

## Advocating Business Archives

by Ken Wirth

### Introduction

Corporate archives seem to be perceived as barely necessary in today's corporate world, as witness the six Wisconsin-based firms on "The Fortune 500." An inquiry at each of these companies revealed that only two have a corporate archives staffed with at least one full-time archivist. What is it about an archives that those companies with them have recognized as important? Focusing on companies that already have an archives may identify reasons which other companies may consider to create their own corporate archives. Referring to examples of how business archives meet the historic informational needs of a company may pique the business executive's interest, compelling him or her to consider the arguments for the creation of a business archives.

### Business Archives: Description and Use

Traditionally business archives has been defined as "a department specifically charged with the systematic acquisition, preservation, and servicing of corporate historical records and artifacts deemed to be of permanent value in documenting the company's founding and subsequent growth." The meaning of this definition may be enhanced by comparing a business archives to traditional assumptions about archives and examining the uses of a business archives.

An examination of the characteristics of a business archives points to three significant differences compared to a traditional public or academic archives. A business archives, due

to its private sector status, typically has very few, if any, external provisions governing its organization. Indeed, business archives are characterized by immense diversity of form, whereas public archives are often required to follow an organizational structure dictated by statute. Hence the first defining characteristic of a business archives: the business is free to organize and control its archives as it wishes, within the guidelines of company policy. This characteristic is particularly attractive to the business that must follow statutory requirements in so many other aspects of the business.

The influence management exerts on all aspects of business is well known in the business world. It is management's influence, which governs the second defining characteristic of the business archives: the informational aspect. Corporations are required by statute to retain some information for certain periods. For example, bank statements and related transactions are typically retained for seven years per I.R.S. requirements.

However, management's responsibility to retain documents and provide information for historical or other cultural purposes beyond the expiration of the legal retention period is up to the individual management. In a similar way, business archives have no requirement to provide information to any members of the public and access to corporate records can be extremely guarded. As Elizabeth Adkins, Kraft Foods, Inc. archivist, states, "the principle of equal access loses its sacred

quality in ... an environment [where companies] have the right to control publicly released information ..." Contrast this with the cultural value which an academic archives provides, or the freedom of information inherent in the public archives. As Van Campen points out: "In modern constitutional states, the legally prescribed duty of public responsibility, even for past policy, is the underlying motive both for maintaining and for providing access to public archives."

The third defining aspect of the business archives concerns the economic environment of which it is a part. Businesses compete in a world where the most successful are the ones which generate the greatest profit. The business archives is one of many service departments whose costs are traditionally seen "as being just as much a part of the cost of a company's finished product as are materials, labor, and overhead." While the costs of the archives are well-defined, the benefits are more difficult to quantify. Much depends on management's view of the archives' worth. Contrast this scenario to that of the public archives, which is not normally required to continually prove its value in economic terms to the institution of which it is a part.

A corporate archives provides many services which do justify its existence; several have been outlined in the Society of American Archivists brochure "Business Archives in North America." The corporate archives serves as an "internal record" to help guide company policy, as well as providing research support. The corporate archivist selects and

disseminates important records; prepares exhibits and oral histories; maintains photographic collections; and conserves old materials - it is the corporate archivist who selects and preserves key documents that reconstruct the company's history.

#### Business Archives Survey

While the above may seem reason enough to warrant creation of a business archives, the simple facts are that few companies have archives. For each compelling argument advocating corporate archives, the corporate executive stands ready with a counter-argument that seemingly refutes the need for a corporate archives.

Yet, somehow, companies which have corporate archives have succeeded in the task of advocating business archives, often in the face of opposition and indifference. They also have continued to demonstrate the value of archives to cost-conscious corporate executives. An examination of the facts and evidence related to their experience provides a series of action steps to use to advocate business archives. The successful business archives described here can be used as examples by anyone who wishes to create the company's business archives.

