

Deciding Which Laser to Buy

Because we create laser product patterns for laser owners, we try to be totally unbiased on our opinions of all brands of laser. We are constantly asked (by customers) which laser we prefer. Which laser should we buy? Which laser is the best? The reason I want to discuss this topic is because it is the most asked question by far and it is the most important decision you will make when you first start out. So let's get started.

"Which laser should I buy?" is absolutely the most asked question we get at each trade show. Also, we receive numerous phone call inquiries throughout the year, and many ask this question on internet forums for others to provide an opinion (good idea). I might even say I get asked this question over 1000 times a year. So what is the magic answer? Which machine will make me the most money? What machine has the least repair? Which machine has the most features? What's new out there? Do I need a rotary attachment? Do I need a vector table? What is the best value? How much power do I need? Is air assist necessary? Should I get an exhaust filter? I could go on and on! These are legitimate questions and should be asked. Each of us who are seasoned laser owners will give you some bias in our reasoning, mostly because of what we do with our lasers. Don't fear, there is some common ground in everyone's selection.

In my opinion the most important issue is POWER. Get as much power as you can afford. I know some will say I plan to only raster something simple. I don't need a lot of power. Why do I need 50 watts when this substrate rasters with 25 watts? Let's be truthful. No matter what you plan to do with your machine today, you will be asked to do (or want to try) something that will require more power later. A 40 to 50 watt machine will raster just as nice as the 25 watt, but will also cut thicker substrates after it has rastered them! More wattage will also allow you to increase production when needed. Now if you cannot afford a lot of power, get a minimum of 35 watts, although more would be better.

My next issue would be table size. Never get less than a 12" X 24" table. I want everyone to get into the laser business, but I believe you will be disappointed if you get a smaller table size. If you can afford a larger table, great!

A "vector table" is a must have, also. The laser can cut through your substrate so you will need a good vector table to do that.

An "air assist" system is a must have! Some salesman will tell you if you get your focus right and do this or that you don't need an air assist. I say BULL! You need air assist to do so many things. I believe it is safer for your machine when cutting substrates like acrylic, paper, rubber stamps, and many other materials! Those who say you never need air assist have not run a laser for manufacturing. It is hard for me to take a person seriously who believes you don't need air assist on your laser.

Options like rotary attachment or the air-purified dust collectors are used for specific products and I would opt to put the money towards more power unless you had a reason for needing these options.

So let's recap. Get as much power as you can afford with a minimum table size of 12" X 24". A vector table and air assist is a must, but I still have not told you which laser to buy! Well, to tell you the truth, I can't. If I could take just the positive points

about each different laser manufactured and combine them into one machine, then WOW! What a killer machine!

Let me make a point this way. Using laser “*analogy*” you have the Lexus, Cadillac, Ford & Chevy, and a few Yugos. I use the Yugo in hopes no one still owns this car.! The Yugo runs. It can get you where you are going, but when you overload it or try to get fancy, it takes a lot of extra effort or it stalls and quits on you. This low-end type of laser maybe all right for hobbyists, but many a hobby has grown into a profitable business. I am a Ford & Chevy type of guy. I would like to have the Lexus, but I cannot see starting out with the biggest and the best until your business can afford it. Even if you buy the Ford or Chevy, they have brands (machine styles) that fit into the high-end category, along with the bare bones model. The big difference in your decision should be whether this is going to be a hobby or a business. I would like to see you get started, but I don’t want you frustrated shortly after getting your first laser. To be honest, I have made many a business decision according to just price and have regretted it. Just a few more dollars in the beginning would have made my life so much easier in my quest for success.

There are laser manufacturers who still need to make changes before I would purchase their laser, but that doesn’t mean their laser does not work. It is just not what I want in a laser. As time passes, lasers are coming down in price and they are starting to level off. As the prices start to level off, feature enhancements make them more interesting. As each laser company comes out with new features, others will try to match or exceed those features with improvements of their own. This is all good for you and me! You should know exactly what those features are and if they fulfill your needs. Of course your needs may change as the product line you create requires different methods of manufacturing.

Generally, I would never tell anyone to make their decision based on what the distributor/salesman alone has told them, but there are a few laser distributors who stand so far above the rest I would say definitely buy from them. Certain distributors see their reputation on the line and will make sure you have an easy time as possible for start up. These few distributors will be there when you have any problems. Unfortunately, there are more who are just in it for the sales commission. With that in mind, you want to make sure you have company support for any downtime. Do your “due diligence” and call the tech department of the company you are investigating. Ask a simple question, such as; “What is the cost to recharge a 35 (or whatever power you plan to buy) wattage tube?” If you get an answering machine, just leave a callback number. This will tell you two things; how fast their response time is (if my machine is down this is very important to me), and what the cost is for the most expensive replacement part for your machine (the laser tube).

I haven’t even discussed warranty. How important is this to your purchase decision? One year, or a two-year warranty? I do not believe this should be your lone reason to purchase one machine over another. Does the warranty include free shipping of all replacement parts during the covered period? Is tech support available?

Here is the way I would make my selection. Price would be a primary factor, but not the final reason. I would want all the bells (power) and whistles (accessories) of the Lexus, but at the price of a Yugo! Of course, just like everything in life, I will probably

spend more money than I had hoped, but will be thankful down the road when I am able to do the products easier and faster. I will certainly look at any new features that might help me. I would absolutely call tech support to see if they are courteous and helpful with my questions, along with how long their response time is for my needs.

I don't mean for this to sound negative but if I bought a car that cost me \$20,000, I would expect it to perform as advertised. If my engine or transmission did not allow me to get where I'm going (at the speed advertised), I would demand fast service to correct the problem. If not, I would be screaming at someone at the dealership. I want to make sure the dealership I was buying my (Laser) car from had the knowledge, parts, and courteous people who wanted to make sure I became successful! The point is; this is a big decision. I have been in your shoes. I did make a mistake with my first laser purchase. I bought just on price (not enough power). I was able to upgrade to correct my shortsighted thinking. I don't sell lasers so I'm not trying to get you to spend more money, but think, a few dollars spread over years could give you much higher production capability and a better chance for success.

The best place to find or get all the information about each laser is also at trade shows! When one company tells you one thing, check with another company to see if they have that same feature. Don't be shy, kick their tires! Ask other peers, attend seminars and get informed. Heck, I'll even show you what features I like about different machines. I want you to become successful with a laser you can brag about, not one you can complain about! I want you around making money, creating wealth, and hopefully spending more money in the future, and maybe even with us!☺

Tom "Buzz" Bernard
LaserBuzz, Inc.
www.LaserBuzz.com