

Choosing Your First Handgun

- By Joe Aiello / August 13, 2012

When you make the choice that you are going to buy a handgun, there are many factors that must be considered. It is only when you, as an individual, can honestly answer some important questions that you will be in a good position to make a good choice. What I would like to do in this article is outline some of the factors you must consider and give you some guidelines that you can follow. It might even help if you actually make a checklist of the points you should consider so you can review it later.

First and foremost, knowledge is power. Having an understanding (if even very basic) about firearms in general is very important. The way a particular action works, what to expect from a cartridge and even your ability to hold and manipulate the controls are only some of the very important factors you must consider. Hopefully, you have attended our safety course, or another nationally recognized safety course given by a certified instructor. This is a very good start in helping you understand firearms basics, which is exactly what you need to make a good decision.

Being able to explain and communicate what you want (or what you need) is just as important as having the knowledge in the first place. If you can't express what it is you are looking for, then there will be no way for gun store employee to help you with the choices. The best way I have found to interact with a new (or first-time) buyer is to simply ask the right questions. This narrows down the choices and gives better understanding of the client's needs. With this in mind, I decided to list some of the questions I would normally ask so you, as the reader, can address these yourself before actually walking into a store.

1) Why are you buying this gun? What purpose will it serve?

This is probably the most important question that you need to answer for yourself, as well as communicate to the sales person. As a matter of fact, you could effectively move forward with a purchase with only this question answered.

Guns come in many styles and functions and many are purpose-built for a specific role. Much like sports equipment or even automobiles, you need to know what you are going to use it for before you start looking to purchase. A Jeep, a limousine, an SUV and a Corvette are all technically vehicles, but they all serve very specific purposes. A baseball bat, a cricket bat and a softball bat are technically all long sticks, but they are purpose built for their intended use. The same could be said about sneakers, dress shoes, hiking boots, motorcycle boots and sandals.

The gun you buy for target shooting will probably be very different from the gun you buy for hunting, for concealed carry or for home defense. There are some guns out there that

can fill several roles, but understand that generally, the main design usually has an intended use. So, you must know ahead of time what role or purpose the gun is supposed to fill.

2) What type of handgun are you interested in?

There are 2 basic types of handguns to consider: The Revolver and the Semi-Auto Pistol. Yes, there are sub-types of each design, but for the purposes of this article, we will just compare the 2 basic designs.

Both the revolver and the semi-auto pistol have their strengths and weaknesses and you must decide which one will best suit your needs and experience level. While it would take an entire article to explain and compare the pros and cons of these two handgun types, I will summarize some of the points for consideration...

Revolver

Pros

Easy to maintain
Easy to inspect
No magazines to fuss with
Very accurate
Lowest chance of jamming
Able to use different power loads with no problem
Can sometimes shoot different calibers
Easier to change grip size

Cons

Slower to reload
Limited capacity
Tends to be wider
Tends to be heavier
Usually more expensive

Semi-Auto Pistol

Pros

Fast to reload
Higher capacity
Tends to be thinner
Tends to be lighter
Can be less expensive

Cons

Higher chance of jamming
May be ammo sensitive
Grip size not customizable
Slide might be hard to work

What is important to remember is that one type is not necessarily better than the other type. A hunter who needs the heaviest loads in a large cartridge might opt for a revolver because it fits his/her needs. A competition shooter who will be firing a huge amount of rounds in a match might need an autoloading pistol. For general target shooting or even for personal defense, you could be well served with either one. The purpose of this comparison is not to sway you towards one type or the other. Rather, it is to get you to think about all the options and try to get you to keep an open mind.

3) What size are you looking for?

There are two ways to measure the “size” of a gun...the physical size of the frame and the caliber for which it is chambered. A physically large and heavy gun could still be chambered for a very small caliber and a tiny gun could be chambered for a monster magnum cartridge. So, in essence, this question really comes in two parts: Physical Size and Caliber. Let’s tackle these issues separately...

