

Kodak got into the inkjet printer business and shook things up

David Pogue

In some ways, the world of electronics is a great big game of Us versus Them, filled with imbalances of power that the little people can't do anything about. We have come to accept that the gadget we buy today will be passé in a year - period. Calling technical support is going to be a nightmare - tough. Buying cartridges for an inkjet printer will cost twice as much as the printer itself - each year.

But a funny thing happened a couple of weeks ago: Kodak decided to get into the inkjet printer business on its own for the first time. To drive the point home, Kodak decided to turn the model of printers and cartridges on its head. Kodak's printers cost a little more - but the ink, according to Kodak, costs half as much as Hewlett-Packard's.

The first three Kodak models are combination printer/scanner/copiers that work with both the Mac and Windows operating systems.

The base model (\$150) is called the 5100; the 5300 (\$200) adds a color screen and memory-card slots so you can print your camera photos without a computer. And the 5500 (\$300) adds faxing, a document feeder and double-sided printing. All three machines contain the same printing guts and accept the same cartridges.

These machines print beautiful, glossy photos: a borderless 4-by-6 print pops out in about 55 seconds.

That is not as fast as rival models, some of which manage a 4-by-6 in 32 seconds, but there is a big difference: Kodak's machines accept so-called pigment inks. They take longer to dry, but they also take longer to fade - as in 90 years, even when exposed to the air.

The dye-based inks in most inkjets begin to fade away in as little as a year.

But so much for quality. Let's talk ink. Could it be true that Kodak charges half as much for the same ink?

Hewlett-Packard claims that Kodak's tests are flawed. For example, it said Kodak did not use the recommended paper when testing one HP printer. Kodak responded that HP would say just about anything to protect its cash cow.

As evidence, Kodak points to the HP press release that landed shortly after Kodak announced its printers. In it, HP said that, starting with its spring 2007 printer models, each ink would be available in two cartridge sizes: standard and XL. The smaller size would cost less than HP's current cartridges, but also contain less ink.

HP said that by lowering the up-front cost, the new "standard" cartridge would benefit people who don't print much. HP's XL tanks would hold three times as much ink as the standard ones - but cost twice as much.

So here is the 64,000-liter question: Do Kodak's cartridges really save you money?

The following calculations are based on cartridge prices from Staples.com. This example pits Kodak's \$200 all-in-one, the 5300, against H.P.'s \$200 all-in-one, the C5180.

Kodak's black cartridge costs \$10 and prints 350 pages of an industry-standard test document. Ink cost per page: 2.8 cents. H.P.'s current black cartridge costs \$18 and prints 660 pages, for an ink cost per page of 2.7 cents. The HP wins by a hair.

In most other scenarios, however, the Kodak wins by a mile. For example, the cost of black ink for H.P.'s new, improved 2007 cartridges - the standard and the XL sizes - runs you 7.5 cents and 4 cents a page, respectively.

The math for photo prints gets even more complicated, because the HP 5180 uses individual color ink tanks (\$10 each), so you don't throw away perfectly good ink when one tank runs dry. On the Kodak, a single \$25 cartridge contains all four colors, plus a fifth tank containing a clear sealant that is applied whenever you print on Kodak photo paper. The Kodak also has a separate black cartridge for text.

Kodak hoped to settle the economy issue by hiring a lab called Quality Logic to study 14 printers from HP, Canon, Brother, Lexmark and Kodak. The lab bought three of each printer, and nine sets of cartridges for each model.

In the study, Kodak whumped its rivals in printouts per dollar. A typical borderless 4-by-6 photo used 9.6 cents of Kodak ink versus 28.9 cents of HP ink. A business document with color graphics cost 7 cents a page using Kodak ink versus 14 cents of HP ink.

If you trust the study, it seems clear that a Kodak printer will save you money on ink. You'll have to weigh that against some of its drawbacks.

The Kodak is the new all-in-one on the block, so it doesn't offer as many features - like printing directly onto blank CDs - as some of its rivals.

All three grades of Kodak printer paper have identifying, machine-readable stripes on the back, so you never have to worry about choosing the wrong type; the printer already knows. But unlike HP printers that have a similar feature, the Kodaks do not alert you when you have inserted the paper upside-down.

Each Kodak has a tray for letter-size paper and one for 4-by-6 photo paper. Most printers let you specify which tray you want to use right from the computer. But on the Kodak, to switch to the photo tray, you have to push the tray in until it clicks. It is not a terrible system, but it feels a bit ancient.

So no, the new Kodak doesn't run away with the crown, but it easily holds its own against much bigger, more experienced manufacturers. It has its priorities straight, delivering great-looking photos that last a lifetime and easy-to-use controls.

More important, it makes a world-rocking point about the ink model that has lined the coffers of the inkjet industry for years. If you're mad as hell, you don't have to take it anymore.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 17/5/2007.