LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME: GETTING BUSINESSES INTERESTED IN ARCHIVES

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ABSTRACT: American archival repositories have done a fairly good job of documenting political activities, military conquests, the arts and cultural affairs, as well as the lives of prominent individuals. However, they have done a less than adequate job documenting where people spend a majority of their lives—in the workplace. Large corporations recognize the importance of history and employ professional archivists who preserve those records that assist the company in accomplishing its mission. Problems arise, however, in trying to document the small to medium-sized companies, the "bone and sinew" of America's capitalist system. How can archives and related historical projects be made affordable to businesses? Perhaps, more importantly, how do we convince a CEO of the utility of history? In 1991, the Cincinnati Historical Society Library inaugurated a successful and unique corporate outreach program that confronts these issues directly.

In the summer 1982 issue of *The American Archivist*, Harold Anderson, the journal's editor and author of a foreword entitled "Business Archives: A Corporate Asset," wrote: "Business archives are coming of age as more and more companies reap the benefits of one of their most useful and inexpensive corporate assets."[1] The emergence of American corporations that adopt the "long view," thereby showing they realize the necessity and importance of maintaining a link with their company's past, is commendable. Procter & Gamble, Microsoft, Merck & Company, Kraft Foods, Inc., and the Coca-Cola Company are a few of the major corporations that maintain archives managed by professionally trained archivists. While there appears to be a strong commitment on the part of each company to maintain archives, even these archivists must justify regularly to executive management the utility and marketability of history.

If corporate archivists, who collectively have done a respectable job preserving their companies' heritage, are filled with anxiety and must scramble for every morsel of "historical" justification, what must be the condition of archivists who work with small to medium-sized regional companies that do not have the resources to support a full-time archivist? The distress, the feeling of being used, of not really belonging to the company, of being non-essential fluff, and the obvious reality that it is extremely difficult for an archivist to sell or to convince a CEO of the viability and the utility of

maintaining historical records causes great concern. It is distressful for an archivist to feel that his or her service will be needed only to celebrate an anniversary and then...oblivion. The archivist, along with the company's history, is disposed of as the enthusiasm for the celebration disappears. It is not long before the archivist is abandoned, relegated to the bowels of the building, only to be resuscitated when an "urgent" historical or legal question arises. If it is the latter, one quickly becomes damned for saving or for destroying the records. How does the archivist, especially a business archivist working at a not-for-profit historical society and lacking any corporate allegiance, obtain, preserve, and increase a CEO's interest in the company's records?

Since 1991, the Cincinnati Historical Society Library's pioneering Business Archives Program has offered a fee-based archival/historical research service to many established companies within the greater Cincinnati region. This corporate outreach program makes historical and current records retention affordable and accessible to local businesses and organizations. Whether the company is 20 years old and employs 30, or 150 years old and employs 800, the program assists executives in maintaining the information unique to the business. In addition to collecting and organizing information, the Business Archives Program can assist a company in historical research and writing and in curating an exhibition.

There are three broad areas that need to be discussed regarding corporate outreach. First, there is the difficult task of convincing business owners of the need to preserve historically significant records. Second, executive management needs a thorough understanding of how other companies have utilized archives effectively. Finally, there is a need for specific examples of how the Cincinnati Historical Society Library's Business Archives Program has succeeded in offering regional businesses and organizations fee-based archival and historical research services.

Rarely does an owner inquire directly about processing records, researching and writing a corporate history, or interviewing a retired employee or executive. Usually, a "cold call" must be made to the owner or ranking executive. The hope is that the conversation will heighten their interest in scheduling a formal meeting. The least controversial approach is to discuss an impending anniversary, for this lends itself to summarizing the services offered by the Business Archives Program.[2] Most owners are impressed that the Historical Society Library is interested in the company and a bit curious as to how the Business Archives Program can help. Whether the owner is interested in archival administration, records management, oral interviews, or the researching and writing of the company's history, their voice rings with the anticipatory sound of "do you have something on our company that we don't know about?"

