

BUSINESS ARCHIVES: AN ORGANISATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Development needs roots and one must know one's past in order to build a future - which is neither an illusion nor a constraint.

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Businesses have no patience for history. Often busy with planning for future they do not feel the need to consult the past. But can they afford ignoring history? As the famous saying goes 'Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.' I believe that history can add a great deal of value to businesses. To begin with, it reminds people as to who we are, what do we believe in, where all we have been and the kind of journey we have traversed so far. Certainly, understanding of these factors can help shape the future in many useful ways. The challenge is to find the usable past from our history and use it creatively for building a stronger future.

History As A Differentiator

Every company has its own unique story and history that can be leveraged as a differentiator for a company to create its unique place in the market when the competition is global.

The idea of 'history as our prime strength and a real differentiator' has been put into practice at the prototype of Godrej future office, known as 'S P A C E'. The aim was to create a young and brighter work culture and for this Darshan Gandhi, the project architect, while working on the designs had visited our archives looking for a few archival documents, photographs, advertisements and the like. As the words 'Young and brighter' are not normally associated with history, I was bit perplexed and asked her what made her come to the archives. She said, "We want to keep this reference to the history alive so that any work we do in present or in future, remains rooted to our history. We want people to experience our DNA when they visit us. This precious material that we have should be used to showcase what we were yesterday, what we are today, and what we want to be tomorrow."

I have observed that the visitors, new employees, potential collaborators, business partners and old employees clearly see the evolution of the company to its younger and modern avataar. The journey through the time creates a lot of interest and excitement.

HSBC used its history to create a grand impact when it decided to create a massive history wall at their head quarters, which was made of 4,000 images from HSBC's collection, representing its staff, customers, places, documents, banknotes, illustrations and the like, covering the whole range of business activity from all over the world. The objective was to demonstrate that HSBC is a global brand with a unique experience - a multi-local approach that is very different from the standardising, homogenising approach of other multi-nationals. "We believe the single most important

source of competitive advantage for a commercial organisation is its corporate character. The HSBC History Wall is the visual representation of our character.”, remarked Sir John Bond, Former Chairman of HSBC. Understanding the History Wall is a requisite part of new employee induction, and the employees are required, as part of their performance contract, to demonstrate the values and character of HSBC in their work as shown on the History Wall.

History To Enhance Brand Image

History thus can be used as a powerful tool to promote the corporate identity and enhancing the brand image among its customers as well as employees. Knowledge about the brand can not only inspire innovation but the brand history can also help the sales and marketing teams in developing more rounded and wholesome sales pitches to combat competition.

This reminds me of an incidence that occurred at one of the archives exhibitions. A senior manager from Interio visited the exhibition and got particularly interested in the special supplement on Godrej brought out in the year 1955. Amongst the advertisements showing the range of our products in that supplement, one particular advertisement caught his attention and he got hooked to it for a while - it was of our hospital furniture. He wasn't aware until then that we were into the business of hospital furniture way back in the 50s. He shared his astonishment with me and said that such an advertisement will help his team establish their credibility in the market as they were planning to re-enter the hospital furniture segment.

The episode underlined the fact that our heritage and legacy are important elements for establishing our credibility

and build trust amongst our customers for securing business. Being in the business for 116 years is not a small feat - it signifies our unique character.

Shaping The Mindset Using The Stories From The Past

Stories from the past can be used to accentuate certain dimensions of the culture. Also, these stories can be used to reinforce the unchanging values of the company. Stories of survival, of triumph over adversities, of successes, of failures can be used as sources of inspiration by the leaders. The desired ethos can be created to connect with and inspire teams.

History As A Knowledge Management Tool

I must mention here an interesting anecdote from the pre-ISO/pre-Kaizen period that Mr. I.P. Singh shared with me. He recalled that once a Professor of quality engineering from Japan had come for a shop floor visit. He saw a skilled worker doing work in an unconventional but effective way. He requested if he can see the process on paper. On hearing that such a paper was not available, he remarked that it was undesirable to leave this knowledge embedded in the head of the workman. What happens if he leaves us tomorrow? Such vital knowledge must be captured on paper as it was company's intellectual property. Today, when the employees are highly mobile, it is essential to capture tacit knowledge of employees appropriately for using it and building upon it.

History As Evidence

History as preserved in the archives has a value as evidence. Well managed records facilitate well rounded decisions. Records can be used to counter legal claims as well as to protect the brand against any infringement of intellectual property rights.

'Castrol GTX is one of the best-known engine oil brands in the world, but with commercial success comes the threat of counterfeit. Where trademarks are infringed, the BP legal team is regularly called upon to prove that Castrol GTX has been continuously advertised and sold in particular territories. They do this by exploiting the comprehensive Castrol archive of historic packaging, pricing and advertising material that was set up in the 1990s. Although the intellectual property in the archive is historic, even material perceived as out-of-date is used as evidence of commercial development over time, and is invaluable for protecting current brands, and ultimately BP's business. A case study was shared by BP at the Business Archives Council, UK. "We regularly need to provide our legal team with historic sales and marketing information, when trademarks are being infringed." Peter Housego, Global Archive Manager, BP.

In the fast paced environment, which is full of uncertainties, technological and organisational changes, growth and recession, what is constant is the corporate memory that can serve as a learning tool and can help the company navigate through the trying times. Corporate memory constitutes a formidable knowledge base that future-managers can draw inspiration from or learn from. Gavin Neath, Senior Vice President of Global Communications, Unilever PLC, had once remarked that an understanding of a company's history, can give an insight into a company's future. After all, "It's not about making replicas of things that have gone in the past. It's about looking at them, learning from them and seeing how we can adapt them for today's market."¹

¹Wesley Tayler, *Brand Director, Burton Group, 2008.*

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