

A perfect storm of photographic innovation, marketing and consumer desire: Kodak's you-press-the-button camera ads

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Abstract. This research examines adoption of the earliest Kodak cameras by consumers who quickly became fascinated with them. Early photography, such as daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, required sophisticated knowledge about photographic processes and chemistry. Up until August 1888, when the first Kodak cameras were marketed to the public, photographs were created by a relatively small number of professional photographers who possessed the combination of skills to take and process them. Shortly after advertising the Kodak No. 1 camera featuring his new roll film, George Eastman proved he was as adept at marketing as he was at photographic innovation. The nearly immediate success of the Eastman Kodak Company can be attributed to the perfect storm of photographic innovation, effective marketing and consumer desire.

1. Introduction, Background and Research Question

How did our culture move from having one or two photographs taken in a lifetime to photographing ourselves constantly throughout the day? In the Gilded Age, when indoor plumbing, electric lighting and radio transmissions were rare, what inspired consumers to attempt to master photography? Cameras were some of the first technology put in the hands of consumers. Kodak cameras and advertising were monumental in convincing consumers that they would be successful at this new pastime.

Beginning with the Kodak No. 1 camera and carrying through each successive model, Kodak cameras were sold as simple to operate and fun to use. Founder of the Eastman Kodak Company and inventor of gelatin roll film—which early on set Kodak cameras apart—George Eastman coined the first company slogan or tag line: “You press the button—we’ll do the rest.” Eastman said, “The idea gradually dawned on me...that we were starting out to make photography an everyday affair...to make the camera as convenient as a pencil.”¹

Kodak advertisements strategically targeted consumers by eliminating the complications associated with photography. While competitors’ ads of the day listed features and solely emphasized the product, the Kodak

advertisements positioned Kodak cameras as the solution to a cultural problem; how to create a photographic record of not just the auspicious moments in life—as had been the practice—but also the everyday events, the fun times shared with family and friends.

With advertisements appearing in popular newspapers and magazines, readers could see how fun and easy Kodak cameras were from the women in the ads, which conveyed another subtle message empowering women to become the record keepers of their families. Headlines in the ads often suggested “Take A Kodak With You.” The little Kodak cameras were small and light, perfect for day trips or long trips. With the advertisements so strategically marketing Kodak cameras, did it work?

2. Methodology, Results, Discussion, Significance

How did the first consumers, the early adopters, first use cameras? Can evidence be found in the newspapers of the day that people were following the suggestions in the ads as they incorporated this new technology into their everyday lives? What can be learned about the effectiveness of Kodak advertising by looking at how cameras were talked about in newspapers?

Previous research has examined Kodak advertisements for content i.e. the role of women in the ads. This research is interested in the strategy behind the ads and its effectiveness as revealed in newspaper articles.

To illuminate the success of early Kodak ads, this research uses thematic analysis of newspaper articles during the Eastman Kodak Company’s first 10 years in business (1888 to 1898) to determine how people were talking about Kodak cameras—what was written and printed about cameras and photography in newspapers. This will shed light on the effectiveness of the ads.

The results demonstrate overlap in how the Kodak cameras were marketed and how people used cameras. In fact, the overlap is significant enough that it is not

surprising how quickly America became obsessed with a new pastime and the culture became saturated with snapshots.

Drawing from 33 newspapers—from Bangor, Maine to Portland, Oregon²—655 newspaper articles were studied through two online databases.³ Types of newspaper articles examined included: articles, business news, commentary, correspondence, editorials, editorial cartoons, features, front page/cover stories, general information, illustrations, image/photography, letters to the editor, military/war news, news, opinion and reviews, each coded and grouped by themes to discover parallels between news stories and ads.

Findings. Thematic analysis of the newspaper articles revealed overlap between the suggestions made in the Kodak advertisements and how the cameras were used.

Popularity. The Eastman Kodak Co. hoped that Kodak cameras would become popular, and in fact their popularity was a dominant theme in newspaper articles. Kodaks were mentioned on news pages and society columns, having to do with everything from fashion to international espionage. Kodak ads illustrate the cameras' popularity by positioning them as the answer to myriad problems, by leveraging a Kodak's many uses, and by utilizing women in the ads to relay the subtle message that Kodaks could be enjoyed by both men and women.

