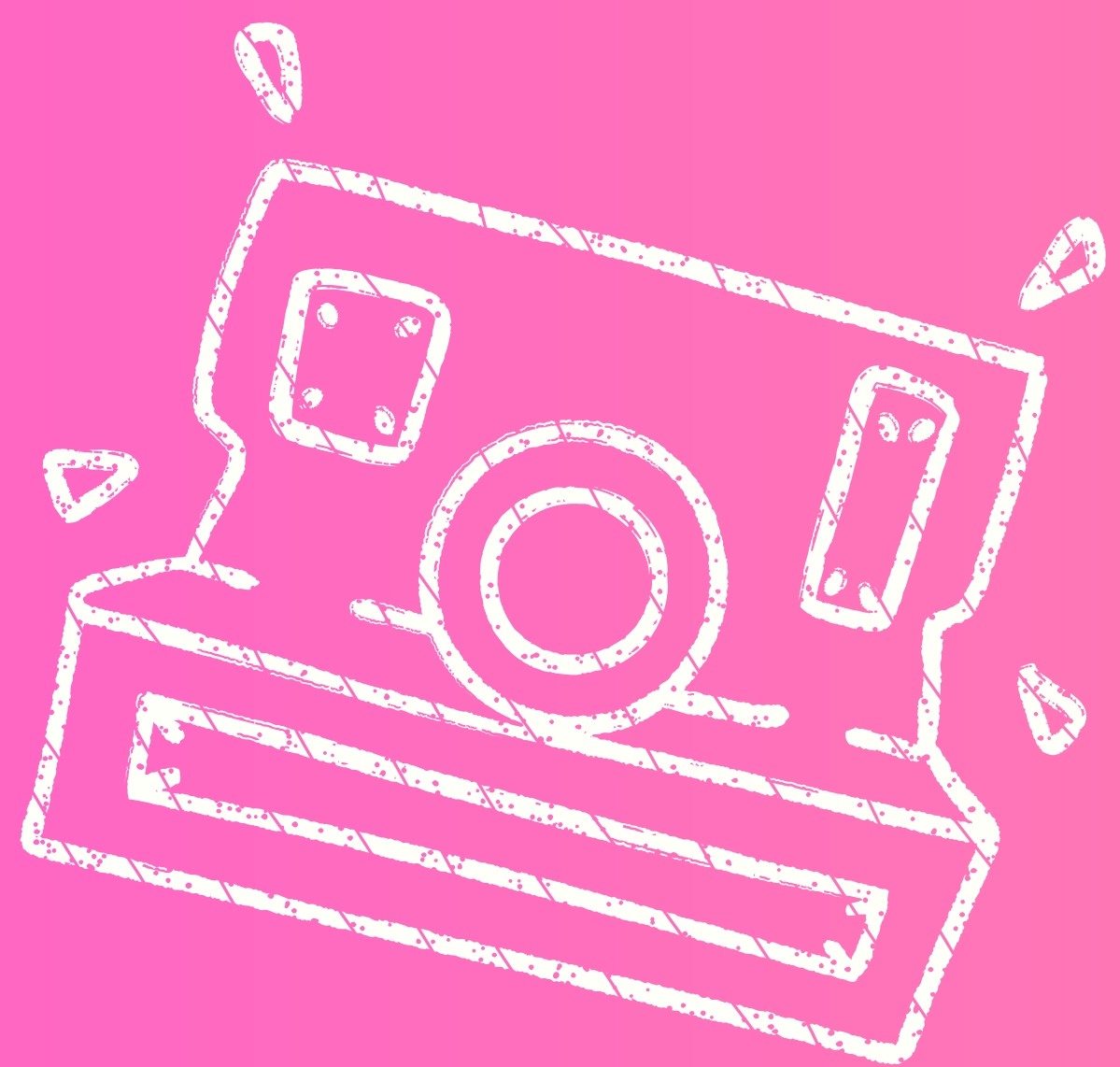




The Polaroid Promise: A Broken Social Contract and the Decline of an American Industrial Icon

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Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the Polaroid brand was synonymous with American innovation. The company's longtime leader Edwin H. Land frequently promoted Polaroid's unique brand of scientific humanism: one that embraced cutting-edge science and innovative technology in the service of artistic expression and social progress.