A: Physical Size

Let’s deal with the most obvious feature of the handgun first...its physical size. Generally, a larger gun can be easier to grip, shoot and manipulate the controls. A larger grip will fill your hand better. A longer barrel (with a longer distance between the front and rear sight) can be aimed a bit more precisely. The larger size and weight can help soak up recoil. Additionally, the controls being larger can make it easier to work the action, use the safety (if present) and even work the slide (as there is more surface area to grip and a bigger, heavier slide usually means a lighter spring is needed to hold it closed).

A good rule of thumb is that you should consider getting the largest sized gun that you can comfortably hold and operate. Keep in mind that guns are like shoes...it has to fit you personally and it has to be comfortable. What is a good fit or very comfortable for me may be the exact opposite for you. So, be prepared to do a lot of handling of different firearms and never commit to anything simply because someone told you it was the “best” or you read about it on the Internet.

B: Caliber

The caliber of the gun is simply the size of the cartridge. The number used in a caliber is the diameter of the bullet in either fractions of an inch (the US standard) or in millimeters (the European & Military standard). Therefore, a 9-millimeter round is 9 millimeters in diameter and a .45 caliber round is 0.45 inches in diameter. Additionally, the full name of the cartridge will further identify it and some cartridges may have several different names. For instance, the 9-mm NATO, 9-mm Luger, 9-mm Parabellum and the 9x19 (9 millimeters wide by 19 millimeters long) are the exact same cartridge. Yet the 9-mm Kurtz and the 9-mm Makarov are completely different than the 9-mm NATO as well as each other.

Confusing? Yeah, it can be. But this is why we have experts at the shop who can help you with these decisions and why you need to keep asking questions. This is also why there are some “standard” calibers in the US that can be compared to other “standard” calibers. Also, this further illustrates why you should not just blindly choose a caliber that you haven’t fired before, because it may just be too much for you to comfortably handle. Think about when you first learned to drive...I’m sure you’ll agree that a Ferrari or a Corvette would probably be a very poor choice for your first car. The same logic can be applied to your first gun.

In order to choose the right caliber, you must determine what you will be using it for. Next, you will have to determine the type of handgun you wish to purchase and finally,

you need to be honest with yourself and your current skill and experience level and choose one that will not be too much to handle. Again, taking our NRA safety course and speaking with our staff is a good first step.

4) Price and Budget

The final consideration is how much you are willing or able to spend on a handgun. If you are anything like me, price is always a factor in my decisions and, lets face it, guns are expensive! Perhaps one day, I'll hit the right six numbers and I won't have to worry about costs. Until then, like many of you, I have to make careful decisions and plan accordingly for these big purchases.

However, with that being said, price should be your most flexible and least important factor. You have to understand that you are purchasing a machine that could and should easily outlive you. Like fine jewelry or even art and collectables, firearms are expensive but are expected to last a lifetime. I can assure you that in 20+ years from now, you won't remember that you paid \$50 more than you wanted to for your gun. Most people can't even remember exactly what they paid for it years later. So, your best course of action is to set a price range that you can handle and look at options within that range. Also, don't dismiss the option of purchasing a used firearm...especially if you are buying from a reputable dealer. You will be surprised at how much you can save by buying a used, but functionally excellent firearm.

The final point regarding price and budget is not so much the price of the gun, but all the extra costs associated with ownership. What most people don't realize is that the price of the gun can actually be lower than the price of ownership. In your first year of ownership, you can easily exceed the original cost of the gun in ammo purchases, target purchases, range fees, maintenance supplies, locking/security devices, holster/carrying cases, accessories and so on. Consider if you were purchasing a handgun for target shooting only. Well, you can opt for a really big, powerful caliber or a small caliber. The difference is, you could be paying as much as 50 cents to one dollar for every round of the larger caliber, while you could pay around \$20 for 500 rounds of .22 Long Rifle cartridges. A gun that you can't afford to feed isn't much fun.

I hope this article has been informative and helpful to you. To stay up to date on the latest class schedule, new articles, store specials and news, follow us on Twitter: **@NYGunTraining**.

Stay Safe!

-Joe