

So You're Thinking of Publishing a Company or Family History?

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Researching, writing and publishing a history book is a memorable achievement for any company or family. The best books combine people, facts, dates and anecdotes in an engaging narrative; contain an array of vintage photographs; and are read and enjoyed by those who receive them – not just put on a shelf and forgotten.

Here are some thoughts on producing an effective book and getting the most value for your investment.

Begin by establishing objectives and identifying your audience

Be clear why you are publishing a book. To celebrate a company anniversary? Honor a company founder or family patriarch? Boost public awareness of the company's mission and products? Relate a company or family history that will be lost forever if it isn't told now? Your objectives will help determine the book's content and story line.

Also, identify your audience early-on. Employees? Customers? Family members? Others? Defining your audience will not only help shape the contents of the book but will also determine the print run, which will in turn affect costs.

Put one person in charge

Assign one person to manage the project with full responsibility for its successful completion. Let that person, or a company or family committee chaired by that person, select and guide a writer, designer and printer.

Alternatively, you might hire a publishing firm to put together a writing, design and production team and manage the project. Several firms specialize in producing company and family histories.

Establish a budget

The budget should include provision for research, writing, travel (if necessary), design, photographic rights, paper, printing, binding and distribution.

What is the anticipated number of pages of the book? Will it be published in hardcover or paperback? Do you plan to include photographs and/or illustrations? If so, black-and-white or color? Each of these decisions will affect costs.

Most companies give away their books and absorb all the costs. To maximize readership, Graybar Electric not only issued printed copies but also posted its book on the Internet, allowing anyone to download it for free. On the other hand, some companies seek to recoup part of their costs by selling books to customers or the public. P.C. Richard & Son marketed its book on its website, while Eddie Bauer displayed and sold its 75th anniversary book in its retail stores.

Develop a realistic timetable

A book can sometimes be researched, written, designed and published in six months to a year on a fast-track schedule. Ideally, however, you should allow at least two years from start to finish. Moreover, an in-depth history of a large corporation might take three years or more to research, write and produce.

Don't short-change the research process

Creating an interesting, well-written book begins with thorough research. Some companies and families have archival materials, but archives are just the starting point.

Simple rules for interviewing

Interviews with employees (current and retired) or family members are essential; the more of them the better.

In contacting someone to arrange an interview, describe the project and explain the subject areas to be covered so the person can prepare. The interviewer (in most cases the person writing the book) should review all relevant documents and other materials prior to the interview. Identify the most important information you need to obtain from each interview.

I usually end an interview by summing up the major points that have been covered. This summing up sometimes prompts an outpouring of additional information, interesting perspectives and colorful anecdotes. Some people relax once the formal interview is over and start sharing their best stories if given the opportunity to do so. I have even had situations where we walk together to the door, and the person suddenly says something highly quotable just as I am about to leave. Don't put away your recorder prematurely. Sometimes the best material comes after you think the interview is over.

Joint interviews with two or more people sometimes work well, especially if the individuals have known each for years. I once interviewed five cousins who had been close all their lives. They regaled each other for two hours with family recollections and stories, and I got terrific material for the book. On the other hand, one person may dominate a joint interview to the detriment of the others. If a joint interview does not produce the information you need, re-interview each person individually at a later date.

Look for opportunities to arrange multiple interviews in one location. For one project, I interviewed 25 retired executives and managers in two days at a retiree reunion.

Consider conducting some interviews by phone, especially when an individual is hard to schedule in person or lives in a distant location.

Prepare an outline

The writer should draft a preliminary outline for the book even before the interviews begin. This outline should highlight topics and events that need to be researched.

A full outline can be developed after the majority of the research has been completed and before the text is written. This outline – which might be anywhere from approximately two to 20 pages in length – should spell out the proposed contents of the book chapter by chapter. In the case of

a corporate history, show the outline to senior management to resolve any disagreements as to theme and content before proceeding further.

Simple rules for recording interviews

All interviews should be recorded, but the writer (or whoever else is conducting the interview) should always ask the subject for permission to do so. Find a comfortable location with little or no background noise. Some people are intimidated by speaking into a recorder, so place it to the side, out of direct sight.

For group interviews, consider using a video camera. This makes it easier to identify individual speakers when the interview is transcribed.

Double-check all facts

Information obtained in interviews can be unreliable. People's memories fade. If an interviewee says such-and-such happened in 1977, maybe it really occurred in 1974 or 1979. Check all information against authoritative sources.

Conflicting versions of a story

Sometimes people give conflicting accounts of the same story. One solution is to present both versions in the book. "Joe Smith says ABC happened, while Sarah Brown recalls that XYZ occurred."

Library databases and the Internet

An enormous amount of historic information about companies and families is available in library databases and on the Internet. Don't neglect to mine this valuable resource. A few examples include:

Past issues of the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Times of London* and hundreds of other newspapers, trade publications and magazines have been digitized and are electronically searchable.

The website of the Library of Congress offers a wealth of business, economic and other information accessible by home or office computer. Go to www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html.

Federal documents such as immigration, census and military-service records, citizenship papers and passport applications are available at the nearest office of the U.S. National Archives (go to www.archives.gov for a list of locations) or can be searched online for a fee at a commercial service such as ancestry.com.

Although not generally available electronically, state and local documents such as business incorporation papers, birth and death certificates, wills and property ownership records can be found at local courthouses or municipal archives.

Genealogical organizations

Groups such as the New-York Historical Society and the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society often have unique resources. The Family History Library of the Mormon Church maintains one of the largest genealogical collections in the world, covering individuals of all backgrounds. The Library has branches, called Family History Centers, across the nation. Some of its genealogical information is available online at www.familysearch.org.

Should your book contain negative information?

Companies and families often wonder whether to include negative information, such as legal problems or a messy divorce, in their book. I recommend doing so to the degree possible. Readers want to know the full story, including the blemishes. In fact, sometimes the blemishes are among the most interesting parts of the story. A book that lacks candor will also lack credibility and risks being so bland that few will read beyond the opening pages.

Tell your story in a way that is enjoyable to read and easy to understand

Good writing and design drive readership. If people aren't going to read the book, why bother publishing it?

Lively and entertaining – The best histories bring events and people to life through anecdotes, pacing, quotes and humor. They use simple, declarative sentences and active verbs.

Humanize your book – Tell the story from the viewpoint of people. Don't say "the company" made such-and-such a decision. Name the individual or individuals who made the decision; explain some of the pressures they felt and factors they considered; and quote them if possible.

Provide context – Your story fits into the larger picture of events in the nation and the world. Some of the most interesting books interweave the story with these larger themes and, in doing so, provide unusual insights. A simple example is the rise of technology and how your company has influenced, and been influenced by, technology – and what your company's experience says about the benefits, limitations and opportunities of technology.

Use photo captions to summarize your story – Of all the content of a book, only the chapter titles are likely to generate higher readership than the captions. Yet, captions are often the least developed element in the mix of words, pictures and design. Each caption can be used not only to identify the subject of the picture, but also to summarize an important point made in the text. Those who skim through the book and read only the captions should come away with the highlights of your story.