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Schumpeter

Museums of Mammon

Company museums are not as dull as they sound

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FOR a city that prides itself on putting its past behind it, Atlanta has rather a lot of first-rate



museums. The Jimmy Carter Library and Museum celebrates Georgia's greatest president. The (Martin Luther) King Centre eulogises America's greatest civil-rights leader. And the World of Coca-Cola worships the world's greatest carbonated drink.

When Schumpeter visited Atlanta, the World of Coca-Cola was by far the most popular of the three. It attracted a cross-section of America (minus the Ivy League): veterans criss-crossing the country in RVs, children on school trips, families on holiday, all adding up to about 2,500 visitors a day or 1m a year. The World of Coca-Cola tells the story of Coke's rise from "the ideal brain tonic" for headaches and exhaustion, sold exclusively in pharmacies, to the world's most powerful brand. It contains thousands of Coca-Cola-themed objects, from Haddon Sundblom's pictures of Santa Claus clutching a glass of festive fizz to a child's piggy bank that dispenses a tiny Coke when you deposit a coin.

The World of Coca-Cola can be surprisingly informative—Schumpeter learned that Coke was clear during the first world war and that the country that swigs the most Coke per head is Mexico. It can also be frustratingly evasive. The story of the New Coke debacle is confined to one video. The rivalry with Pepsi is glossed over: “We don’t mention the P-word.” The tour ends with a Coca-Cola orgy: a chance to sample Coke’s 64 favourite products from around the world while listening to “I’d like to buy the world a Coke”.

The world’s most discerning travellers have always included corporate museums in their itineraries. The SPAM Museum in Austin, Minnesota, is the Guggenheim of pork products. The Kohler Design Centre in Kohler, Wisconsin, is the Frick of bathroom fixtures. The Cumberland Pencil Company’s museum in Keswick, England, is the British Museum of old pencils. But now company museums are going mainstream.

A corporate museum is a shrewd way to bolster a brand. If it’s good, people will actually pay to hear your story. So companies have been transforming stodgy old-fashioned museums—collections of company artefacts and documents—into corporate theme parks. And they have started using their histories to enrich their brands and deepen their relationships with customers.

Harley-Davidson offers a fine example. Its museum in Milwaukee contains more than 450 motorbikes: from the first one it produced (which is encased in glass and bathed in a halo of light) to the most recent creations. The museum displays cultural icons, such as Elvis Presley’s bike and a copy of the one that Peter Fonda rode in “Easy Rider” (the theme tune, “Born to Be Wild”, often fills the air). The museum spills into the car park: there is room for 1,000 bikers to park their hogs.

John Deere reopened its museum in Moline, Illinois, earlier this year after a big renovation. Visitors can try their hand at driving some of the company’s mighty machines—albeit on simulators. They can also learn about the history of tractors. The museum shows how various breakthroughs have revolutionised productivity, including contraptions that were tried but later rejected. It also airs surprisingly moving videos of farmers talking about what their machines have meant to them.

Among the firms that use their museums most effectively as a marketing tool are the German carmakers. BMW has a giant cauldron-shaped museum right next to its headquarters in Munich. It traces the company’s origins making aircraft engines and its expansion into motorbikes and then cars. The museum is linked by a walkway to the

futuristic BMW Welt (World), where punters can have lunch and buy cars. Mercedes-Benz has a similar arrangement in Stuttgart. It has also built a satellite Mercedes-Benz World in Weybridge, Surrey, that displays past and present models, and offers driving courses on an old motor-racing circuit. Even children are allowed to drive around the track, so long as their feet reach the pedals.

Memory banks

Various banks have also grasped the value of history. It conveys a sense of solidity. Wells Fargo has nine museums across the American West, full of stagecoaches and gold-digging paraphernalia. It also lends replica stagecoaches to festivals. HSBC has a history wall at its London headquarters with 3,743 images drawn from its archives and arranged in chronological order.

Company museums are not just for cementing bonds with customers. Hershey uses its Chocolate World museum to teach its employees about corporate culture. Harley-Davidson uses its collection of old bikes to inspire its designers. Coca-Cola ends its display with a taste of the future: a small machine, named the Freestyle, that can dispense 100 different Coca-Cola products. Mercedes ends it with a look at the road to emission-free mobility.

Serious historians frown on corporate museums. They are seldom objective: even before the brand managers got hold of them, they had a tendency to glorify their subjects. And they are unreliable preservers of the past. Tupperware has ditched its museum of food containers in Kissimmee, Florida (though it maintains something similar in Orlando). Companies that go under typically take their museums with them: the Waterford Wedgwood Potteries, for example, was ordered to sell its remarkable collection after the company went bankrupt in 2009.

However, the rise of corporate museums says something interesting about collective memory. Ordinary people have grasped much better than professional historians that great companies and their products often affect their lives far more intimately than the politicians who are celebrated in more conventional museums.

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