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Fostering Company Soul Through Internal Company Exhibits

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A Startup company doesn't erect exhibitions about itself: It's too busy creating its product before the money runs out, and after all, its employees know every detail of what's going on. It's when a company survives to have a few hundred employees that it starts to consider setting up an internal exhibition, and when it has a thousand people it usually does so.

An exhibit aimed at a company's own employees may seem similar to an outward-facing Visitor Center, but it's not. It plays an important role in a critical goal of the company: safeguarding its soul. Having been involved in creating such displays at various points in my career, here is what I learned.

The objectives of having an in-house exhibition

A company is a business concern, not a museum... why then would it want to invest in exhibitions? The answer is fairly obvious for a visitor center: once you're large enough to attract visits, whether by VIPs or by members of the community at large, you need someplace to take them, and you want it to be as good looking and engaging as you can make it, to impress and foster goodwill. A Visitor Center is just another PR tool, and a very useful one. But why build an **inward-facing** exhibition?

An internal exhibition has, to my mind, a number of objectives:

- To educate employees about the company, its technology and its products.
- To foster among the employees pride in the company's achievements, values and virtues.
- In a geographically distributed company, to bridge the distance and create a feeling of unity and camaraderie with distant coworkers.
- As a secondary benefit, to provide a visually pleasing focal point to the building's interior design.

What it's really all about: Soul

The main point of all this is to capture, transmit and reinforce the "soul" of the company despite the coming and going of employees over the years.

Every company has a soul, which is embodied in the norms, values, expectations, creation myths, and role models that shape and maintain it over the decades. This may seem fuzzy, and yet it is a powerful force in the success (or failure) of any company, and keeping it stable in the face of rapid change, while evolving it responsibly over longer time frames, is vital. This gets harder the larger the company.

Because they are intangible, such factors can be preserved among existing employees and imparted to new ones through role modeling – a critical function of managers and peers – and through tangible exhibits that capture them directly or indirectly.

Elements of an employee-facing exhibit

A good employee-facing exhibit will most often consist of a physical space – this can vary from a small wall-mounted showcase to a dedicated museum hall – where items and pictures are on display. These may serve to impart any or all of the following aspects of the company's nature:

- **Company history.** Every company has a history, whose earlier years are usually at stark contrast to the present day, whether in size, location (garages seem to be de rigueur in hi-tech), or product range. These origins highlight the distance covered and carry an element of surprise; they also show the founders' vision and perseverance, which many employees may find inspiring.
- **Company products.** Many employees have no access to the end product. Administrative and support people may never see it, and even technical people often see only the product(s) they work on. Showcasing a representative lineup of all the company's products gives a perspective entirely missing in people's day to day work.
- **Company technology.** This goes beyond the product; it is the real IP of the company, embodied in inventions and processes – the essence of its wisdom. Many employees are in no position to understand this unassisted, and they should get such assistance.
- **Company culture.** This can involve values, key programs and policies that set the company apart (for the better, of course) and that employees should identify with passionately, yet might miss in the daily grind.
- **Global presence.** These days most companies are spread across different countries. Breaking the distance barriers to tie all employees into as single family is best achieved through physical travel, but lacking that, an exhibition can capture what it's like to be an employee in each far location.
- **Future vision.** A carefully measured dose of the company's future plans, especially as regards impacting the world, can round up your exhibit to good effect.

Tips for designing effective internal exhibits

Designing good internal exhibits is an art, and doing it right can make a real difference to the realization of the objectives listed above. Here are some ideas to consider.

- You want to present **timelines**. Things that you can display over different points in the company's evolution, whether it's employee count (start with photos of the handful of people that were the entire workforce in year X), product power (at Intel I had it easy, given how transistor counts in a chip are driven by Moore's law), or geographic extent (a world map with pins, flags or lamps...) Products can be showcased in the context of their place in history: a maker of mobile phones can show them in a timeline starting with a Bell candlestick phone; a memory company can present its SD cards on a tangle of 35 mm film (making sure to point out that one of these tiny cards can hold photos that would require a hundred celluloid rolls); and so on – be creative!
- Always strive to show **real objects**. Video and interactive computer exhibits are OK, but not when they exclude the real thing. The reason museums survive in the age of the internet is that nothing can quite replace the experience of being in the presence of actual interesting objects. If possible, include the product in forms not usually seen: enlarged scale models, cross-sections, dismantled versions, versions with transparent casings... the more unusual, the more impact you will have (see an [opinionated article](#) of mine for more on this).

