

Corporate Museums in the United States

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When discussing my profession, people are always surprised to learn of for-profit companies operating museums that interpret their own corporate history. Corporate museums are not new. In fact, they have been around for over 100 years. However, corporate museums are one of the most frequently overlooked and misunderstood components of the museum community. Some might not think of corporations as keepers of cultural assets, and I have met many who work in the museum field that do not consider them to be "real" museums. Yet, corporate museums are real, they are quite popular, and are more abundant than you might think. Corporate museums have much to offer and are worthy of a closer look.

Corporate museums are rarely discussed within the fields of public history or museum studies. As a corporate museum and corporate archive professional, I was interested in exploring the role of corporate museums within the greater museum community. In the Spring of 2006, with an endorsement from AASLH, I conducted a survey on corporate museums within the United States. As part of

its operations, AASLH oversees a Corporate History Program, and is the only prominent national historical organization that specifically addresses issues pertaining to corporate history.

This article reports the findings of a nation-wide survey of business enterprises that operate a museum or other interpretive attraction related to their company. The over-arching goal of this endeavor was to gather comprehensive information to determine the current state of the corporate museum field in the United States.

To qualify as a “corporate museum,” each facility was required to have a dedicated space that is used to interpret the business and/or history of their company, maintain a permanent collection related to their business, and make the facility available and open to the public.¹

Based on these criteria, a total of 155 companies were selected to participate in the survey. A total of 149 surveys were delivered, and 38 completed responses were received, indicating a survey return rate of 26 percent.

Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and asked to respond to thirty questions divided into five categories:

1. General Information
2. Governance and Staff
3. Collections Management

¹ For the purposes of this project, a corporate museum is defined as a corporate-sponsored facility that is open to the public and used to interpret the nature of a company’s business, history, products, and/or the company’s contributions to a particular industry. For the most part, corporate museums convey this information through public venues which include traditional museum-like settings, visitor or information centers, or factory tours with exhibits or displays. While some companies have private collections or exhibits that do not pertain to their business, those institutions were excluded from this analysis.

4. Museums and Community

5. Issues

The survey explored the structure and operations of corporate museums, ascertained the scope and range of their collections and governance, identified audiences, and questioned their objectives, challenges, concerns, and needs.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The first section of the survey was designed to gather information to help provide a general overview of the current status of corporate museums.

All respondents indicated they currently operate a museum or public exhibit about their company. Almost two-thirds of respondents (61%) reported that they operate more than one type of facility. The most common type of facility was a museum (55%), followed closely by factory tours (44%) and visitor centers (39%). One-quarter (25%) of respondents indicated they operate a small exhibit or display. The remaining interpretation sites were identified as virtual museums or web sties (17%), historic houses or buildings (14%), and art galleries (8%). Several respondents reported operating other types of facilities such as a theatre, a gallery of interactive exhibits, an attraction/experience, or an innovation center.

Each company was asked to select the category that best described its business. One-quarter of respondents operate in the food and/or beverage

industry. Other classifications reported included consumer goods, agriculture, manufacturing, aerospace, amusement/recreation, insurance, apparel/accessories, automotive, real estate, retail, telecommunications, banking, photography, and creative printing.

The survey then asked some fundamental background information. The responses revealed a great deal of variety in the date of creation and overall magnitude of the facilities. While the oldest museum was established in 1935, over half of all facilities were established within the last 15 years.

Nearly four million people visited the responding facilities last year, with attendance ranging from 150 visitors up to 950,000 visitors per year. The median attendance among all of the facilities responding to the survey was 36,500 visitors annually.

Funding of these facilities generally comes from department budgets (73%). The majority of these facilities do not charge admission fees (74%). However, most of the facilities that do charge admission fees cite fees or gift shop sales as their primary source of funding. Other facilities are funded from grants or donations, foundation support, or endowments. Of the for-profit facilities, only 15 percent charge an admission fee, and the majority of them reported that the admission fees or gift shop sales were their primary source of funding.

