

Access to Business Archives: U.S. Access Philosophies

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Abstract: Most U.S. corporate archives could be described as “closed to the public.” But access is not completely unavailable. The key is that companies establish archival programs solely to serve business goals. And support can fluctuate with the company’s fortunes. Therefore, corporate archivists must tie archival programs to business goals, placing internal needs ahead of external requests. In spite of this prioritization, the majority of external questions are still answered. Academic research requests in particular are scrutinized to protect the company’s interests. In the case of major societal topics, companies sometimes find it beneficial to open their records. And some U.S. companies donate their older archival records to public research institutions. So, corporate records are not simply “open” or “closed.” Corporate archives exist to serve business goals and the historical record, in that order. A professionally managed business archives, however, ultimately serves the public interest.

Most corporate archivists in the United States would describe their collections as “closed to the public” — a fact that may discourage researchers with an interest in these important repositories of American history and culture. However, upon closer examination, the picture is not as bleak as it may appear. To understand the reasons for the current situation of limited access to corporate records, one has to understand the motivating factors for companies to establish archival programs.

In the United States there is no legislation mandating that companies preserve their archival or historical records. But in spite of this, more than 300 companies and business associations are listed in the Society of American Archivists’ *Directory of Corporate Archives in the United States and Canada*.¹ Many of these companies can be found on *Fortune* magazine’s “Fortune 500” list of America’s largest companies, and are among the most admired business entities in the world.

Companies create archives programs and hire archivists because they recognize the advantages that can be gained by leveraging their heritage and brand history — or by preserving and maintaining access to records that have long-term business value. Many companies see clear business benefits in the areas of litigation support for patent and

¹ The directory is posted online at <http://www.hunterinformation.com/corporat.htm>.

other intellectual property issues, trademark protection, media relations, brand marketing, internal communications, speechwriting and presentations for internal and external use. Archives add value to all these business activities and more. They can be used to enhance the reputation of a company and to both communicate and build on a corporate culture. While corporate executives may be aware of the interest of scholars, journalists and local communities in the histories of their companies, that interest is not the driving force behind either the creation of archives programs or their ongoing support. The purpose is to help a company achieve its business goals.

There is no government or grant support for appraising, arranging, describing or preserving corporate archives in the United States. The only source of support for a corporate archives is from the corporation itself. Therefore it is not surprising that an archives program, like all corporate functions, is impacted by the economic viability of a company. As companies prosper and grow, so do archives programs. As companies fall on hard economic times, go out of business or are acquired by another company, archives programs are often downsized, merged or in some cases closed. While archives programs in government and academia also suffer from this phenomenon, in a corporate environment the effect is magnified because of the for-profit nature of the corporate environment.

Therefore it is imperative that corporate archivists clearly communicate and consistently demonstrate their value to the business. They must directly link their mission, services and policies — particularly access policy — to helping the company meet its business goals. While this necessary alignment with business priorities often results in restricted external access, the very existence of corporate archives does offer some hope for those outside the company who may want access to the records. This is because if corporate archives do not exist, there is very little chance that historical corporate records will be retained or properly preserved. And with no corporate records, there definitely can be no access.

All archives have to balance limited resources against a variety of demands on their collections and staff. And we all understand the need to place some restrictions on records based on donor requirements, privacy legislation or institutional requirements. Most not-for-profit archives and publicly funded archives have a mandate to serve the research and information needs of the public, regardless of who is making a request and why information is being sought. The “open and equal access” policy of not-for-profit and publicly funded archives is clear. This access ethic represents a key difference between these repositories and corporate archives.

Not all corporate archives have written access policies. But whether the policies are codified or informal, virtually all corporate archives place a higher priority on internal requests than on those received from “outside researchers” or “the public.” As I mentioned earlier, most corporate archives have a straightforward mission — to help a company meet its business goals. Therefore, the activities and resources of corporate archives must be focused on meeting the needs of internal clients or customers rather than those of external researchers.

In many not-for-profit institutions — particularly research and academic archives — the archives staff are custodians of records that others use as the source of their research. In corporate archives, the archivists are not only the custodians of records but also the primary users of those records. They provide reference services on behalf of and in service to their internal clients. Particularly for complex questions or strategic research, employees typically do not have the research skills or the time to visit the archives or otherwise access its resources to do their own research and analysis of the records. They want to call an archivist and have the archivist do the research, evaluate the sources and provide the key information quickly, accurately and with the appropriate context when necessary. This is the typical role of the corporate archivist.