- You can showcase your company **founders**, as long as they're memorable role models – guys like Steve Jobs or Andy Grove. Intel has in the lobby of its HQ in Santa Clara a large photo of co-founder Robert Noyce, who not only invented the silicon chip, but was also a wonderful person in many ways – which adds a warm personal dimension to what is otherwise just a corporate lobby.
- In presenting your company's unique **intellectual assets**, you can show framed key patents – preferably with some tangible representation of what they're about, like the original patent model, or a product embodying the patent, or a related piece of manufacturing equipment.
- A key element is showing the **global diversity** of your company. The viewer needs to understand where you are deployed on the planet, what you do in each country, and what it's like for employees to work there. You want to convey the differences in culture and customs (even trivia like differences in workday hours can help) – and the similarities that tie everyone into one team.
- Capturing your **company values** is easier said than done – avoid at all costs showing a boring list stating that you value integrity, your employees, your community, etc. You need to embody these values in interesting objects, stories, and images. For instance, exhibiting visible aspects of your contributions to the community and to the environment can exemplify some of these values. Give it thought.
- Lastly, strive for the **Wow factor**. Is what you're showing just more corporate PR? I remember once hosting a group of school children at our plant; one child actually sent us a thank you note stating “thanks for the candy bars – and the advertising movie was OK too”. This kid was clearly not wowed. You want your employees and their guests to get a kick out of your exhibit, to feel they've learned something impressive and fascinating about you. That's your ultimate goal!

An extension to virtual and mobile exhibits

If you have a large global company you may have hundreds of buildings, and you won't build a permanent exhibition in every one of them. You would put one in your main campus, where many employees are bound to show up sooner or later... and for the rest of the world, you can consider two options.

- First, you can create an interactive **online exhibition** accessible through your Intranet (and while you're at it, you might as well make part or all of it accessible to the public too). This would not allow you to present physical objects, but if done well could still be engaging and instructive.
- Second, you can go for **mobile exhibits** – ones that can be shipped and assembled in each of your sites, then dismantled and sent on to the next one. The Intel Museum did this in the nineties; it used free standing modules about two meters across that described different aspects of the company and were rotated among our geographies. The constraints of this form factor still allow a lot of creativity, and their coming and going keeps the interest up!

Some comments on project execution

I hope I've convinced you of the benefits... but how do you go about creating such an exhibition? It isn't part of your core competence, after all... Here are some pointers, from what I've experienced over the years. They're mostly about getting the right people on it; the rest, money can buy.

- Have a senior manager sponsor the project. There will be moments when you'll be glad you had: exhibitions are seldom seen as a top priority, and they can get stuck without management focus.

- Put project leadership in the hands of someone in the company who is passionate about it. All good exhibitions are labors of love, and the worst you can do is to farm this out to someone who doesn't really care about the "soul" aspect of this. This person will then need to assemble a project team of people with different points of view, crossing functional and seniority barriers.
- Make sure you pull in the right expertise: you'll need some old timers with a sense for company history, along with some techies who can flag technical inaccuracies that the creative folks would never spot. You also want people with that knack for out of the box ideas. They all exist in your company, you just have to entice them to volunteer (and they will, if they're passionate)!
- For the global diversity part, engage your global workforce. Connect to your remote sites and have their people define how to present their part of the company.
- Raid the bottom drawers of your founders, if they're around; and advertise an invitation to other veteran employees to provide memorabilia they've retained from key moments in the history of the company. You'll be amazed at the cool stuff that turns up!
- Once you have a plan, you will need to build the thing. Don't skimp here: get a professional company to do it right. Your people may know about the content but are likely clueless about how a modern exhibit is designed. The professionals – be sure to engage good ones – can work with your team from the start and astound you with their creative ideas. But keep a close watch – it's your company, your culture, your soul. Decisions and direction must come from **your** people.

A key point: if you don't like the design, don't hesitate to start over. Keep at it until you know you're building something you can be proud of. It may be a hard decision, but I've been there and it's worth the tenacity. The investment will pay off handsomely. Once you do it right, your employees will have a better grasp of their company, its place in the world, and why they can be proud of it. They will also be better ambassadors, taking these messages to friends and family members. And – incidentally – you'll enjoy the process of creating this exhibition a great deal!

If you wish to discuss your direction in this space, by all means [drop me a line](#).

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for 18 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see [here](#). You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.

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