

It's a Kodak Moment - Leadership and Innovation

By Valarie D. Willis



The camera revolutionized the world. Once the exclusive preserve of tripod and lens packing professionals, today photographic technology is found in industries from cell phones to health care. George Eastman invented the Kodak camera in 1888, and he also invented the first film in roll form. Could he have ever imagined where that invention would eventually lead Kodak?

I have now reached the age when I can look back and see history made as well as being made. I feel I am a strand in the tapestry of that history. I remember Kodak's Brownie camera. On special occasions, my family would have assembled on our front porch, fuss over who was in front or back, and when everyone was set, voila, Brownie would perform its magic. Then the wait would begin. The film processing which would take the eternity of a week or two would pass and finally we could see our Kodak moment, transferred forever to special paper pressed into family albums.

Next the family acquired a Polaroid camera. I can still remember that peculiar odor from that little picture swiper, but we could see the pictures right away. Oh what a great "Kodak Moment" that "Polaroid" would make.

When I went off to college, the instamatic cameras were the rage. I could use these handy photos without the hassle and complexity of a 35mm camera. At that time it was thought that these cameras were the best thing around. But innovation continued to change our Kodak moments.

The digital age flashed into our world, and suddenly film was becoming obsolete. Tiny digital cameras could make an instant photographer out of anyone, including me. Kodak moments were changing, but was Kodak? Previous articles seem to shed light that Kodak may have been caught sleeping, or at least nodding through this digital age. Kodak was shedding jobs quicker than you can click the camera, as the film business changed.

In a July, 2005, article from Kodak's website, they wrote:

"As part of the effort to accelerate its digital transformation and to respond to a faster-than-expected decline in consumer film sales, Kodak will extend the restructuring activity originally announced in January, 2004, in which the company set plans to reduce employment worldwide by as many as 15,000 positions. The company now plans to increase the total employment reduction to a range of 22,500 to 25,000 positions, and to reduce its traditional manufacturing infrastructure to approximately \$1 billion, compared with \$2.9 billion in January, 2004. When largely completed by the middle of 2007, these activities will result in a business model consistent with what is necessary to compete profitably in digital markets."

Their film producing factories were going the way of the milkman. Kodak was faced with declining consumer film sales, high costs, and an outdated manufacturing infrastructure. How did this market leader become a market laggard? Like a lot of companies, it paid too much attention to what they knew, rather than what they needed to know next. To stay in the picture, leaders today should consider the following:

1. Look to create the future, not just follow the emerging trends.
2. Stretch yourself, imagine what is impossible and make it possible. Note: Strategic planning is great, but not if it only focuses on what you are certain of.
3. Remember that today's cash cow may be tomorrow's steak dinner.
4. Know who the potential new leaders are in your organization and develop them now.
5. Get everyone involved in "trend analysis." Cut out headlines, pass them out, ask people how that headline

might impact the business. Be open to the “off beat” ideas.

6. Embed innovation into the culture - your next great product may already be hidden in your company.

Kodak used these innovative ideas towards their own reinvention. For example, using new internet voice technology by Skype(TM) and Kodak’s technology, they have taken the world of storytelling to a new level. Not only can you store and share your pictures online, you can now share your photo album and tell the story behind the pictures live, using Skype. As the headline from their website recently shared, “Kodak launches the first Skype certified online photo sharing experience, helping people talk live to friends, family and colleagues around the world while viewing a shared photo album.”

Kodak has become a leader in digital imaging technology with inroads in health care technology, and they are the leaders in consumer digital images, printing, and sharing. At a recent Las Vegas International Consumer Electronic Show, Kodak stole the show by winning “Best of Innovation” awards for digital photography. That was a “new” Kodak moment!

There is a “Kodak Moment” for every organization. What’s yours?

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