Most corporate finding aids and catalogs are available on company intranets, accessible only to employees or the archives staff who mediate access to archival records. Most companies provide at least some historical information on their Internet sites. But corporate archives do not generally use any of the public online catalogs used by the not-for-profit sector. And corporate archives often do not have either the physical space or the staff needed to provide an open “reading room” or research area such as those found in not-for-profit archives. At Kraft Foods the Corporate Archives is not located at the company headquarters building but is seven miles away in a purpose-remodeled facility. With employees across the globe, we are accustomed to servicing requests remotely. We service virtually all employee requests without their having to physically visit the Archives.

This is not to say that corporate archives do not allow outside researchers into their archives. Many do. A past survey of corporate archives conducted by Elizabeth Adkins shows that a full two-thirds of those surveyed have allowed outside researchers to physically review their records. And virtually all of those surveyed reported that they provide non-proprietary information to outside researchers via e-mail, telephone and fax.²

Who are these people we refer to as “outside” or external researchers? From my own sixteen years of experience as a corporate archivist, only a very small portion of our external requests come from the academic research community. Most people who contact us are looking for a simple answer to a simple question. And they do not ask, nor do they need, to physically visit the archives to get the answer. Because Kraft is a food company, most of the outside inquiries we receive relate in some way to our products, our business founders and our advertising or promotional efforts. The requestors want to know the age of an old product package or advertising promotional item found at a flea market or purchased on eBay. Or they want to replace a recipe booklet that their mother had but which has been lost. They want information about their grandfather who was a plant manager, or perhaps a line worker, at one of our manufacturing facilities. Or they are a high school student working on a History Fair project about our company’s former world headquarters building in downtown Chicago, an art deco landmark.

² Elizabeth W. Adkins, “Philosophies of Access: A Corporate Archivist’s Perspective,” presented at the Midwest Archives Conference, May 3, 1996.

The archives staff can provide the answers or the information for these types of inquiries more efficiently and effectively by doing the research on behalf of the requestors and providing the answer to them. And since virtually all of these people are consumers of Kraft Foods products, it is in the interest of the company for the Archives personnel to be responsive and helpful, thus using these personal contacts as opportunities to affirm and enhance the satisfaction of individual consumers. Based on my own anecdotal experience we generally exceed most people's expectations when providing them with the information they are looking for.

But academic researchers have a different purpose, different needs and a much broader scope. This is also true also of the print and television media; they generally ask broad questions but want and expect more granular information. They ask to see records which may contain trade secrets or legally privileged communications, or which involve confidential transactions with the government or third parties, or which contain private information such as the details of an executive's personal life, or data — including personally identifiable information — that is restricted by government regulation and which can be used in identity theft. Most corporate archives do not have the staff resources needed to review large sets of records to ensure that they do not contain documents and/or data that cannot be shared with individuals outside the company.

So, corporate archivists freely admit that we do not apply the rules of access uniformly. We will not risk harming our company or violating the privacy rights of individuals within our company. More broadly, we act as gatekeepers to records of ongoing business value to our companies. While we are sympathetic to the needs of historians and academic researchers, we will not act in a manner that is detrimental to our institution and its reputation. We must take into consideration the *intent* of a researcher when we make a decision about whether to permit access to certain records. This is why most outside research requests are handled on a case-by-case basis.

Despite all of these issues, many companies, including Kraft Foods, have occasionally allowed outside researchers access to their holdings. JPMorgan Chase and Ford Motor Company, to cite two examples, have been more “open” in this respect than most companies, in part because key managers at both companies recognized the impact of their companies on local, national and international history. In both cases, researchers were interested in topics involving important social issues, and the leadership in these companies properly determined that transparency was in the corporate interest as well as the public interest. Despite such measured openness, even these companies are far more cautious about letting researchers in their doors than scholars would hope.³

Still, there are times when it is in a company's interest to open its archives to outside researchers. For example, a scholarly research project about the company might improve the company's public image or provide the company with more understanding of its own unique history, culture, brand equity or public image. A scholarly research project may serve a need in a local community where the company does business, supporting a