During the course of the interviews conducted with eight business archivists, three topics were mentioned repeatedly and provide food for thought regarding the methods to promote business archives, or any archives, for that matter. These three themes are:

- the business archives' customer base;
- the motivating factors behind the business archives' creation; and

- the business archives' chief strategy to ensure its continued support.

Focusing on these three areas may suggest what it is about existing business archives that keep them "in business." Stated in another way: who are the business archivist's customers, and why do they use business archives as opposed to some other source? What factors lead a company to want a business archives in the first place? Does the business archives need to find a niche, which warrants its continued existence?

#### **The Business Archives' Customer Base**

The business archives customers can be divided generally into two groups: those internal to the company, and those external to the company. The eight business archivists interviewed were unanimous that the internal customer represents the largest group, providing between seventy and ninety percent of all inquiries.

Among the internal customers, the following groups were among the most frequent users of the corporate archives: corporate affairs, legal, marketing, public relations/consumer affairs, executives, and staff personnel. As questions about the company's past arise, all invariably turn to the corporate archives, although each has different needs, as described below.

The corporate affairs department might use the archives to obtain historical information for stories in corporate publications. The law department typically use the archives to obtain documents relating to the history of a trademark, copyright, or patent. The marketing department might use the archives to obtain information regarding how a

certain product or brand has been positioned and advertised over time, such as by requesting examples of old print ads, or television commercials. The public relations/consumer affairs department may find archival records useful to answer questions from the general public concerning the company's history (to distinguish from those queries asked of the archives directly). Corporate executives may use the archives to obtain information regarding past policy decisions, product history, or even to obtain quotes for speeches -- who but the corporate archivist would have the speech given by the company founder at the laying of the cornerstone 100 years ago? Staff personnel may ask the archives to answer general questions. For example, The Sporting News Archives serves as an "in-house reference and research facility", much like a library, because of the wealth of sports information contained in the pages of its publication.

External customers are less plentiful, although still important. Such researchers usually can be described as belonging to one of several groups. The first includes individuals conducting research for articles or books who require information from the archives. For example, an author of baseball books wanted to know about CIGNA's ownership of a professional baseball team in the 1950s. The second group might be called the "inquiring public" looking for various kinds of information. For example, a homeowner who has unearthed an old Coca-Cola bottle in his or her backyard is interested in knowing how old it is and whether it has any value. An amateur genealogist working on a family tree would like to track a family member's job history. The third group includes film and television producers who may

require background information, or the use of original props. The fourth group includes journalists looking for information to confirm or refute stories and articles. Other business archivists requesting or sharing information is a fifth group. A final group is public relations firms which have been hired by the company and require historic information.

What can be concluded from a review of the archives' customer base? Many companies have marketing, legal, or public relations departments, but only a small fraction of these have an archives. Do they miss having an archives? Probably not, because the services an archives could provide for these customers are provided more - or less - efficiently by someone else, and no one has broached the subject; the idea of a corporate archives may never have entered these individuals' minds. For example, a marketing department has kept its own record of the history of a brand, the legal department has established the history of a trademark. Why should another department be created to do something that management feels is adequately accomplished right now? A good question, yet further probing may reveal places where the argument falls short. For example, is the material stored and preserved in a professional manner? Can inquiries about the material be answered in a timely fashion? Are marketing and legal resources really being used in an effective and efficient manner when queries must be answered by the \$40 per hour marketing executive?

It is the task of the "archives advocate" to ask these questions of the prospective customers, to describe to the lawyers and marketers the positive aspects of having a corporate archives. It

should be remembered that in a business archives, as in any business, "the customer is king"; by filling an identified need, the archives has validated its existence.

#### Factors Behind the Business Archives Creation

Three situations prompted the eight businesses reviewed to establish archives. These suggest arguments for the creation of a business archives at other companies currently without one. The situations can be divided into three broad areas:

- The first is when historic records have been collected by some far-sighted employee or department, yet there exists the need to gain more timely and efficient access to material and provide information which the current collection method treats inadequately.
- The second occurred when top management wanted the company's history preserved.
- The third situation was the occurrence of a significant anniversary prompting the archives' creation.

