

# Thanks for the memories, Kodak



**Michael Bayler** suggests that we have lost more than just a business with the demise of Kodak

**I STARTED** looking at Kodak just weeks before its Chapter 11 announcement of January this year, in the context of some strategic work for a movie client. It won't surprise you that a major motif in the boardrooms of LA is: 'Above all, please let us avoid the awful fate of ... the music business!'

But music – more specifically the record business – was never as dumb as it was made out to be, its goofy PR bloopers notwithstanding. More importantly, and more subtly, music as a cultural product behaves in a very different way from all other forms of content.

I found, to the contrary, that the insights drawn from Kodak's journey, from ubiquitous global icon to sad poster-child for digital disruption (at the time of writing the company has just asked for its name to be removed from the Oscars theatre in LA, an awful fall for a company on whose stock literally every Academy Award-winning film for decades was shot) are far more informative, not merely for Hollywood, but for all categories exposed to the value-stripping influence of online media.

## **OWNING MEMORIES**

The Kodak Brownie transformed personal human experience, in that it enabled people worldwide to capture, own, and share (note, not in the way we 'share' today, but at a genuinely physical, intimate level) images of their own lives. In a sense, Eastman Kodak was the Ford Motor Company of modern personal identity. And the deep, sustainable and above all personal meaning that those gawky, prosaic, kiss-me-quick shots offered to consumers was immense.

When Kodak eventually invested in some formal brand-positioning work, it was able, without effort or loss of credibility, to take global ownership of one, fundamentally human idea. Kodak decided to own 'Memories'. Sounds easy, in a way.

But the key insight here is not that a brand agency then created a marketing and advertising manual, that then enabled all sorts of other agencies to create all sorts of brand communications that cemented their commercial monopoly over 'Memories'. What we need to grasp more urgently, is the sheer human impact of the Kodak brand and its then-technology; and above all, I argue, the cultural and personal weight that the process and the images that emerged represented, from ...  
... lugging that bulky clunky item of luggage on holiday or to a wedding;  
... through how to load a film without exposing and ruining it;  
...then how to take the film out when you'd

finished it, again without exposing it;  
...to the simple joy of waiting for your prints to come back in the post or from the pharmacy;  
...through to the often awful, sometimes happy, but always very meaningful, shared experience of our very amateur holiday snaps.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEXTUAL VALUE**

So, what did happen to Kodak? Did memories suddenly lose their value? Well, we can obviously say that 'digital happened'. And certainly Kodak was terribly slow off the mark when the digital image came to town. One senses that the Kodak board perhaps saw digital – like so many other industries have – not as the global cultural earthquake it would shortly become, but more as a supply-chain issue with minor implications at the consumer interface: digital cameras at one end, CDs instead of prints at the other, and so on.

No, it was infinite copying and infinite sharing that did for Kodak. Because, missing from that formerly unassailable position astride all the world's 'Memories', was a simple fact, one I believe of the greatest strategic importance for post-digital business. It was the context, not just the content, that created and sustained an awful lot of the Kodak value.

Until we were all joined up by networks, Kodak's 'Memories' (moments of profound personal and family meaning, if you like) were special, unique, one-of-a-kind, and could be shared only with a privileged few. In other words, it was not just the images themselves (quality of photo, with a nod to the obvious exceptions, never per se made them intrinsically meaningful) but the severe technical limitations within which they were captured, processed and shared, that gave them their rarity, exclusivity, and, in the end, their commercial value.

It was hard to take them, hard to make them, and very hard indeed to share them. Then, Flickr, PhotoBucket, Tumblr (among countless others) and ultimately, that category killer of all category killers, Facebook, became the new platforms for worldwide photographic activity, meaning and value. And that rich, snug, primitive context that gave Kodak's snapshots their value, has now lost significance and disappeared.

## **HARD WORK MAKES MAGIC ...**

Of course, the cameras built into mobile phones threw the iconic snapshot into the eye of the connectivity storm. Universal access and shareability, not just 'being digital', dilute to oblivion the traditional impact and power of the physical image.

When my photos, yours, Britney's, Robbie's and Justin's, are just confetti in the hurricane of billions upon billions of deeply personal, but somehow now entirely anonymous, meaningless snapshots, what happens to the brands, products and the services that supported them?

Segue to a different but quite closely linked subject. *The Artist* – the new black-and-white silent film that's made lots of audiences very happy in a way that films haven't for a while now – has been confusing certain executives in LA, who are used to spending upwards of \$100m to launch CGI-driven blockbusters that often struggle to live in consumers' hearts for more than a couple of hours.

What, if anything, does the success and profile of *The Artist* mean? It strikes me that the point of this lovely film is to remind us that magic – and Hollywood was always about magic – only works hand-in-hand with severe restriction. An empowered, choice-spoilt audience, with all the magic they'll ever need in the palm of their hand, will paradoxically find magic almost nowhere. But put this audience in front of a black-and-white, silent film for 100 minutes on a cold, wet afternoon, and *The Artist* returns magic, along with romance, compassion, tragedy, comedy, pathos and cuteness, in spades.

It's truly startling to learn that in 1929, just as the talkies were ending the silent age, 95,000,000 Americans went to the movies every week. And this Golden Age of the screen was very much built on the profoundly humble, often mundane, rarely privileged, and perhaps above all, physically grounded lives of its audience.

### ... WHILE CONSUMER POWER DILUTES IT

Which moves us towards a conclusion, while linking us into the Kodak narrative.

Any nostalgia that I felt on seeing *The Artist*

was, in the end, little to do with a hankering for the age of the silent movie, and all to do with a pang of the loss of a simpler age in the much more recent past.

One where our infinite connectedness, power to choose, limitless access to channels for self-expression, and our regal bestowing of attention on media objects on the merest whim (with disenfranchised consumer brands creeping around the edges of Facebook, Twitter and the rest) had not yet made us like cranky, jaded children after far too many sweets, allowed to stay up far too late for our own good.

If there is a substantial new lesson to be learned from Kodak's slow, painful demise, it's perhaps something to do with this. In the push to create daily experiences for our new king, the empowered connected consumer, that are effortless to access, share and discard, are brands falling into a new value trap?

Are we systematically removing the magic from what we do, by putting the creation and distribution firmly into the hands of consumers whose control over magic turns them all too quickly into hundreds of millions of Sorcerer's Apprentices. Spoiled, all-powerful. And strangely unhappy.

Does value today reside – hasn't it always in fact – far more in the magic of what we can't do, than in the now-mundane power of the almost endless list of the things we can?

That, if it exists at all, is what we might call Kodak Syndrome. I find it both fascinating and a bit of a worry. ■

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