It is usually at the initial meeting that the main objection is addressed—why an owner or corporate executive may not want to have anything to do with archives. Do not let them openly parrot what they have heard from others about the validity of history. Experience has shown that it is more dramatic and a bit unsettling to have the historian reinforce verbally what an executive may believe: history is "bunk." Perhaps by "hearing" themselves, they may be less quick to reject the suggestion to participate in the program. Through more than five years of experience, the author has found that executives offer the same basic excuses for not maintaining archives that Maynard Brichford identified about twenty-five years ago:

1. Maintaining archives is too expensive.
2. "Corporate skeletons" may be found.
3. There are doubts about the validity of archives.
4. Executives are unwilling to believe what archives "tell" them.
5. Executives generally perceive historians as muckrakers who will expose the company as Matthew Josephson-type characters who believe that all business people are robber barons.[3]

Because these issues have been brought to the fore by "the opposition," executives do not know how to reply. They have been put off-balance. Ironically, candidness makes executives a bit uncomfortable, and they become more receptive to hearing the reasons why they should care for records and be concerned about preserving the company's history:

1. Archives are a unique database that permit a company to study business developments, they can be used in litigation support, to assist with public relations, and to indoctrinate new management trainees.[4]
2. Archives save money. Processing the company's records costs less than compiling an anniversary brochure and can yield more meaningful information.
3. Archives serve corporate planners. Records alone cannot predict the future, but they do enable one to understand where the company has been.[5]
4. Archives identify the company's "culture" and all that it connotes.
5. Archives can be used to understand the evolution of past policies and the precedents established through daily operations. They are an asset as surely as any item on the balance sheet.[6]
6. Archives allow for valuable and balanced judgments.
7. Simply collecting business records is not enough—selecting ***quality*** is much more important.
8. If costs prohibit developing an archives, then store the ***correct*** and more meaningful records with the Historical Society until sufficient money can be allocated for processing.
9. Integrate the existing records management program with the archives program.[7]
10. Encourage executives to view archives as a managerial tool of corporate information and not as "nice, little, old things that are neat for people to view occasionally." Taken out of context, archives have little, if any, meaning.

It is also important to emphasize how other companies have used history and archives by showing newspaper and magazine advertisements, pamphlets and brochures, and product packaging. Some examples from company participation in the Business Archives Program, are the Fleischmann Yeast Company, Frederick Rauh Insurance Company, and the Cincinnati Opera. Others are drawn from the public domain, such as Louis Vuitton Luggage, Motorola Corporation, or the New York Stock Exchange.

Ironically, once an owner is interested in archives, a recurring dilemma surfaces: the records company owners think are important usually have little value. Conversely, what the owners do not think is historically important, archivists treasure. A content list that reflects the types of business records the Business Archives Program desires is provided here (see appendix). After reviewing the list, the executive may realize that given the types and varieties of records, an archivist is not a muckraker necessarily bent on

doing harm or embarrassing the company. In fact, after studying the list, many owners feel disappointed that they have not done a more thorough job of maintaining meaningful records. This list has developed into a great icebreaker.

Contracts for various services have come to a total of over $250,000 since the start of the program, just shy of $46,000 a year. By almost any standard the program can be judged a success. The fees cover not only the salaries and benefits of one full-time archivist and, since November 1995, a shared employee, but offset the cost of archival supplies (boxes, folders, clips, basic conservation), telephone and copier expenses, and professional travel. The program has accomplished one of its intended goals: it has created a self-supporting archival program, though it must be noted that there are sixteen dedicated volunteers who perform, under supervision, a majority of the processing that helps the program ultimately accomplish its mission.

Some collections have been acquired in ways similar to most historical institutions. When a company is a going concern, senior management sees little merit in participating in the Business Archives Program. Ironically, when a company either goes out of business or is absorbed by another out-of-town concern that plans to close the local facility, the company's "old" management realizes that if meaningful records are not donated to the Historical Society Library, no written record will exist of the company's business contributions and its community involvements, or of the successes of the individuals that made the company prosperous. The U.S. Shoe Corporation (retailers of Red Cross, Joyce, and Pappagallo shoe brands), and the Drackett Corporation (inventors and manufacturers of Windex and Drano) are two Cincinnati companies that fit this category. The Business Archives Program accepted the records as donations because both were important to the economic history of Cincinnati. Perhaps, one day, either former employees, a local foundation, or family members will fund an archival processing project.[8]

