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Mama, They Took My KodaChrome Away

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I attended a training session for a popular photo-editing program recently, and the presenter described a particular innovative feature as “the one that spelled the end for Kodak.” As a brand guy—one who grew up having Kodak moments—I found the notion that a single “feature” could undo over 100 years of such personal brand experiences to be unsettling at best. After all, Kodak created and owned the category.

Of course it was not the end of Kodak, per se, as they continue to have success in the commercial space with an array of imaging products. But the trainer’s provocative statement did inspire me to reflect on my own history of brand loyalty and brand experiences with Kodak.

In 1888, Kodak introduced consumer photography and delivered on a brand promise that had mass appeal, replacing what was a complex and expensive process with easy and accessible point-and-click technology for the average consumer. Supporting that promise gave rise to communities, employed generations of Americans, inspired countless patents, netted a fortune for Kodak and its investors, and etched a unique place in the mindset of millions looking to capture the times of their lives.

Within our own modest household, my parents had envelopes of photos that spanned three iterations of the evolving Kodak logo – envelopes filled with Kodak moments that chronicled every birthday, every Christmas, every summer. Wherever we were as a family, throughout all our stages of life, Kodak was right there with us.

Then came digital. For me, it came later than most since the image quality of film was still more important than the convenience of posting or sharing digital images. But once double-digit megapixel technology became more affordable, I made the switch. Sadly, Kodak was not the first name I thought of...or the second...or the third. Sure, Kodak offered digital technology too. But by that point it was too late.

For me, and millions who made the switch much sooner, Kodak no longer delivered on their original promise of replacing what was a complex and expensive process with easy and accessible point-and-click technology for the average consumer. They BECAME the complex and expensive process. But Canon and others delivered on the original Kodak promise. Suddenly, the masses were enjoying “good enough” point-and-click \$99 digital cameras that made affordable, convenient photography and image sharing easy and accessible.

So what went wrong? Was it a research and development lapse? A poor business plan? Unwillingness to move away from antiquated but still lucrative products and embrace newer technologies? From a brand perspective, one thing was certain: Kodak had abandoned a brand promise that worked for over 100 years – and that same promise was now working for their competitors.

I recently went for an MRI – perhaps the most critical Kodak moment of my life. I was elated that it went well, but I noticed the scanner had an updated Kodak logo I didn’t recognize; it had evolved since I went digital. Kodak occupied a new space – a place that was clinical, industrial and no longer emotionally relevant. At that moment I mourned the passing of the Kodak that USED to be along for the times of my life.