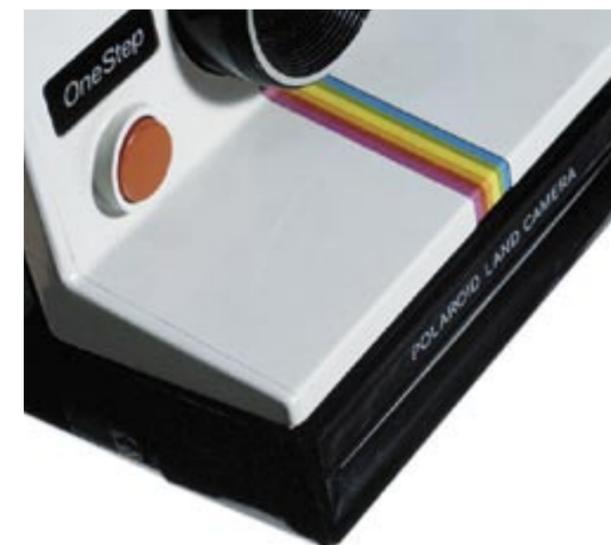


Stars and Stripes.

With digital photography forever on the increase, our favourite analogue film products are fast becoming extinct. In the wake of Polaroid's bankruptcy and recent takeover, John Weich examines the rise and fall of the camera company that will always hold a special place in creative hearts.



It is the nature of brands to come and go; but some brands are harder to let go than others. More tears were shed over the new British Petroleum logo than over the demise of Cellnet, for example. And while many Brits lamented the fall of Rover, that is was nothing compared to the salty tsunami the bankruptcy of Cadbury would unleash. Why is that some brands demand more loyalty than others? Is it national pride? Longevity? Nostalgia? Good marketing? Logic says that it is a combination of all of these things. Still, when it comes to loyalty, product charisma is every bit as important as the product itself.

Polaroid is the perfect example of the schizophrenic nature of brand loyalty. Few people shuddered when the eponymous instant-film king filed for bankruptcy a few years back, and even fewer flinched when Petters Group Worldwide, a new-ish firm grown rich on mail order, took the company over this spring. Why wasn't there a creative uproar? After all, some of our most spontaneous (and perhaps naughtiest) prints are immortalised on Polaroids. Maybe the silence was spawned by guilt; our infatuation with Sony and its digi-sidekicks has been expediting the exit of traditional film, at an increasingly rapid pace, since the turn of the new century. For most of us it's good enough to know that Polaroid will live on in our photo albums, having forever secured a place in our hearts and minds. Besides, think we, even if Polaroid pulls through and succeeds in reinventing itself in the digital age, it can never live up to its illustrious past.

Over the last eighty years Polaroid has dabbled in lamps, headlights, X-ray film, closed-circuit TVs, polarised sunglasses—sunglasses were the company's first substantial commercial product; 1 million were sold in 1939 alone—airplane windows, film reels, floppy disks, printers, video recorders, video cassettes, scanners, projectors and inkjet photo paper. The company even produced a Polaroid machine-gun trainer in World War II. But no matter how many seasoned gunners the company churned out the brand will always remain synonymous with instant film, which since the late 1940s has been Polaroid's billion-dollar bread and butter. The story goes that one day in 1944, during a vacation in Sante Fe, the daughter of Polaroid founder Edwin H. Land wondered aloud why she had to wait so long to see a picture taken of her. Within three years Polaroid's engineers, receptive to a hint when they hear one, had developed one-step film that could be processed in sixty seconds.

Like Apple today, Polaroid supplemented its superior product with superior branding and was rewarded with a wide fanbase (though with much more mass appeal than Apple). And just like Apple, whose case history is dotted with Microsoft shots, references and slights, it is impossible to contemplate Polaroid without considering its rival, Eastman Kodak. The two were not simply competitors; they were nemeses—the sourness that typified their relationship throughout the twentieth century culminated in 1986 when a judge ended a ten-year intellectual property battle (the costliest in history) by upholding Polaroid's patents and effectively killing off Kodak's instant-film ambitions.

Despite being way ahead of the game with Polacolor, throughout its history some of Polaroid's most interesting brand initiatives were conjured up to combat Kodak's brilliant yellow box. From a marketing perspective, their relationship was very much action/reaction.

Kodak introduced lifesize die-cuts of pretty young women holding Kodak cameras (a.k.a. Kodak Girls); Polaroid rebutted with silhouette drawings that identified each camera model instantly. Kodak hired a young Cybill Shepherd as its spokesperson; Polaroid took on a young Candace Bergen. Their greatest battles predictably took place on the retail floor, where Kodak's brilliant box forced Polaroid to abandon its lacklustre 'soap box' packaging and Memphis logo for something more enticing to the consumer consciousness.