GOVERNANCE & STAFF

The second section of the survey was designed to gather information about the structure, staff, and governance of each museum.

The majority of respondents indicated they are governed by a for-profit corporation (71%), with the remaining respondents operating as a nonprofit organization (21%) or a nonprofit subsidiary of a for-profit corporation (3%).

Facility managers report to the marketing department (32%), the CEO or President's office (29%), Public Relations (18%), the Board of Directors (11%), Communications (7%), Human Resources, or another department.

In nearly three-quarters of the facilities, responsibility for the overall execution of the mission and goals of the museum falls upon a manager or director. However, the responsibility of managing the day-to-day operations fell more in the hands of a curator or staff member. Staffing at corporate sites varies widely among these institutions. Some facilities do not employ any full-time staff, while others had as many as 67 full-time staff and 269 total employees. The median facility employs six full-time staff members.

Interestingly, while for-profit corporations generally do not have mission statements like nonprofit organization do, nearly half (7 of 15) of the for-profit respondents operating a traditional-style museum reported that they did, in fact, implement a formally written mission statement. The implementation of a mission statement indicates a dedication to their collection, history, and objectives; and implies that these facilities are guided by a vision that is distinct from other divisions within the corporation or business.

COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT

The third section of the survey was designed to gather information about the types of collections held by corporate museums, the contents of their collections, and guidelines for managing their collections.

Nearly all respondents have a permanent collection. The type of materials these sites collect, preserve, or use for interpretation include samples of company products or merchandise (88%), photographs (74%), company records (68%), artifacts (44%), fine art (35%), and documents (21%).

In terms of the topics featured in exhibits, company history was featured by most (94%). Other subjects featured in exhibits included products or services (82%), company founders (82%), history of type of business (76%), manufacturing process (65%), advertising (53%), employees (44%), and state or local history (32%)

The frequency of changing exhibits was evenly distributed among the facilities with approximately one-quarter having permanent, unchanging exhibits. Some facilities change exhibits several times per year while others change exhibits only once every five or more years.

Most respondents have some type of written guidelines in place for their site and collections. A majority of the facilities maintain a collection inventory, a visitor services manual, and operating procedures. Many have a disaster preparedness plan (44%) and a collection management policy (41%). Only 16 percent of respondents had no written collection-management guidelines.

MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY

The fourth section of the survey was designed to gather information about corporate museums and how they relate to their local communities as well as the museum community as a whole.

The facilities were asked to define their audience or “community.” More than three-quarters of respondents included the general public, company employees, students, and customers. Only 38 percent identified company stockholders as a target-audience.

Most of these facilities offer guided tours (85%). Two-thirds of the facilities provide educational tours specifically designed for students. The majority also offer tours to customers, employees and/or their guests, and community groups.

Corporate museum professionals are also involved with the greater museum community. Sixty two percent of respondents belong to at least one professional museum association, and many belong to multiple such associations. The organizations include the American Association of Museums (30%), the American Association for State and Local History (27%), the Guest Relations Association (12%), regional/state/city museum associations (33%), or regional/state/city historical associations (24%). The remaining 39 percent did not belong to any professional historical or museum association.

Only one-third of these respondents sent personnel to attend professional museum conferences in the last two years. Among that group, the conferences attended were hosted by the American Association of Museums (55%), the American Association for State and Local History (36%), and the Guest Relations

Association (18%). In addition to these national conferences, respondents indicated they also attended conferences hosted by state or regional museum associations.

Corporate museums also have relationships with other museums. Over half of these corporate institutions collaborated with a nonprofit museum or historical association in the past two years. Most of them reported multiple types of collaborations. The collaborations included outgoing loans (67%), exhibits or displays (56%), research projects (56%), incoming loans (39%), publication projects (28%), and guest lectures or symposiums (22%).

