

# Brave is the new safe

 By [Mike Abel](#)

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(Want proof? Ask the former CEO of Kodak.)

There's an old (and probably clichéd) proverb that says, "If you want to discover new worlds, you need to lose sight of the shore." I find this saying quite disingenuous, as it seems intent on heightening fear, while simultaneously portraying a lack of knowledge or vision as to where you want to go.

One surely doesn't intend to lose sight of the shore and just drift along, going wherever the oceans may lead?

## **Simply to survive in business**

You have purpose. You are not randomly looking for new worlds but, hopefully, better ones. So, while this old saying is meant to summon the adventurer in each of us, I'm suggesting that we undertake this trip today simply to survive in business.

Those of us who steadfastly stick to tried and trusted worlds will see a gradual depletion in stocks, grains and fruit until the larder is ultimately bare. I like this Old Testament-type warning (would love a crack of thunder in the background to give it additional gravitas) but let's quickly move forward a few thousand years to right now.

So there you are, unkempt, looking in the morning bathroom mirror. You're about to shower, prepare for the day and possibly decide on how today may actually be better for you, your family, friends and the company. Or, probably, just you.

How many folk do this daily and have done so for millennia before - and then proceed to do the same as yesterday and that very exciting day before that, too? So here's a thought. Businesses and brands succeed not because of what they say, but actually because of what they do.

## **Relevant or sufficiently interesting**

They only succeed if what they do is blatantly deemed relevant or, at least, sufficiently interesting by an overly busy customer, like you and everyone else who is trying to make ends meet, in this crazy, fast world. So we seek that which is simple, fresh, interesting and ultimately rewarding. A fair exchange of value.

Who was that global computer company CEO who said that nobody wanted a home PC?

How was it possible that Kodak doggedly stuck to the semi-traditional film and camera business when it was the generic for an entire industry? It owned childhood memories, for heaven's sake; the brand was there for every special occasion and it was affordable. But did it retain its relevance?

You see, relevance is that little thing, which makes us search for better worlds. Steve Jobs, whom I reference all the time as he was simply the greatest retailer we've ever known, understood this. Relevance is ultimately about what people want, even if they may not realise it yet. It's about having a deep insight into the human condition.

### **What everybody likes**

Growing up, we all bought vinyl (and then CDs) for one or two songs, but we still paid for the whole album. The thing is, we want to buy music as and when it suits us - simple, iTunes. And we want a fun, easy and unintimidating shopping experience when we do decide to venture out - iStore. And everybody likes something nice-looking and aspirational - and that is why Apple can charge a premium for its mass-produced products.

Because people WANT them.

The whole concept behind that brand is absolutely not about losing sight of the shore. MP3 players and mobile phones (iPods/iPhones/iTouch) are the shore. Tablets are just thin, pretty computers. Apps are like the programmes you used to buy on a disk - now just easily packaged and downloadable.

It's the same world, people. Steve simply moved upstream to where the soil is more fertile, but less discovered.

### **Great paradox**

So, what did Kodak do that was relevant? People take far more photos today than ever before but they certainly don't use film en masse in the digital age. And haven't for about 15 years. And thus the great paradox. Facebook has just paid US\$1billion for Instagram - the iPhone app that, in itself, derives no revenue (supposedly employing only 13 people). The app is free and there are no in-app charges either.

Ironically, Instagram lets you take photos that look like they've been developed on old-school film paper. So, the digital age sailed right past Kodak and now millions of people share their photos daily, on digital "faux-film".

Greater relevance can come in many shapes and forms and isn't just about the actual product. Like Outsurance, it can also be a clever pricing strategy; or Discovery's value-added medical scheme; or even an exciting new packaging for iced tea, BOS.

Look at your distribution strategies - how have they evolved? Your bricks-and-mortar retail solutions. Your approach to market - are you getting closer to your customers by harnessing the very real data you currently hold, or is it just too darn difficult so same-old saves the day? When did you last try something new? Something really new?

### **Fundamental human truths and insights**

When you look at the above examples they look like sheer genius, but in fact it's all about understanding those real fundamental human truths and insights, to take a dive into deepening Relevance.

Our kids teach us how to do this every day with that maddening word, "Why?" As adults we stop asking "why" and that is the day we stop searching for new and better answers and solutions because we think we already know.

You need to be future-fit in your thinking. The safest thing to do is replicating the model you know and understand. But liberate yourself to focus your offering entirely on your potential clients and their needs, whether simple, or not. And be deaf to the noises of your detractors. It's essential that you are.

I'm reminded of a line from Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If". "If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken, twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools". There is always a lot of noise out there and you need to be certain of your own truth or journey, even if others don't wish you good tidings or try to "shape" it differently.

### **With belief, set sail**

Feed on the positive, the words of encouragement, those who come to the shores and wave warmly and drop off fresh fruit and meals. Ignore the pessimists and naysayers. Understand all the perils of the journey as best you can. Watch the cash flow and the winds that blow. And then, with belief in yourself and crew, set sail.

Staying where you are in business (and life in general) is actually moving backwards, as nothing else around you is static. I'm suggesting to all of you who aren't scrutinising and innovating your current business models and offerings - that you are heading for your very own "Kodak moment".

*Adapted with permission from [original blog post](#) published on 24 April 2012.*

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*For More list added at 3.02pm on 4 May 2012.*

## **ABOUT MIKE ABEL**

Mike Abel is chief executive partner of M&C Saatchi Abel ([www.mcsaatchiabel.co.za](http://www.mcsaatchiabel.co.za); @mcsaatchiabel), which was born in a downturned economy and in an overtraded market but has grown faster than any previous local company in the industry and has been able to attract the most incredible talent. Contact Mike on tel +27 (0)21 421 1024 (Cape Town) or +27 (0)11 263 3900 (Johannesburg), email [mike.abel@mcsaatchiabel.co.za](mailto:mike.abel@mcsaatchiabel.co.za), follow him on Twitter at @abelmike and read his blog at [mikeabel.wordpress.com](http://mikeabel.wordpress.com)

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