"Managers at every level of the corporation, from the board room to the shop floor," wrote George Smith, president of the Winthrop Group, "have a need for a history of the company that is larger than their own experience."[9] Although archivists and historians believe passionately in this statement and in the utility of history, convincing an executive of the usefulness of the past is not easy. The Business Archives Program has been involved in five corporate history projects. Some adhere to Smith's model that business histories should "act as agents of change," others do not.[10] Two of the projects, those of the Fleischmann Yeast Company and Kluener Packing Company (a local meat packing operation), were written for 125th and 100th anniversary celebrations, respectively. These histories provide accurate historical information and give company personnel something to rally around for an anniversary. However, both lack in-depth historical analysis because few meaningful records exist. Fleischmann distributed a copy of its history to its employees worldwide. Kluener geared its history to use at industrial trade shows; both histories have little, if any, public exposure. Two additional writing projects, Frederick Rauh & Company (an old-line, local insurance agency) and the Cincinnati Southern Railway (the only municipally owned railway in the country), were meant for the "man on the street." Neither was for an anniversary, yet they were requested because extensive internal changes necessitated reflection. Management hoped that a comprehensive but honest history would become a resource that current and future

managers or trustees would refer to concerning the company's growth and experiences.

The final example, Littleford Day, Inc., a local family-owned sheet metal job shop that throughout its 140-year history successfully made the transition from a builder of road construction and maintenance equipment to a manufacturer of high-speed, high-tech industrial mixers, was motivated by a non-family president directing a business where family members were not involved actively in day-to-day operations. The president viewed a history as a method of binding the family together, enabling them to feel proud of the company's successes, and as a way to educate fourth-generation family shareholders in the company's heritage. Although the history details where the company has been and highlights the difficult decisions that were made to keep it profitable, most importantly it looks toward the future. The Littleford Day, Inc. history brings continuity to an established enterprise. It complies with Smith's dictum that histories should "concentrate on the dynamic accumulation of past events and decisions that have abiding significance for the present and the future."[11] The president plans to give a copy to board members, extended family members, stockholders, and select employees. Additionally, the president believes that portions of the book will be placed on CD-ROM where it will be viewed electronically by potential customers attending industrial trade shows.

An important reason why the Business Archives Program has been successful in garnering research projects is that the client's needs were addressed; the company is not limited to using the final product in a manner predetermined by the historian. The program is dynamic enough to respond to the company's needs. Granted, archivists and historians would love business histories to be works of enduring value. Brichford was correct when he argued that histories written for the purpose of increasing esprit are wasteful. However, executives have their own motivations and stratagems. In some cases the cliche that "something is better than nothing" has merit.

Anniversary histories are easy to understand and a company has a tight deadline by which the project needs to be completed. The reasons for a non-celebration history are less obvious. In fact, in the Littleford Day, Inc. project, the president's intended application was not known until much of the research and writing had been completed. It is not that the president engaged in deceptive practices—quite the contrary. It is necessary that archivists and historians pay just as much attention to what is not said as to what is said. To pretend that a "standard" company history exists is not professional. It defeats the very essence of history and undermines its value and utility to the company or institution being served.

Ironically, a "sales" call was not required to obtain these writing projects. Three assignments resulted from the respective president's reading of a bimonthly column in a local business newspaper on old Cincinnati businesses and business personalities. Another came about because volunteers had finished processing the company's records. The fifth contract resulted from the company's chairman blindly calling the Historical Society Library and inquiring if anyone could offer advice on researching and writing a company history. What was interesting in ***all*** of these cases was that none of the executives wanted an advertising firm to do the work. Usually, battle armor must be donned to convince a president or a public relations department executive not to use an

advertising firm for historical perspectives and interpretations. The companies that chose the Historical Society Library may have thought that a trained historian could do a more comprehensive, accurate, and professional job.

A unique approach to corporate outreach was tried recently for the sponsorship of an exhibition on the John Holland Gold Pen Company, a business founded in 1841 that closed its doors in 1980. A dedicated volunteer spent three years processing the collection. It was a filthy and difficult task, but she persevered and finished the collection by late summer 1995. However, a problem remained. How could the Business Archives Program obtain sponsorship for an exhibition of a company whose assets were auctioned publicly fifteen years earlier and where no family or extended family members existed?

