

A basic guide to Anniversary Celebrations

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Upon the occasion of its anniversary, a company, as at no other time, takes on importance in the eyes of its industry and field, it employs, customers, prospects and stockholders—all its various publics. A public relations program tied to the milestone may pay rich dividends. But to insure such an objective it should be carefully planned and executed and should have the backing of all concerned, from top management down.

Defining the Purposes

Before embarking upon an anniversary program, its objectives should be clearly defined in the minds of those responsible for conducting it. Questions to be considered, then answered, include: "What do we expect to gain in return for the time, effort and money we will put into celebrating our anniversary? Publicity, good will, increased sales—some or all of these, and in what order? To whom shall we direct the program—members of our own organization, our suppliers, our customers, our shareholders, the public? Shall we increase our promotional budget, and, if so, by how much? Or shall we spend what we normally spend, but tie all our activities to the anniversary theme? How much of the expense should be borne by head-

quarters and how much by branches, divisions, distributors, other operations?" The clearer the thinking on such subjects and the earlier the decisions are made, the greater the chance of success for the program.

When to Celebrate

The popular company anniversaries are the 25th, 50th, 75th and 100th. But any multiple-of-five year may well be the occasion for a celebration, and, for that matter, there's no reason to sidestep the celebration of a so-called off year, such as the 21st or 47th, if conditions are right for such a promotion. For to survive as a going organization under today's challenging conditions is an achievement. (More than 3/5 of the 4.2 million firms now in operation have been acquired by their present owners since the end of World War II. The median age of all operating businesses is less than seven years—that is half are seven or older and half are seven or younger.)

A factor in deciding whether or not to celebrate should be the age of the industry. Twenty-five years is a ripe age in the aviation world, both for the airplane maker and the transportation firm. Another factor

*From December, 1935, Survey of American Business, "Age and Life Expectancy of Business Firms," by Betty C. Churchill.

is the age of the region. A pioneer firm in Oklahoma is a stripling when compared with the old companies of Philadelphia and Boston, but that does not detract from the achievement of the Oklahoma organization.

Milestones are available as themes even for very young firms: the production of the 500,000th unit, be it tin can or automobile, for example. Or a celebration may be tied to an invention important to the industry, such as Edison's electric light and phonograph; or to the birth date of a pioneer in a field, such as Franklin's, which is annually observed by the entire graphic arts world.

It is literally true that "any year can be an anniversary year" for the company which wants such a promotional peg. The important thing is not the precise age of the celebrating firm so much as the degree of sparkle and enthusiasm put into the observance of the milestone. Some programs of young companies, even for tenth anniversaries, have been more successful than those of 50-year-old firms in the same fields, simply because the younger celebrants put more excitement and zest into their programs.

Who Should Run It?

It is important that one person should assume responsibility for making the anniversary program work. Usually, he (or she) reports progress to someone in top management, most likely the president, or perhaps to the entire executive staff. The extent of assistance accorded him depends upon the scope of the program. If comprehensive, he may need an assistant. Or some of the work might be turned over to an outside agency, such as a public relations firm or a consultant.

Unless the celebrating firm is quite small or the anniversary program very modest, the key person should have the benefit of the services of a committee, both to assure cross-fertilization of ideas and to facilitate sharing of duties and coordination of plans. The key person might be the sales promotion manager or his assistant, the director of public relations or his second in command, or perhaps the advertising manager or an assistant. But the chances are that the advertising manager of a large company would be too busy to assume major responsibility for conducting an ambitious anniversary program.

Start Planning Early

Generally speaking, the earlier the start, the better the chance of success for an anniversary program. Ideally, planning should begin at least a year before the period of observance, and preferably two years earlier. Some companies start planning for major anniversaries, such as centennials, six or seven years before the event. Time is needed for research into the background of the company and the industry of which it is a part, especially if a company history is to be issued to commemorate the milestone. Advance planning on the part of top management also facilitates wise delegation of authority, rather than last-minute tapping of someone who fears he won't get his old job back again after his anniversary stint.

For the person who heads the program, and perhaps for a small group working closely with him, the year of preparation may be almost as full as the year of actual observance. To be covered during that period are:

1. *Delegation of responsibility* among top management representative, committee members, outside agencies (if any), key person heading program and his assistant(s).

2. *Making the blueprint.* Before this is done, the decision should have been made as to whether the program should be concentrated during a short or medium-length period or extended throughout the anniversary year. The date of the kick-off event would have been selected and at least tentative dates set for other major events on the celebration calendar.

3. *Research* should be under way for the purpose of collecting material on the company's early history and the era of its beginnings—for releases, advertising themes, company magazine coverage. (If there is to be a hard-cover company history, the research would probably have been started a year or two earlier.)