By end of the twentieth century, Polaroid was no longer an industry leader. Sales for its consumer products had fallen, scientific and technical innovation had stalled, and corporate leadership was in a continual state of flux. In 2001, Polaroid had declared bankruptcy and begun selling off assets. By 2010, the company had stopped production of its iconic instant cameras and film.



Anne Bell and Margarette Kulthau in the Polaroid Labs
circa 1950s
Source: Nancy Rudolph

Central Argument

Analyses of Polaroid's decline point to the company's technical and business missteps: a series of failures to support cutting-edge scientific research and predict future trends in consumer technology. As Kenneth Lipartito argues, however, narratives of technological failure that do not consider social values and cultural expectations are necessarily incomplete.[1]

To understand how Polaroid lost its innovative edge requires conceiving of innovation beyond a focus on scientific progress and commercial success. Instead, this project argues that the arc of Polaroid's reputation as a benevolent employer and progressive corporate citizen foreshadows the company's eventual commercial failures.

Building the Polaroid Brand

In public writing and speeches, Land made repeated mention of the "Polaroid Philosophy" – a framework that described the company's dual commitments to scientific innovation and technological progress, on the one hand, and worker welfare on the other.[2] From Polaroid's early days, Land implemented programs designed to improve the worker experience including job enrichment and enlargement programs, education initiatives, and employee committees. Polaroid also established an early commitment to workplace diversification. Through partnerships with women's colleges, HBCUs, and worker training programs, the company established itself as an equal opportunity employer.