While downtown one day for a marketing appointment, the author met the owner of an office supply store that sold high quality writing instruments and an array of stationery and office supplies. After discussing the Business Archives Program, the owner was informed that the Historical Society was processing the John Holland Gold Pen Company records; as an antique pen enthusiast, he was quite familiar with the company's heritage. He was asked if his company could possibly sponsor a small exhibit in the library. He loved the idea. After several discussions, plans were made for a five-case display; four cases pertained to the John Holland Gold Pen Company, and the fifth case displayed contemporary models of fountain pens from some of the world's major pen companies: Parker, Schaefer, Waterman, and Pelikan. Originally, plans called for an antique pen collector to appear on a designated Saturday and appraise the collectable pens of patrons. However, he had to cancel at the last moment. The exhibit was well received by the media—from the newspaper and television to a local history bulletin board on the Internet. Both participants benefited from the exhibit: the Business Archives Program was able to highlight the opening of an important collection and the sponsor was able to increase market awareness of contemporary fountain pens. All this was accomplished through a company that is only tangentially related to fountain pen manufacturing and sales. It proved to be a unique and affordable way to make a collection's accessibility known to the public.

Another necessary step in securing corporate support of archives is efficient service, something most not-for-profit institutions fail to understand. One late afternoon, the director of a major art museum in Cincinnati, who happened to be a former officer at Cincinnati's largest bank, called at 5:00 P.M. inquiring about landscape drawings of the museum's gardens. After it was confirmed that they were part of the Historical Society Library's holdings he asked if he could view them, knowing full well that it was past closing time. Obviously, it was not a problem. He stayed for 1½ hours and was impressed that he was not hurried. After a lengthy conversation about the Business Archives Program he inquired about the possibility of processing his museum's institutional records. It is unlikely that someone who said, "I'm sorry, but we close at 5:00..." would have received the same offer. If archivists want to be taken seriously, accepted as a genuine and influential part of the corporation, then patrons and even employees must be treated as paying customers.

A key component of service is follow-up. It is important to visit the office instead of using the mail or a courier service when drafts of the company's history are submitted

for review. It is more time consuming and costs money, but it is absolutely necessary. Recognize that the client is the customer buying "our" wares and expertise. Additionally, it is important to be reminded that you are probably the only representative from the archives that this executive will ever see. At these meetings, discuss what has been written, answer questions, and take notes on possible revisions. Remember, the company's archives is only one of several projects on the president's mind. There is nothing wrong with being recognized on the manufacturing floor, in the CEO's office, or in the board room. This signifies to employees and middle management how important the project is to the president, a small but vital function of corporate outreach.

One of the more challenging aspects of corporate outreach, besides servicing existing clients, involves advertising. How can a fiscally restrictive program include advertising? The answer, very simply, is that it cannot. There is an effective alternative, however. Two years ago contact was made with the editor of the *Business Record*, a local Cincinnati business newspaper. Would the paper be interested in a monthly column concerning Cincinnati's business history, including both biographies and company reviews? The managing editor thought it was a marvelous idea. Approximately twenty-four articles have been published, some have received positive responses in the "Letters to the Editor" section from the general readership. More importantly, three corporate research and writing contracts valued at approximately $63,000 have resulted from this marketing/advertising effort. The column enables the Cincinnati business community to realize that the Business Archives Program exists and provides the program the exposure it needs to expand.

A final thought concerning corporate outreach is both non-quantifiable and subjective, but something that is extremely important: enthusiasm. Company executives enjoy an historian who is genuinely interested in preserving the company's history. Experience demonstrates that most business people are impressed with the historian's research skills, the ability to gather facts from a box of records and to make intellectual and contextual sense of them. If an historian performs this task with a high energy level and meets the proposed deadlines, the company's management becomes even more impressed. The stereotype of the "radical" historian slowly dissipates when management realizes that he or she is a professional who takes genuine pride in quality work. Enthusiasm alone will not convince the unenlightened or persuade ahistorical managers, but it is hoped that executives will take an initial look at corporate archives in terms of costs and benefits.[12] One day management may believe in history's utility. Presidents, owners of companies, board members, and trustees can understand and appreciate the need for archives if the idea is presented by a knowledgeable and enthusiastic employee or consultant.

The Business Archives Program's experience with corporate outreach seems to be filled with success stories; however, it has not been easy. The time period from initial contact to signing a contract is separated by weeks, even months, of sleepless nights, personal anxiety, and wishful thinking that a "deal" has been consummated. Generally, history is a hard sell and making businesses aware of the need to preserve history and understand the economic utility of historical information is extremely difficult. There is no one answer for every situation. However, the empirical examples and method of operation reviewed here have worked with a modicum of success.