ISSUES

The fifth and final section of the survey asked the respondents to prioritize various objectives, issues, and concerns shared by all museums. Respondents were asked to rank issues that applied to their facilities according to their importance. The questions pertained to: museum objectives, museum challenges, museum concerns, and museum needs.

Museum Objectives

Some interesting data came from the responses regarding museum objectives. Each company was asked to rank the importance of several given objectives for their museum. This question was asked in order to clarify the

motivating factors behind corporate museums. The answers to this question tended to negate the proposition that corporate museums are motivated primarily by profit.

The top two objectives reported by the corporate museums were to preserve and convey company history (68%), and to educate and inform the public about the company and its business (65%). The survey results clearly demonstrated preservation of history as a far more important objective than generating revenue. Of the for-profits operating a traditional museum, a mere 13 percent saw generating revenue as an important objective while 73 percent considered preserving and conveying company history as an important objective.

Creating goodwill within the community was ranked as an important objective by 59 percent of respondents while showcasing/selling company products was ranked as an important objective by 47 percent of respondents. Employee engagement was the least important objective, with only 21 percent ranking it as important.

Museum Challenges

Next, each facility was asked to rank/prioritize several factors including: budget, staffing, visibility in the community, collection care, and organizational support. This question was asked in an effort to ascertain the practical, as opposed to theoretical, obstacles encountered in the corporate museum world.

Of these various challenges, budget constraints (83%) and sufficiency of staff (74%) were, far and away, the items ranked most important by respondents. Other issues such as visibility in the community, collection care, and support from management were well behind with only about one-third of respondents ranking each of them as important challenges.

Museum Concerns

The next question asked each facility to rank its concerns regarding funding, staffing, management, and public outreach.

Reduced funding was again ranked as an important issue by most of the respondents (61%). Further, funding led all other responses by a significant margin, with almost twice as many facilities ranking this as an important concern than any other answer selection. Ranked less important were long-term viability of their collections (29%), public misconception issues (29%), legitimacy within the corporation (21%), security (14%), and liability issues (14%).

Museum Needs

The companies were also asked to rank their current needs among various choices including their physical facilities, staff, visibility, management

support, and budget. This question was added to the survey to gather information pertaining to the immediate needs of the facility.

Budget was again the highest ranking answer with 64 percent of respondents listing a budget increase as an important need. Additional staff and improved facilities tied for second-most important with 48 percent of respondents ranking them as important needs. Close behind was the need for increased internal/external visibility (39%) while community recognition of value (24%) and management support (21%) ranked at the low-end of the spectrum.

Among the for-profit facilities operating traditional-style museums, budget needs was far-and-away the most popular choice with 71 percent. The second-place selection was additional staff at 50 percent. These responses demonstrate that despite the apparent wealth within the corporate world, funding for corporate museums is limited.

Need for a Corporate Museum Organization

The final question of the survey asked whether respondents felt there was a need for a professional museum or historical association to address the specific needs and interests of the corporate museum community.

The overwhelming response to this question was “yes,” particularly among those organizations that currently belong to a professional museum or historical association. More than two-thirds of the for-profit respondents answered in the affirmative. As one respondent commented,

I am struggling to find contacts in the traditional 'museum' field who are able to help us with our specific needs and concerns. An organization of this nature would be very beneficial to me.

CONCLUSION

The results of this survey revealed that corporate museums are diverse in purpose and scope. Many are quite similar to and have all the earmarks of tax-exempt, nonprofit museums. These corporate museums care for permanent collections and host exhibits, provide tours with an educational component, collaborate with other museums, and consider historical preservation and public education their primary purpose. Their responses indicate that corporate museums play an important role in historical preservation and are a viable component of the greater museum community.

Corporate museums are relevant and useful in the study of our nation's social and economic history. They collect, preserve, and interpret cultural material and serve as educational and cultural resources. All museums are institutions of learning. Corporate museums provide opportunities to learn about the diverse, successful industries that are part of America's heritage.