Museums Add Value for Long-Lived Family Businesses
by
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April 2019 Issue: Hénokiens Are Museum Builders

In our monthly columns we usually examine the ways long-standing family firms build brand awareness, attract new customers and adapt to their ever-changing environments. Today’s column, however, is special. We are going to focus on family-owned museums. At least seven members of the Hénokiens, an association of 48 family-run firms more than 200 years old, have established their own museums, five of which are open to the public year round. We will first discuss each museum and then conclude with reflections on their value.

Etablissements Peugeot Frères: The idea for the Peugeot family museum dates back to 1982, when Pierre Peugeot decided to create an association of stakeholders called the Peugeot Adventure. Its mission was to gather together all of the different types of products that were manufactured by the Peugeot since its establishment in 1810. After six years of hard work, the Peugeot Adventure Museum was opened to the public in 1988. Located in Sochaux, in the east of France, the museum is divided by time periods, giving visitors a sense of the family adventure as it adapted to changes in the market. Visitors first witness the vast variety of products both household and industrial that Peugeot first made, from metal workman tools to wooden coffee grinders. Visitors then enter a series of large spaces dedicated to old Peugeot bicycles, ancient Peugeot cars, wagons, trucks, motor cycles, racing cars, all the way up to modern Peugeot concept vehicles. Meanwhile, the Peugeot Adventure Association lives on, providing help and advice to members who collect Peugeot vehicles or who are in need of spare parts. It also runs an open workshop that repairs vehicles within the museum. More than 50,000 people visit the museum each year, making it one of the largest family museums in France.

Amarelli: A maker of liquorice sweets in Calabria, Italy since 1731, the Amarelli family decided to open a museum in 2001 to bring together all their historical artefacts under one roof. Since then the family and firm have exploited the museum as a key strategic business asset. The Giorgio Amarelli museum offers a living testimony to the history of liquorice, the family, the business and the region. Named after Giorgio Amarelli, the family leader who came up with the idea but who died in 1986, the museum has a diverse range of objects on display, engravings, documents, books, vintage photos, agricultural tools, and even ancient clothes. Immersed in the sweet scent of liquorice, visitors walking through the museum can discover the secrets of processing liquorice, the root sheaves ready to be worked, the modern extraction plants, the ancient cookers where the black liquorice paste and the bronze dyes give it shape and thickness. Indeed, liquorice takes on different shapes and tastes, from raw wood sticks to pure liquorice or with mint and aniseed, from gummy to orange, lemon, violet, to delicately coloured sugared almonds. In addition, the Giorgio Amarelli museum boasts an auditorium with over 100 seats that has become a centre of the cultural life in the local area.

Gekkeikan: Founded by the Okura family, the Japanese sake brewer Gekkeikan has been producing the world’s finest sake in Fushimi, Kyoto, ever since its establishment in 1637. The old sake brewery, built in 1909, began to attract so many tourists that in 1982, the family decided to transform the brewery into a museum. The museum presents the history of sake in Japan and sake production in Fushimi in an easy-to-understand manner. The museum has a permanent exhibitions of some 400 sake production items, which are displayed to show each stage of the process. It also displays period materials dating back to Gekkeikan’s origins, including different types of vessels. Traditional chants of sake makers are also played on speakers throughout the museum, recreating the atmosphere of the old brewery. Visitors can taste Ginjoshu and other sakes in the lobby. In addition to the museum,
visitors can walk around Fushimi, which resembles a theme park of period buildings that form part of the company’s rich heritage.

J.D. Neuhaus: Founded in 1745, J.D Neuhaus is a producer of pneumatically and hydraulically operated hoists and crane systems. It employs 175 people at its headquarters in Witten-Heven, Germany and another 75 staff at its global offices. Recently, the family opened the Hoist Museum near its modern factory in Witten. Visitors to the museum can learn about the development of hoists and crane over the centuries. The many exhibits in the curated museum reflect on the remarkable history of this family-owned company. The Hoist museum is located within an old timber-framed building with many old original components and exhibits on loan from companies in the same sector. The museum documents the 270-year-old tradition of J.D Neuhaus and its origins: to lift and lower loads, to pull and to move loads. Visitors can see the history of the hoists starting from the Stone Age based on scale models as well as on originals. From the construction of the Pyramids to the setting up of the Vatican Obelisk are only a two examples of the “material-handling” achievements that are displayed at the Hoist museum. In the open-air grounds of the museum, originals and replicas of old full-scale hoists are also exhibited.

D’Ieteren: The Belgian family-run firm, D’Ieteren, was founded by Joseph-Jean D’Ieteren as a manufacturer of coaches and wagon wheels in Brussels in 1805. His two descendants built one of the finest horse-drawn coupes for King Leopold II in 1905. As part of the Brussels museums, the D’Ieteren Gallery was founded by Roland D’Ieteren (INSEAD MBA ’67), the sixth company president to take on the family name. In addition to the horse-drawn carriages, built and distributed by D’Ieteren, the small museum presents objects, photographs and rare documents tracing the company’s 213 years of history. The gallery also contains about 250 cars and 30 motorbikes from the company’s collection of brands, including Auto Union, Bentley, Studebaker, Porsche, Volkswagen, Bugati, Maserati, and many others.

Fabbrica D’Armi Pietro Beretta: Founded in 1526, Beretta is the oldest gun-maker in the world. In 1880, the family decided to open a showroom for customers and since then it has grown to include a second large room. Located at its long-time headquarters in Gardone Val Trompia, Italy, the museum houses an exotic collection of 900 different guns. The museum is closed to the public.

Viellard Migeon & Compagnie: VMC has been owned and managed by the Viellard family since its establishment in 1796. The family has stayed loyal to its roots in metallurgy and specifically to wire technology found in fishing tackle and fasteners, and the museum is a testimony to its heritage. Over the past two centuries, VMC has grown and diversified to the point that it now operates in a number of sectors, making components for the aeronautics, automobile and medical device markets, selling fishing tackle and designing soldering components; it now employs 15,000 staff worldwide. According to Christophe Viellard, the family leader and former president of the Hénokiens, the family decided to open the museum in 2012 to nourish the collective memory of the several thousand Viellard family members. To this end, the family donated to the museum its archives, portraits of family leaders, a large collection of photographs of factories and workers, and copies of contracts and patents under the family ownership. Through the museum, family members can develop a sense of belonging to the Viellard family and take pride in being part of its common legacy. Visitors to the museum can also learn how the firm developed innovative products that made the company successful over time. Said Christophe Viellard, “A united family is the best way of transmitting a culture, a generous ambition and an attachment to environment and inhabitants.” While the Viellard family museum is not open to the public, the Hénokiens and those members of the public who are interested can make an appointment.

In conclusion, a family museum can transmit the values and traditions of a single family, as in the case of the Viellard museum or the Beretta showroom-museum, or it can respond to the needs of an
entire stakeholder family, which is exemplified by the Peugeot Adventure Museum, which is driven by an association of more than 2,000 members. Whatever the scope of the museum, the aim of the long-living families and their firms are the following 1) to safeguard their collections of archives, prototypes, portraits, photographs and other souvenirs; 2) to transmit the culture and metier embodied by these artefacts to the next generations of family members and 3) to stay loyal to the history of the company and its family to inspire future leaders.

Part four of this 11-part series will feature a profile about a long-lasting family firm.

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