Quad-Triggering. Let's say that you are lighting a location or a set in the studio; I like to light in a back-to-front layered approach. With PocketWizard MultiMAX transceivers I can set the background lights to channel 31D, the accent lights to channel 31C, the key light to 31B and the fill to 31A. By bringing up each zone individually on the L-558, I can use either the spot or the incident meter and the memory functions to measure each area separately and see how the values relate to one another. When I want all of the zones to fire, I simply tell the meter to choose all four zones. This can make short work of some complex lighting problems that I used to solve by making a progressive series of notes as I built-up my lighting. I suppose the next logical wish is for lights that have remotely adjustable output levels that are controlled by a PocketWizard module or transceiver.

The ergonomics of the meter are good. I have slightly larger than average size hands and the meter felt very comfortable. The function buttons and scroll wheel on the meter are thoughtfully laid out and easily manipulated. When switching modes, you hold down the relevant button and use your thumb to scroll through the various options for that function. The only handling aspect I have problems with is the placement of the trigger button when using the L-558 as a spot meter. I keep pushing the memory button, which is placed so that with the meter up to my eye, it's under my index finger, when what I really wanted to push is the measure button.

All in all, the L-558 with the optional PocketWizard module is a hotrod of a meter—accurate, adaptable, easy to use, fast and versatile. □