The first situation speaks of a latent corporate interest to collect historic material, yet the interest was never taken seriously by top management until either complaints arose or employees came to realize the advantage of an archives. This "hobby-like" interest in collecting old material was mentioned by four of the eight business archivists, who recalled an individual employee collecting old company records and other material. At CUNA Mutual and CIGNA the corporate secretary kept this material because of personal interest; at P&G, it became the part-time avocation of the employee who wrote the

company magazine. The material may have stayed in these collectors' hands were it not for certain groups who recognized the need for one source for this material. At Kraft, the material resided not in the hands of specific employees but in departments, which recognized they were unable to devote sufficient resources to properly care for the material they held. For example, the Kraft marketing department had a collection of old ad campaigns and other such memorabilia accumulated over the years, but nothing was in one place and how much they owned was unknown. An additional consideration lay with Kraft's legal and corporate affairs departments, which were doing their own trademark research and fact-checking, but found this too time consuming and wanted others to do it. Some employees in these departments recognized the advisability of an archives, but this resulted only in informal discussion and nothing more. A change in management, however, prompted action. The new, "enlightened" Chief Executive Officer (CEO) realized the efficacy of having an archives, especially the marketing advantages. He felt that by promoting Kraft's long-established brand names through nostalgic ad campaigns, the consumer's comfort level with Kraft brands would increase, hopefully leading to increased sales.

This required preserving information about the brands in the form of labels and packaging and records of old ad campaigns, such as the print ads and television commercials that were used to promote the brands over the decades. The legal department reasoned that an archivist could also accomplish the research and fact-checking for trademark questions, thereby freeing legal staff for other work. One may also

assume significant labor cost-savings could result if it was found that a high-cost attorney's time could be replaced by the comparatively low-cost archivist's time. Hence, the need to professionally process this material coupled with the recognition that a part-time approach was not adequate to answer the historical questions which originated from internal customers was one factor leading to the archives' creation.

The second stimulus prompting companies to create business archives occurred in two of the eight respondent companies: the top executives of the firm wanted the company's past preserved. For example, executives of CIGNA, formed by the combination of The Insurance Company of North America (founded in 1792) and Connecticut General (founded in 1865), recognized already at the end of the last century that the company was aging and that both firms' pasts were worth preserving. At Motorola, Bob Galvin, son of company founder Paul Galvin, was sensitive to the corporate culture and knew how easy it was to lose sight of one's past. He wanted to establish an archives to permanently preserve the corporate culture. Hence, the second way a corporate archives may be created: the founder's descendants, either familial or corporate, recognize the importance of history and the preservation of the past to benefit the future. Because they have the authority to command it, the archives is brought into being at their behest. These executives, with an abiding respect for the importance of history, become the archives' "champion." Throughout the ensuing years the champion will see to it that the archives has, at minimum, a staff of one full-time archivist; will support its acquisition policy; and will avoid

archival budget cutting during lean times.

While the champion keeps the best interests of the archives in mind, one inevitably wonders what happens should this individual depart the company and a less enlightened executive takes over. Three of eight respondents identified an individual that could be defined as such an archival "champion." However, each was quick to point out that since its founding, the archives had developed a reputation of providing services to many other corporate customers and that the beneficial relationships nurtured with these customers would hopefully counteract any negative overtures by the "champion's" less archivally-enthusiastic successor. The Sporting News archivist, Steve Gitschier, mentioned that since 1986, the year the Sporting News archives was founded, a number of publishers have come and gone. Yet each new publisher has come to value the archives, due in no small part to the archivist's services.

A third reason for the business archives' creation is one that the archival profession hears so very often. The celebration of a significant anniversary such as a centennial gives cause to reflect on past accomplishments and take stock and plan for future goals.