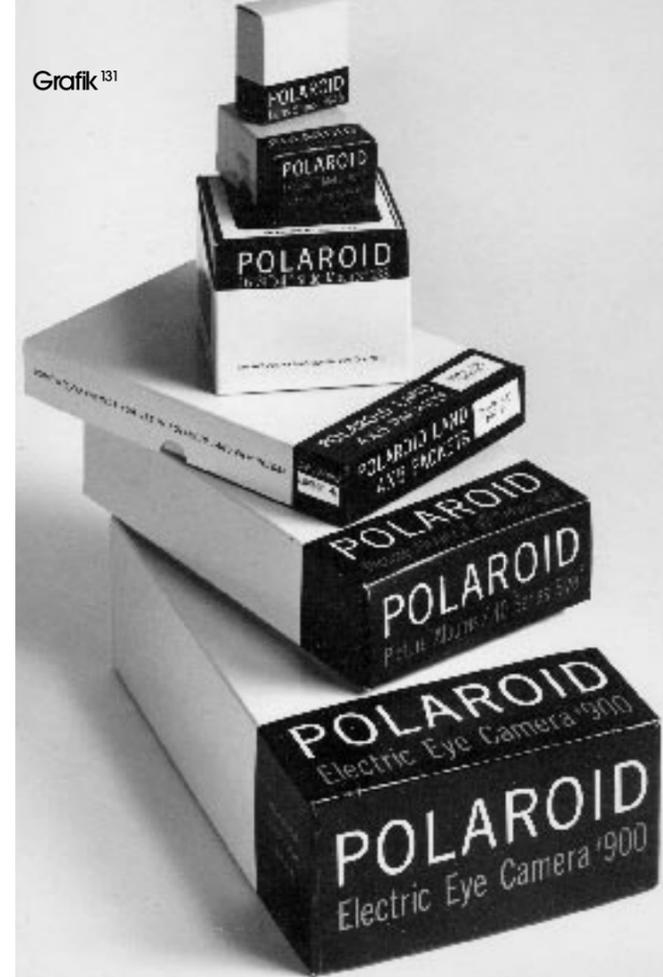
In 1958 the company decided to hire freelance designer Paul Giambarba with a view to revitalising the brand. This was the start of a relationship that was to last an amazing twenty-five years—Giambarba changed the face of Polaroid. He was responsible for creating packaging for Polaroid's Colorpacks, its SX-70, Square Shooter and Square Shooter 2 and the OneSteps. Giambarba's first initiative was to transform the logo into an uppercase News Gothic, and his second was to give the company's B&W film shelf distinction by way of black end panels, which were easily discernible in its TV spots (which, of course, were black and white).

This first round of rebranding lent Polaroid some design credibility, but its second, more significant evolution elevated the brand to design icon. The introduction of the colour-stripe boxes in the mid-1960s for its Polacolor film was Polaroid's first true answer to Kodak's ubiquitous box. The six stripes were used for both film—the fabulous rectangular film—and the Polaroid Colorpacks. You could argue that the stripes paved the way for Ott Aicher's 1972 Munich Olympics colour-stripes branding, arguably the best in Olympic history. Eventually, the success of the colour-stripes packaging spawned similar graphics for Polaroid's B&W film: seven gradations of black.

- 01 SX-70 family of packages by Paul Giambarba
- 02 The black end-panel packaging, 1958, by Paul Giambarba, photography by Mel Goldman Studio, Boston
- 03 Pronto! packaging by Paul Giambarba
- 04 Polaroid (soap bubble) packaging, 1957, by Paul Giambarba, photography by Mel Goldman Studio, Boston
- 05 Square Shooter packaging by Paul Giambarba,



01



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01 Colorpacks packaging
by Paul Giambarba