Family. Kodak cameras were positioned as the solution for photographing the family in candid moments, and newspaper articles parallel that sentiment. From an 1896 newspaper story, "There were so many times when the baby looked too cunning for anything, and it was quite impossible to rush off to the photographer's gallery, that Mr. Luther invested in a Kodak."⁴

Travel. Ads repeatedly show the Kodak as an essential travel item used from the North Pole to the Netherlands, to the Chicago Columbian Exposition, "Take a Kodak With You to the World's Fair" was debuted in 1893 with the exposition and shortened to "Take a Kodak with You" and used repeatedly. Newspaper articles reflect this idea. An 1890 New York Times article states, "Now, every tourist feels that he must take a camera with him on his summer trip."⁵ Articles frequently mention traveling with a Kodak—some hotels even advertised darkrooms as one of their amenities. Bicycle travel was particularly featured in the ads with Kodak going so far as to develop and promote the "Bicycle Kodaks," in advertisements. Newspaper articles frequently mention cycling and "Kodaking" in the same article.

Women. Kodak ads frequently feature women, and women figure predominantly in newspaper mentions of Kodak cameras. Whether they are "taking Kodaks on

the lawn" or wearing the fashion of the Kodak Girl, the newspaper articles echo the placement of women as capable photographers among family and friends.

How-to. Another dominant theme in the newspaper articles is information about how to photograph. This was a new medium and new technology for consumers, and it's not surprising that both advertisements and news stories give very literal, practical advice on photography; best practice tips are shared, techniques recommended and troubleshooting walked through. Similarly, in this first decade of advertisements, close-up renderings of hands holding the camera, squaring the subject, or pushing the button are shown.

3. Conclusions

Indicating that the ads were effective, newspaper articles reveal that consumers were using Kodak cameras in all the ways suggested in the Eastman Kodak Company advertisements. America embraced the snapshot as a system of record keeping. There was much written and published about the cameras' popularity. "Kodaking" as the popular pastime was called, was done at home with family and friends whether for special occasions or everyday. "Kodaking as you go" positioned photography as an almost mandatory part of travel, too. And it could be and seemingly was done by everyone. The Eastman Kodak Company had, in 10 short years, put cameras in the hands of nearly everyone desiring to "Kodak" who could afford America's first modestly priced point-and-shoot camera. It was the beginning of our obsession with photography.

¹ Kodak, Our Company, History of Kodak, George Eastman, http://www.kodak.com/ek/US/en/Our_Company/History_of_Kodak/George_Eastman.htm.

² The Atchison Champion, The Atchison Daily Globe, Bangor Daily Whig & Courier, Bismarck Daily Tribune, Boston Daily Advertiser, The Butte Weekly Miner, The Commercial Appeal, The Daily Inter Ocean, The Daily Mining Record, The Daily Picayune, The Denver Evening Post, The Emporia Daily Gazette, The Emporia Weekly Gazette, Fayetteville Observer, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, The Galveston Daily News, The Hawaiian Gazette, Irish World and American Industrial Liberator, The Macon Telegraph, The Milwaukee Journal, The Milwaukee Sentinel, Morning Oregonian, The New York Times, The News and Observer, The North American, The Owyhee, Avalanche, Rocky Mountain News, Salt Lake Semi-Weekly Tribune, St. Paul Daily News, The Weekly Inter Ocean, The Weekly Sentinel and Wisconsin Farm Journal, and Yenowine's News

³ *19th Century U.S. Newspapers*, through Infotrac Web, http://infotrac.galegroup.com.proxy.wichita.edu/itw/infomark/0/1/1/p?url=rc6_NCNP?sw_aep=ksstate_wichita and *The New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009) with Index (1851-1993).

⁴ "What our amateur Photographers Are Doing," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, (Chicago, Ill.) November 29, 1896, col. A.

⁵ "Caught Within The Shutter," *New York Times*, June 16, 1890, page 8.