

Exploiting the Business Records Collection

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THE question of what a librarian or archivist does with the business records his institution possesses and acquires can be answered only by taking a close look at the reasons why those records were kept or acquired. Often, of course, such collections just happen. They come fortuitously, and they repose in respectable, dusty oblivion. But, pressed to rationalize the situation, most archivists would say that they keep and acquire business records for active use—by historians, by members of the firm's advertising department, or by the occasional executive or legal counselor seeking data from the past.

This is the theory, and it is one that all archivists would like to translate into reality. The great obstacle is psychological—the “post-acquisition slump.” Being human, we put tremendous emphasis on acquisition. Once the collection is in the basement, we sigh with satisfaction and that is the end of the matter. We have fulfilled our responsibility and we sink into comfortable apathy.

If records are collected for utilitarian, as contrasted with pack-rat, motives, let's put them to work. To do this, the first requirement is to let potential users know about the collection. In short, publicity. Publicize the collection! Your community or company paper will love the scoop. Acquisition of historical records by a library or the establishment of an archive by a company is first-class news, full of local interest. Next, put your collection to use for in-library or in-company exhibitions. Nothing claims attention like local history. Get pieces of it in those foyer show cases. It's fresh, original, fascinating. Then, cooperate with local historical groups

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and archivists in other companies. You need their friendship and they yours. Make the materials from your vaults available to them, and you'll be surprised by their response. Call on your local merchants and civic "booster" groups. You have real crowd-stoppers in your basement. Get the best parts of your collection into those big plate glass windows on Main Street. Special local anniversaries are made to order for this kind of promotion. Finally, get your collection cataloged, regionally if not nationally.

In short, put the collection to work by letting people know about it. Remember, it will be working for you. It's your library, archive, or company that is being promoted. The message you sell is about a live institution, alert to its historical responsibilities and geared to the interests of the business as well as the intellectual segments of the community.

Once publicized, your collection quite conceivably may not only be used but augmented. Be prepared for both these remarkable eventualities. The inevitable result of exhibiting the 1850 company journal in your reception room showcase will be a telephone call from an old pensioner informing you that he is presenting you with 25 ledgers and 16 trunks of correspondence! You must, in addition, be prepared to entertain historians and other users who want access to the collection you have so skillfully publicized. This need not be a formidable experience. Only a few simple steps are required.

First, index your collection, but don't over-index. Far better to provide a general guide than a detailed one that is inaccurate. Business records are highly technical and highly susceptible to misleading classification. Play it safe, particularly if you are not entirely sure of the difference between a daybook and a wastebook.

Second, provide facilities. These should consist of a chair, a table, and a light. Most archival budgets permit this.

Third, provide freedom. The user of your records does not always know what he is after. Let him probe. For the most part, he knows his business better than you know his business.

Fourth, put the user to work for you. A byproduct of his probing can be a more accurate index for your collection. This is a small *quid pro quo*, happily extended by anyone privileged with the freedom of your basement vault.

No library or archive today can afford to collect for the sake of collecting. Fortuitous acquisitions of limited local value can be swapped off—and such loaves upon the waters invariably bring cake in return. Records collections are for use. You will be amazed at the benefits an active, cooperative, constructive program of acquisition, preservation, and utilization can bring.