

# How Sony Learned That Product Features Don't Matter

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By putting you in close contact with the private lives of your customers, empathic research helps you see your product through the eyes of someone with values, concerns, and emotional triggers that are different from your own.

This perspective becomes absolutely critical when you are dealing with products that are highly personal--like photographs. So when I worked on a project involving the design and marketing of digital cameras during my time at Sony, empathic research on how the camera and its pictures were used became absolutely vital to our success.

We conducted the research in the late-1990s, when people were just starting to use digital cameras and camcorders. We approached the project with a lot of preconceived notions about picture-taking. For decades, images were about preserving memories. They were used to remind people of important occasions in the past, for example, weddings, birthdays, and so on. You'd set up the scene, take the picture, get it developed, put it in a nice frame on the mantle, and leave it there for years.

By watching and interacting with early users--people who had started using digital cameras well before they hit the mainstream--we learned that pictures were starting to play more of a role during the occasions and a more casual role at that.

People would snap informal pictures in the middle of the action and share them with people right on the spot using the instant display on the back of the camera. Picture-taking and picture-sharing added to the fun and action of the occasion in the moment. They wouldn't be the best quality pictures--oftentimes people would take several pictures of the same shot--but now that they were "free" and disposable, getting the perfect picture was no longer as important. Sometimes images would then be saved, printed, and displayed, but many would remain in the camera forgotten after the moment passed.

This kind of behavior had not been anticipated by our product designers. They had assumed, as most of us had, that digital cameras represented a new, more convenient method of gratifying old, reliable emotional needs--to preserve memories of special occasions by putting images in photo albums and hanging them on walls. Many of our efforts had been focused on helping people take high-quality pictures and on transferring image files from camera to computer for printing and storage.

Instead, digital technology had opened up new opportunities to satisfy other emotional needs, like feelings of belonging and sharing during those special occasions. Our technology hadn't been addressing those needs. In some ways, it had thwarted and frustrated them.

The instant displays on the backs of the cameras were small and functional, with low picture resolutions. The user interface for reviewing the photos was needlessly cumbersome. Finally, the cameras themselves could have been smaller, but few of us had foreseen how the usefulness of the cameras as a source of spontaneous fun would be enhanced if the size were reduced.



Image: Flickr user [Paul Stein](#)

All the improvements you saw in Sony's digital cameras during the decade of the 2000s--larger, brighter instant displays, easy gallery-style browsing, wireless instant sharing options, and ever smaller camera sizes--were spurred by these kinds of empathetic insights into how people felt about cameras and about photographs.

It's important to understand that we weren't just trying to make Sony cameras better, and we weren't relying on surveys to tell us that consumers liked bigger displays and wireless transfers (although we did that, too).

We watched and listened as these pioneering customers used our cameras. We heard them when those products failed to satisfy their emotional needs for spontaneous fun. Empathy also helped us understand why our products weren't more successful. Our cameras were loaded with excellent features, but we had designed and marketed them with the intention of satisfying a completely different set of emotional needs--those of memory preservation. By focusing on promoting product features we had missed the emotional connection.

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