02 OneStep packaging
by Paul Giambarba

03 Square Shooter line art
by Paul Giambarba

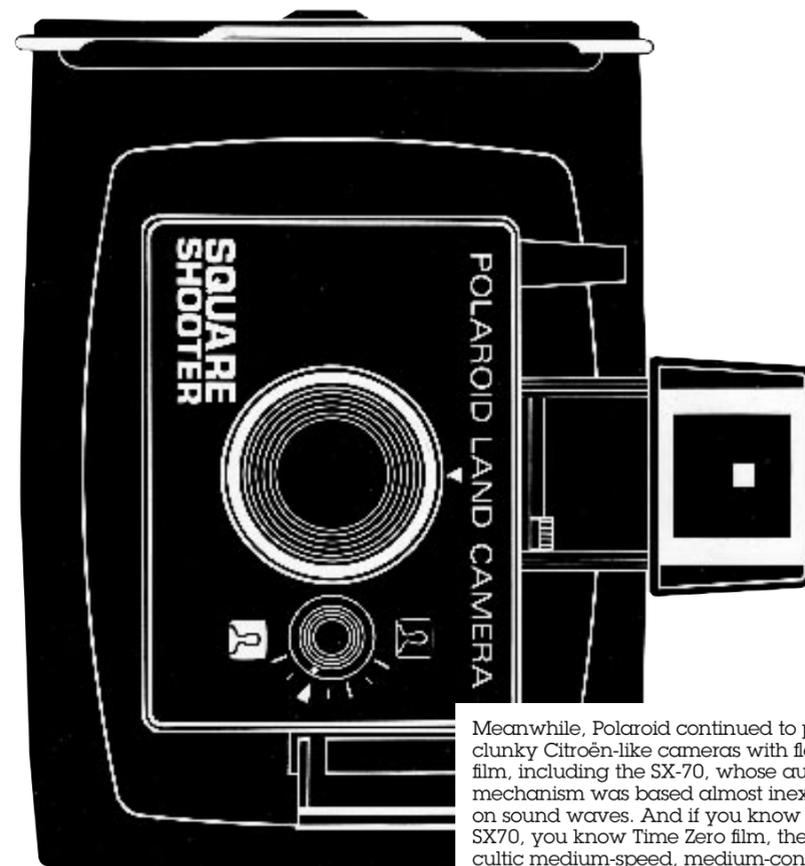
04 Square Shooter 2
packaging
by Paul Giambarba

Paul Giambarba's book
The Branding of Polaroid
1957-1977 will be available
soon from his weblog,
price \$20.00

Paul Giambarba
[http://giam.typepad.com/
the_branding_of_polaroid/](http://giam.typepad.com/the_branding_of_polaroid/)

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04

Meanwhile, Polaroid continued to push its clunky Citroën-like cameras with flat pack film, including the SX-70, whose auto-focus mechanism was based almost inexplicably on sound waves. And if you know the SX70, you know Time Zero film, the equally cultic medium-speed, medium-contrast film for high-definition instant colour prints. A succession of innovative products carried the company through the 1970s: the Square Shooter and the Square Shooter 2, Polacolor 2 with its peel-apart colour film, the OneStep instant camera, which was the best-selling instant camera in the US for four years running.

Eastman Kodak is bigger, older, its yellow boxes more pervasive and its governing slogan ('Kodak moment') one of the most successful brand jingles of the twentieth century. Yet Eastman Kodak will never enjoy the cult status that Polaroid enjoys today. Perhaps this has something to do with the nature of instant film itself, which still manages to cater to the spontaneity of the age, albeit in a lo-fi, quasi-artistic fashion. Or maybe we just have too many Kodak moments; the slogan was so successful it became generic for photography as a whole. Polaroid moments, in contrast, are more distinctive, rarer, more precious. Kodak's celebrity endorsers (i.e. Cybill Shepherd, Bill Cosby) are formidable, but they lack the professional credibility of Polaroid's Charles Eames and Andy Warhol, who didn't officially endorse Polaroid but whose legendary flash colour photographs, taken with a Big Shot Land camera, rank as one of the foremost examples of (accidental) product placement. Moreover, Polaroid purists will argue that Christopher Nolan's 2000 thriller Memento would have been infinitely less fiendish had Guy Pierce been using a Sony digital camera or shooting with Kodak Gold 200.

In recent years economists have focused primarily on Polaroid's business flaws, but in photography no other brand has captured a niche more perfectly. Almost every photographer of significance will admit to having used Polaroid during their I'm-so-goddamn-creative years—and not just the instant film, but also the professional negatives that produced breathtakingly soft grey tones. Kodak acquiesced to the masses; Polaroid targeted the pros. Most photographers have a box full of Polaroid backs for all their non-Polaroid cameras, and if you delve deep enough you'll even find the wrappers for the exorbitantly expensive 35mm slide films, which work great for emulsion and image transfers.

This is not to say that Polaroid is all good. On the contrary—the quality of Polaroid film often falls far short of chromes, and as such is used almost exclusively for the abstract. Large-format Polaroids, such as the 8x10 inch, still produce special colours and tones, but they lack the creamy richness of normal film. Ironically, just like digital photography, many professional photographers are distracted by Polaroid's instant result; it infringes upon the creative process of trial by error.

Measured by the standards of big business, Polaroid's greatest moments are behind it. But measured in nostalgia, Polaroid remains a global great. Fret not, those fantastic little 4x5s will continue to exist as art, as party gimmicks and as movie props for many years to come, available from specialist outlets whenever we feel the need to be artistic.