Regardless of one's political affiliation there is no denying that market capitalism is a true American success story. There are blips on the economic screen, but it is the model that others emulate. Americans invented it, so Americans are obligated to document and preserve it. Business people are not bothered by such matters, but archivists should be concerned. Whether employed as a corporate archivist or as an "outsourced" business archivist, it is incumbent upon all professionals to develop innovative uses of company records that demonstrate history's effectiveness and relevance. Only then will executive decision makers embrace the usable past that archivists have preserved so dutifully.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Steven L. Wright is the Business Archivist at Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society Library. He has a B.A. and M.A. in American history from the University of Cincinnati. The author wishes to dedicate the article to his coterie of sixteen volunteers without whom the Business Archives Program could not succeed.

APPENDIX

CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER
CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CINCINNATI HISTORY MUSEUM

CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

Union Terminal
1301 Western Avenue
Cincinnati, Ohio 45203
513/287-7030
fax 513/287-7095

WHAT BELONGS IN A BUSINESS HISTORY ARCHIVES?

1. Materials that tell the story of the company, its structure, its basic goals, decisions, programs, and its success or failure.

2. Information about employee relations and civic involvement, as well as biographical data about major personalities within the company.

THE KINDS OF MATERIALS WE ARE INTERESTED IN INCLUDE:

LEGAL DOCUMENTS
Articles of Incorporation
Constitution
Annual Reports
Bylaws
Contracts
Insurance Policies
Wills & Estate Records
Mortgages
Deeds
Title Records
Patents
Court Transcripts & Orders

PRINTED MATERIALS
Certificates
Advertisements
Awards
Pamphlets
Brochures
Reports
Proofs
Circulars
Broadsides
Programs
Flyers
Clippings & Articles
Articles
Books
Employee or Company Publications
Newsletters

FINANCIAL DOCUMENTS
Financial Statements
Ledgers
Journals
Loans
Securities
Notes, Bills & Receipts

MANUSCRIPTS
Correspondence
Letter Books
Minutes
Officers' Reports
Memoranda
Diaries
Proceedings
Speeches
Reports

OTHER FORMATS
Product & Market Research Materials
Posters
Photos & Negatives
Audio Recordings
Video Tape & Film
Charts, Diagrams & Graphs
Architectural & Engineering Drawings
Product & Packaging Design
Manufacturing, Research and Development, and Engineering

THIS LIST IS BY NO MEANS EXCLUSIVE. IT SIMPLY PROVIDES EXAMPLES OF THE KINDS OF MATERIALS THE CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S BUSINESS ARCHIVES SEEK.

NOTES

1. Harold P. Anderson, "Business Archives: A Corporate Asset," *The American Archivist* 45 (Summer 1982): 264.
2. I have encountered only one rude and embarrassing rejection using this approach. After meeting with the vice president of sales and marketing to discuss the company's approaching 125th anniversary, it was determined that the chairman probably would be interested in hearing how the Business Archives Program could help. I returned a week later to discuss the program with the chairman. The vice president of sales also sat in on what became a very "brief" meeting. Before I could complete a sentence, the chairman interrupted and asked why I was wasting his time. History meant nothing to him. His company had endured for almost 125 years and certainly did not need assistance understanding its place in general American/economic history. And as far as "documents and records" were concerned, he had thrown them out a few years earlier. Dumbfounded, I apologized for the misunderstanding and walked out of the conference room escorted by an equally perplexed vice president of sales. The vice president assured me that it was not anything I had done directly: "Sometimes he just gets like this."
3. Maynard Brichford, "Businesses Use of Business History," *Records Management Quarterly* 4 (October 1970): 15.
4. Leon Shkolnik, "The Role of the Archive in the Corporate Structure," *Records Management Quarterly* 24 (October 1990): 19.
5. K. Austin Kerr, Amos J. Loveday, and Mansel G. Blackford, *Local Businesses: Exploring Their History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1990), p. 12.
6. Robert A. Shiff, "The Archivist's Role in Records Management," *The American Archivist* 19 (April 1956): 115.
7. Christopher Hives, "Records, Information, and Archives Management in Business," *Records Management Quarterly* 20 (January 1986): 3.
8. Since this paper was delivered at the May 1995 MAC Conference, Drackett family members have donated $28,000 to cover the cost of processing the company's archives. The collection includes paper records as well as museum objects and film and videotape.
9. George David Smith and Laurence E. Steadman, "Present Value of Corporate History," in *Corporate Archives and History: Making the Past Work*, ed. Arnita A. Jones and Philip L. Cantelon (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1993), p. 165.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 176.