It also is a good marketing opportunity. Half of the respondents mentioned that an anniversary had a direct impact on the founding of the archives:

In 1971, the CEO and president of John Deere (now Navistar) was interested in cataloguing old company records, in anticipation of the company's sesquicentennial ten years hence! He was also interested in having a company history researched and written. In

1973, a full-time archivist was hired to accomplish these tasks.

- At The Sporting News, the 100th anniversary of the company's founding occurred in 1986. As historic materials commemorating this anniversary were assembled, the president's friend, a history professor at the University of Missouri, suggested that "something professional could be done" with the material. A consultant, Anne Kenney, then staff archivist at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, was called to develop a program and draft a job description. After reviewing the proposal, the president became convinced and carved out a portion of the budget for an archives.
- At CUNA Mutual, the fiftieth anniversary of that company occurred in 1985. The public relations department had assembled historic material commemorating the anniversary. Once it had been collected and the anniversary came and went, the public relations department was convinced that the material should be collected on a regular basis. This conviction, however, was not what ultimately created the archives. The president and CEO, who came from an academic background, wanted a corporate history written. His interest led to Board of Director approval to create the archives.
- At P&G, the 100th anniversary of Ivory Soap was one of the events which helped to realize a corporate archives.

Can anniversaries be used by the archives advocate? Three lessons contained in the above examples point the way to advocating

business archives.

First, the archives advocate must ascertain whether historic information is readily available, and if it is in the form needed by management, or whether historical records have been haphazardly collected over the years. If the answers to these questions indicate the need for someone to gather all the records and assemble or make them available in a professional, efficient manner, then the archives advocate stands ready to offer his or her services as "problem solver."

Second, the archives advocate must keep abreast of current business archives literature to ensure full understanding and consideration of all theories. Executives at CIGNA and Motorola, convinced of the importance of their company's history, created business archives to preserve the past for future generations. But such convictions are not easily nurtured in business people who have a "myopic emphasis ... on short-term objectives." The curriculum at North American business schools places a far greater emphasis upon capital budgeting and cost accounting than upon history and culture.

Thus, a direct plea to the executive's historical sensibilities, while important, may not be all that is needed. Indeed, it must be made clear to the executive who is not favorably predisposed to history exactly how establishing an archives and recording the company history will be worthwhile, even profitable. In his article "Dusting Off the Cobwebs: Turning the Business Archives into a Managerial Tool," George David Smith provides some examples of how an archives can provide support through historical documentation. In litigation

research, for example, the archives provides documentation which can avoid the company significant expense. In "Where Memory Serves," John Thackray relates how AT&T Technologies, Inc. was able to collect a \$70 million invoice from a Federal Government agency with proof from the corporate archives. It is up to the archives advocate to keep abreast of current literature concerning how historical information has been put to use in modern business, and to provide these examples to the corporate decision-maker.

Finally, the archives advocate must be aware when the targeted company is having its next "significant" anniversary. Even ten years prior to that date, the need to organize historic documents and summarize these in written form may already be recognized by top management. The resourceful archives advocate might contact those companies anticipating anniversaries to offer his or her services. As we have seen, even if the anniversary has passed, the company may be anxious to continue collecting historic records or maintain the collection amassed before and during the celebration. Three or five years after an anniversary celebration the archives advocate may celebrate the fact that he or she has convinced a company to create a professional program.

### **Ensuring Continued Support and Existence**

The one common element on which most business archivists agree regarding their archives continued existence is the ability to deliver good service in a timely way. At Sporting News the idea is to "become as indispensable as possible to as many people as possible as much as possible," something the archivist defines as "in-reach," or selling the archives

potential within the company. The Coca-Cola archives provides services calculated to "enhance the company's image in some way." The Motorola company archivist echoed this by stating that the archivist must "be responsive to one's customers," a sentiment echoed by the CIGNA archivist who underscores the business archivist's strong service emphasis. A business archivist who "disdains the researcher" will be effectively committing professional suicide; according to one, the business archivist is "customer driven and must want to serve."