Challenges to the Polaroid Brand

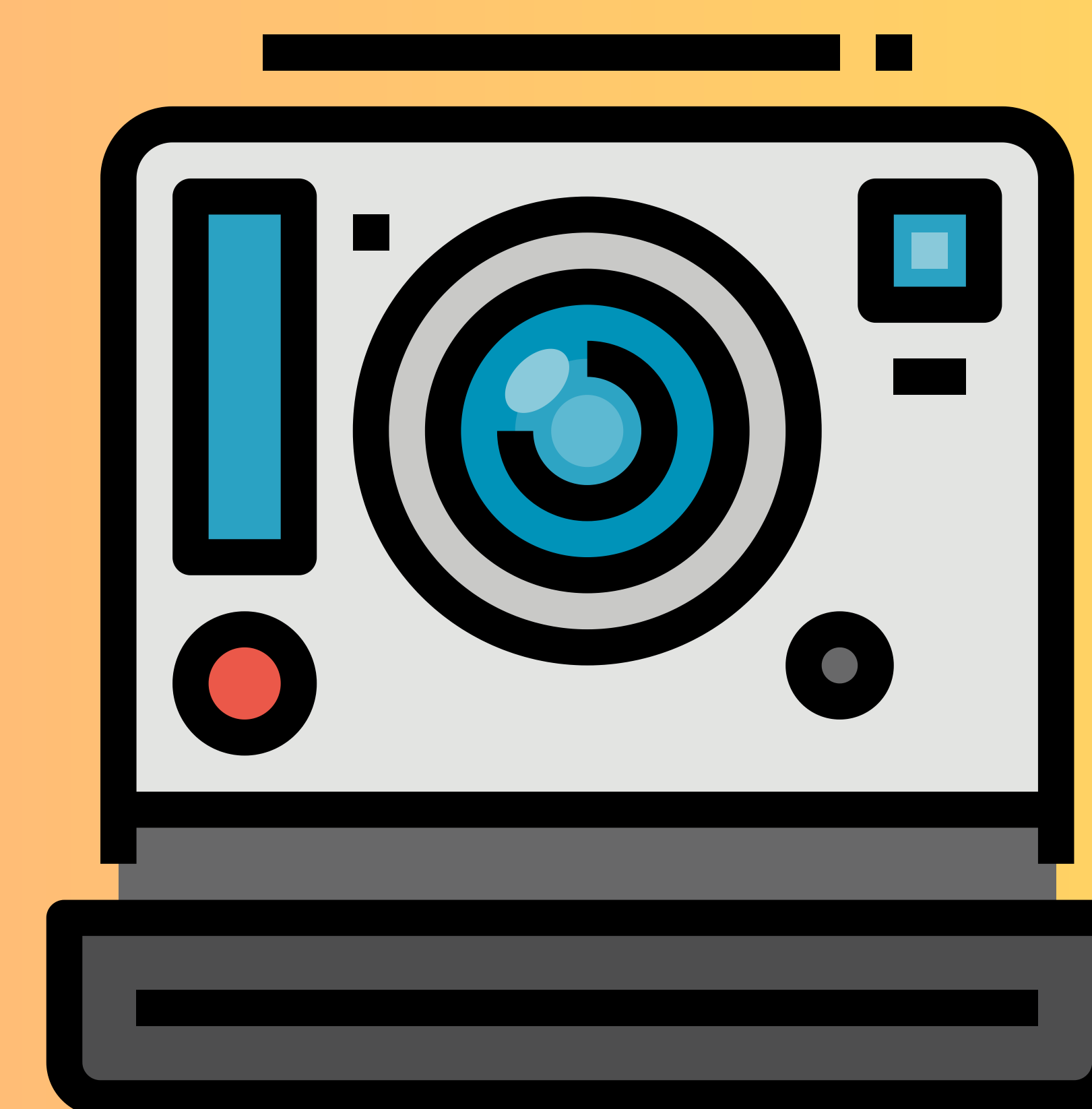
In the 1960s and 1970s, the company faced internal complaints that it was no longer living up to its image as a benevolent employer. In a 1976 report on the company's public image, Susan Ells, Polaroid's Equal Opportunity Coordinator, concluded that the company had lost its position as a leader on social and worker issues. She identified a feeling among many Polaroid employees that the company needed to recommit itself to these efforts if it wanted to retain its reputation for scientific humanism.[3]

Beginning in the 1960s, women workers organized to demand changes to the company's hiring, promotion, and benefits practices. Similarly, Black workers organized in response to the company's failed efforts to recruit and promote minority workers. The company also resisted labor organization efforts among its manufacturing employees, many of whom feared affirmative action efforts had gone too far.

Polaroid was also facing external pressures to its corporate image. Among the most public were concerns about the Polaroid's ID-2 system: the product used to create photo identification. Reports that Polaroid products were being used in South Africa to make the identification cards required for every Black resident under the apartheid regime[4] and in Boston to create new student ID cards, raised concerns about the company's involvement in new regimes of racialized surveillance. Polaroid also faced internal and external pressures to improve its dismal environmental record.[5]

Conclusion

Even while Polaroid was enjoying significant commercial and cultural success in the early 1970s with the launch of the SX-70 – its most expensive and ambitious consumer camera – the company was experiencing multiple challenges to its reputation as a benevolent employer and good corporate citizen. Polaroid was not alone in facing these challenges: by the early 1990s, the social contract between American citizens and the "good corporation" that had been negotiated over the previous century was fracturing.[6] Polaroid was, however, in the unique position of having fashioned itself as a company with a conscious. Despite being ahead of many other companies, Polaroid repeatedly failed to clear the bars it had set for itself in the areas of human rights, community engagement, and labor relations. A full understanding of Polaroid's challenges at the end of the twentieth century necessitates an appreciation for what happens when a company that has built a reputation for progressive labor and positive social engagement practices fails to respond, evolve, and innovate in the face of changing social dynamics.



References

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