4. *Alerting those whose help will be needed* to make the celebration a success: advertising agency, department heads, branch managers, foremen, distributors, etc.

5. *Arranging and scheduling advance publicity* through such media as company publications, trade and technical magazines, newspapers, radio and television outlets. If a company history is in progress and if enough material is available in advance, it might be wise to offer a chapter or other portion to the editor of a national magazine, to be published as a feature story during the anniversary year, or just before it opens.

6. *Arranging for special supplies.* For example, gifts, mementoes,

plaques, scrolls, emblem pins or other jewelry for long-term employees. If there is to be a special seal for the anniversary, it should be designed early enough to be used for stationery, decorations, displays, souvenirs and space advertisements.

7. *The kick-off function* must be planned in advance. It may be a big dinner or other gala event held just before the opening of the anniversary year, or held soon after the year has begun. It may be the big affair of the observance period, or it may serve merely as an ice-breaker. In any event it sets the stage for the rest of the observance and it deserves careful planning, with attention given to decorations, displays, exhibits, refreshments, entertainment. If there's a birthday cake, it should be cut with some kind of a ceremony, and there should be photographs. Unless there's a special party for the press, it should be represented at the kick-off event. All this takes advance planning.

8. *Kits.* Sometimes there's one kit for members of the press and another for branch managers and out-of-town operations. This is a convenient way of packaging information, photographs, releases, copies of speeches. The kit for out-of-town offices (or for local department heads) might contain suggestions for localized observance ideas: "Offer stories to your newspapers. Volunteer to address luncheon groups in your town. Offer to supply exhibit material to schools and libraries. Stage an open house; and invite the mayor and other community leaders to attend." Contents of a basic kit may be varied to suit special purposes, but in any case

they should all be planned and prepared before the anniversary period starts. The dimensions of all kits should be approximately 8½x11", standard file size.

Stress the Future

It is normal for members of an old organization to be proud of its history, but this does not justify overlooking the fact that it has a future too. Expressions of company policy connected with the milestone should contain references to the future as well as to the past. Example: "As we enter our second century, we hope to profit from past mistakes, to build on the experience we've had; and we look forward to further growth . . ." Management should consciously strive toward building its corporate image, not as a staid and stodgy old-timer, but as an old company with new ideas.

Start from the Inside

To be successful, an anniversary observance must start from the inside, concentrating on employees and others associated with the firm, working outward to the public. If it's impossible to have everybody—customers, the press and employees—at one big party, either have the employees at the main party, no matter who else is left out, or let them have their own party. And if there's a separate party for them, it should be just as festive as any staged for customers or the press.

Employees should also be informed as to what is going to happen and what is happening and what has happened in connection with the celebration. District offices and foreign operations should be brought into the program. Company publications, displays and notices on bulletin boards, messages from the

president—these and other tools of communication may be used to spread the word.

If there's a contest in connection with the anniversary, there should be one for employees too. If there's a booklet relating the company's history, copies should be available to employees. (If there's a hard-cover book, too expensive to be given to all staff members, there should be a simpler version for them.) If souvenirs and gifts are distributed, employees should get their share, even if only badges, paper hats and simple gifts.

Special recognition should be accorded long-term employees during the anniversary period. This might take the form of awarding pins, emblems or other gifts to those who become eligible to membership in the 25-Year Club, with appropriate ceremonies. If such recognition is an annual custom, it should be somewhat more lavish and "special" in the anniversary year.

What has been said here about employees is applicable also to sales representatives, including jobbers; to suppliers and to all who are associated with the organization. In short, remember that the company anniversary is for everybody, not just for the top brass and blue-chip customers.

Advertising

The simplest way to spread the news about an anniversary to a wide audience is through advertising. But before deciding on the use of advertising, certain questions must be answered: "Shall we increase our budget during the observance period, or spend what we normally spend, using the anniversary as a theme? Shall we use

to a special audience, such as engineers or high school students.

Tie-Ins

An anniversary offers numerous opportunities for tie-in promotions, which may greatly increase the benefits. Here are some potentially good candidates for such promotional partnerships:

1. An organization (company, hotel, school, hospital, library) founded in the same year as the celebrating firm.
2. An organization not the same age, but celebrating a birthday. For example, a centennial firm may join one 75, 50, or even 25 years old in a promotion.
3. A community, say the city, town or state, also celebrating a birthday, though not necessarily the same one as that of the firm initiating the program. Typical slogan: "It's Our State's Centennial Year, and Our 80th Birthday."
4. An organization with which the celebrant has had dealings for a considerable period. Example: "It's Our 50th Birthday and Our 35th Year of Association With (an advertising agency, a wholesaler, a supplier, a customer)."