³ Currently Ford Motor Company is not considering any access requests from outside the company, due to extremely limited resources.

corporate commitment to be a good public citizen. And there are times when openness and transparency are necessary for a company to maintain its reputation and credibility. Beginning in the late 1990s, in the situation alluded to earlier, Ford Motor Company and JPMorgan Chase, as well as IBM and General Motors, were among businesses publicly mentioned in lawsuits and media coverage regarding possible connections between their German subsidiaries and Nazi-era atrocities. While each of these companies chose to react slightly differently, the degree to which they individually opened their records to outside researchers made a difference in terms of their perception as socially responsible corporate citizens.⁴ More recently, public policy questions are being raised in the U.S. regarding any company that might have had historical connections to the slave trade, either directly or as a supplier of services that supported slavery. Companies with such connections are facing pressure to be transparent with their records as part of the continuing resolution of that chapter of history.

At Kraft Foods, on the fairly rare occasions that we receive requests from academic researchers, we can often provide copies of records, packaging or advertising, or we can answer questions via e-mail, in lieu of a physical visit. It may not be the researchers' preferred method of doing research. But it does get them some or most of the information they need in a way that is not overly disruptive to our internal activities.

There have been a few times when we have allowed writers or historians to come to the Archives to do research, and such requests could conceivably be granted on occasion in the future. In such situations the person submits a written request outlining his or her research scope and the types of records the person wishes to review. The request goes to our senior management for review. If approval is given, we inform the researcher what records will be made available. We would not allow access to anything that is restricted or proprietary.

It's important to note that not all historical business records in the U.S. are in the custody of the corporations which created them. Some companies have donated their archival records to a public research institution. In the United States we are fortunate that there are public collecting repositories that are willing to house, process and provide access to business records and often the personal papers of business leaders. Some of these are historical societies such as the Minnesota Historical Society and the Cincinnati Historical Society; others are universities such as Duke University and the University of Chicago. For example, Duke University houses the Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History. And recently the Chicago-based publishing company R.R. Donnelley donated its archives to the University of Chicago. These records, business and otherwise, are open and accessible to all researchers.⁵

⁴ Information on Ford Motor Company's World War II investigation, which ended in 2001, can be found at http://media.ford.com/events/fw_research.cfm.

⁵ Ford Motor Company is unique among corporate archives in that it simultaneously maintains a corporate archives program, and donates archival records to an outside repository — the Benson Ford Research Center at The Henry Ford. This unusual arrangement came about through a unique series of circumstances and reflects both the company's appreciation of its place in history and society, and the ups and downs of corporate support for its archival program. For more information on the history of the Ford Motor Company Archives, see Elizabeth W. Adkins, "A History of the Ford Motor Company Archives, with

So when we talk about access to business records the answer is not a clear, “Yes, there is access,” or “No, there is no access.” It is more complicated than that. There are different levels of access and different ways to access business records. Access does not have to entail a physical visit in order to be successful or effective. Corporate archivists and the managers who oversee corporate archives are acutely aware of the need to serve their clients or customers. Customer satisfaction, after all, is the lifeblood of a for-profit entity. So, there is no question that an individual who approaches a corporate archives is respected as a customer and as an interested member of the public. Access to information in the archives will be provided to that individual *to the extent possible*. Even if a visit is not feasible, most corporate archivists will try to provide information, if time and resources permit and if privacy and business considerations are no barrier.

And that is the key: Corporate archives exist to serve two purposes — first and foremost, the good of the business, and second, the public good through the historical record. Requests must be assessed with those interests in mind, and in that order. Corporate archivists understand the social, cultural and historical importance of the records we house. And we do what we can to make that information accessible to those who need it. But we must not do so to the detriment of our internal clients and institutional parent. At all times, we must strive to meet the needs of the business and its people. And, if we serve our institutions and our people with professionalism and integrity, chances are the public good will be well served.

Reflections on Archival Documentation of Ford of Europe’s History,” Ford, 1903-2003: The European History, edited by Hubert Bonin, Yannick Lung and Steven Tolliday, P.L.A.G.E., Paris, 2003, pp. 27-67.