Selling the idea of an archives, then, is to sell service, to fill a need. And as with any service function, performance must be measured. The archives advocate should point out to the decision makers that the archives' performance will be tracked in terms such as, "customer questions answered within one day by the archivist versus in three days by the non-archivist." This should give the skeptical manager some slight peace of mind; service quality can indeed be measured and reported, though not in the normal, time-honored tradition of profit and loss. (Although some archives can claim their contribution to corporate-wide cost savings; at Coca-Cola, the archives is the mainstay of the licensing program, which generates royalty revenues amounting to \$7 million every year.) Some archives go beyond one-time performance statistics and conduct follow-up surveys to make certain that what they've provided is effective. CUNA Mutual uses a feedback survey form to find if the information provided was helpful and timely; further follow-up is accomplished by phone.

### **Additional Arguments for**

### **Business Archives Advocation**

The methods to advocate corporate archives are many. Some other issues to address as needed with the target firm's management include:

In the business environment, archives and records management compliment one another well. Yet twenty-five percent of the companies surveyed did not have records management programs, and of the six which did, only two had strong connections between the archives and records management functions. (One records management program was actually part of the archives.) One might consider combining the case for an archives together with the case for a records management program, especially since business people are usually more familiar with a records management program and such programs can more easily be made to identify cost savings.

If the records management function is combined with the archives, the next step is continued centralization of information functions. At P&G, by centralizing information resources at one source, the company can obtain information more efficiently and save hours of on-line access time because the centralized function is quicker and more efficient than an outside source.

The idea that the archives advocate understands the importance of corporate confidentiality cannot be overemphasized. Management must be comfortable that the historic material being gathered is kept under lock and key, that access is restricted, and that security measures will be in place. The legal department especially must be assured that no company secrets will become open to the public because of the archives! In

fact, the archives can work for the benefit of the legal department. An archivist at United Technologies is quoted as saying, "[the attorneys] like the fact that there is a firm policy over what gets kept and what is thrown out. What concerns them is individuals saving stuff they don't know about." The archives advocate must convey the image of the good corporate citizen, looking out for the best interests of the company.

For the company expanding its markets to the former Soviet Union, the Soviet-dominated East European states, China, and other markets with a heretofore minimal exposure to Western products, an archives will be an effective means to inform the prospective consumer about the history of the product, as well as the history of the people that sell it. Coca-Cola did precisely this when they took a traveling version of the corporate archives on the road to new markets in Russia, Asia and Eastern Europe. The astute archives advocate will investigate whether his/her target firm does such business and assess the advisability of such a strategy.

Many firms also routinely acquire foreign subsidiaries, but may be clueless as to what to retain of the acquired company's documents. The archives advocate stands ready to assist here, as well - especially if he or she possesses foreign language fluency.

At P&G, orientation tours for new employees and international visitors begin in the lobby which houses the exhibit of the company's history. What better way for the uninformed to become informed by a visual display. The archives advocate who visits the target firm and notes a dearth of historic information in the front lobby should take note - this presents an opportunity for

promoting the archives through a display.

### **Conclusion**

The best way to begin to advocate a business archives is to provide examples, as outlined here, and ask questions of the target firm, the first one being "what, if anything, is being done to preserve the company's history?" The initial inquiry should take the form of a letter, followed by a personal meeting. At the meeting, utilize as many advocacy steps as possible; several are sure to make their impression. For example, if it is known that a competitor has an archives, this should be pointed out. A company never wants to be outdone by its competition in any way.

The success of the promotional process will depend on the number of valid arguments made and the receptiveness of the listener to these. It is worth remembering, though, the odds of finding a company without an archives are in favor of the archives advocate. Recall that in Wisconsin alone, four of six companies on The Fortune 500 did not have a corporate archives. The opportunities to advocate and convince are enormous.

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