Campsis radicans

While running through the jungle of flash photography last year, I was caught by a trip wire of photographic confusion secretly planted by Canon USA.

If you use an external flash of any brand, it usually gives you the option of setting exposure compensation on the flash unit. My Canon 10D camera also has an option for adjusting flash exposure. Well, what happens if you set a compensation amount on both the camera and the mated Canon external flash head? For instance, if the camera is set at minus one flash compensation, and the flash head is set for minus one-half, will your flash output be minus one-half, minus one, or minus one and a half? Well, in Canon's case it will be minus one-half, as the flash head will override the camera setting. However, you must always be wary of the Devil's shoelaces.

If the external flash unit is set for a zero compensation amount, it is assumed that you are using the camera to adjust the compensation amount. In this case, any compensation amount applied by the camera will be effective, as the external flash unit, which is set for zero compensation, will not override the camera setting.

What if you are testing out different flash compensation amounts on your subject? Say that your camera is again set for minus one compensation. You would like to try your photo at minus one-half, zero, and plus one-half compensation to see which looks best. You place the flash head at the minus one-half, take the picture, then change the flash head setting to zero, take the picture, then change the flash head to plus one-half and take the final picture. So your compensation amounts are -1/2, 0, and +1/2 right? Wrong! You've been tripped just like I was! Your compensation amounts were actually -1/2, -1, and +1/2! When you dialed in zero on the external flash, the compensation amount was set by the camera, not the flash unit.

Well, I wondered, what if I use the automatic bracketing feature on the external flash head? I tested it tonight to be sure. If I dial in 1/2 on the automatic flash bracketing feature of the external flash, it will set the bracketing amount for me at 1/2 stop increments. In this case, the external flash overrides the camera settings at all three exposures, so my compensation amounts are -1/2, 0, +1/2. So if neither automatic bracketing nor exposure compensation is engaged on the external flash unit, only then will the camera's flash compensation amount take precedence. Many photographers keep the external unit at zero at all times, and only use the camera's flash compensation dial to avoid this confusion. I can't be sure how other brands of cameras handle this, but I would bet it's the same.

I've heard of some really desperate people actually reading the owner's manual, but I wouldn't suggest this pathetic practice to my friends! By the way, this has nothing to do with **exposure** compensation, which is a different ball of wax entirely. So it's clear as mud now, right?

Barry Siegel