The degree of participation varies widely. It may be as simple as each partner's congratulating the other in one ad, or a series. It may include a special event attended by executives and key employees from each organization (or all employees of each), with complimentary addresses and an exchange of scrolls, plaques, gifts. Even though the tie-in event be only one phase of an extensive program, it creates good

will and gives evidence of stability and continuing friendship; and there are usually news pictures and stories in local papers and the business publications.

Sometimes the company's anniversary may be tied to an industry milestone, such as steel's centennial, the Wright brothers' first flight, or a significant invention. This year many firms jumped on the bandwagon of Colonel Edwin Drake's having struck oil in 1859. The Pony Express Service, which began in 1860, may serve as a useful promotion peg next year. And in 1969 there will be opportunities for recalling the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad, which was celebrated with fanfare in 1869, with the driving of a golden spike at Promontory, Utah.

Company Magazines

An economical and efficient way of furthering the observance of a company milestone is through both internal and external publications. Advance issues may announce plans and goals; carry requests for memorabilia (old photographs, advertisements, catalogs, clippings); ask for old-timers' reminiscences—and in other ways arouse interest in the forthcoming celebration. Later issues may report progress as plans develop, and, still later, report on various phases of the program, from the kick-off event to the climax. For a large company, a house organ serves as a sort of clearing house of information on the methods used by the various operations in celebrating the anniversary.

Even though coverage of the observance is spread through a number of issues of the company mag-

azine, there should be one main "anniversary issue," which will be treasured as a souvenir. It should have an appropriate cover design; a president's (or chairman's) letter or statement of management thinking regarding the milestone; a company history—an article or chronology, perhaps both. Typography and illustrations should conform to the theme of nostalgia.

In view of the slight additional expense required to turn out a memorable anniversary issue of the company magazine, it is surprising that so few firms do a good job in this regard. (A study by the author of some 60 so-called "anniversary issues" uncovered a high percentage which carried out their promise chiefly in the front cover designs, with little or no recognition of the event in editorial content.)

Despite widespread neglect of the company magazine as a tool for celebrating the anniversary, there are brilliant exceptions. Some editors like the birthday theme so much that they use it for brand anniversaries, for marking incorporation as well as actual founding dates, and for celebrating the magazines' own birthdays.

When an editor goes out of his way to commemorate an off-beat anniversary through his publication, he usually does it very well indeed. For example, one of the finest such issues of 1957 was Jones & Laughlin's May-June number of "Men and Steel," which celebrated not the firm's own birthday (it was founded in 1850), but the steel centennial, or anniversary of the Bessemer process, which made possible the mass production of steel. The 88-page magazine included a 30-page illustrated chronology outlining the role the company played

in a "century of progress in steel-making," but it also listed many events of broader significance. A work of this kind becomes not only a valued memento, but a reference work of lasting usefulness.

The anniversary issue need not be more expensive than those produced at other times, the difference being in slant and type of content. But even if the expense is greater, this may be justified. It is worth while to increase the print run of an attractive anniversary number, and to issue extra copies to the press, to shareholders, to libraries and others who may value them as source material or as souvenirs. A yardstick of this usefulness is that back number magazine shops commonly charge extra for anniversary issues.

Company History

The first thing that comes to mind when planning an anniversary program is usually, "Let's get out a company history." But in too many instances the idea is conceived—or put into execution—too late to permit adequate research for publication of the history during the anniversary year. The result is that we find company histories issued a year or two after the anniversary; or, worse yet, we find them to be "histories" in name only, weak in content, poorly planned and executed.

It's impossible to pinpoint what makes a "good company history," just as it is to define a "good" novel, poem or essay. It is axiomatic that it should be interesting. It should also be a true history of the company, accurately presented, without glossing over facts of which the present-day staff may not be proud.

If research discloses that the founder was a sharp trader, this should be revealed, perhaps with the extenuating circumstances that his behavior was typical of that of his environment and era. Like the person who boasts that an ancestor was hanged as a pirate, management and staff can usually accept the tarnish in a firm's early history, provided it happened long ago. If the company is too young, or if the founder's descendants are sensitive about such blemishes, it's best not to produce a history.

There's no rule-of-thumb as to what to put into a company history. But there's a rule covering what should not be put into it, and it should be written in letters a foot high and kept in sight of everyone concerned in the project: *Don't brag—about the founder or founders, nor about present-day management.* Anyone who has examined very many business histories knows that a large percentage of them follow the formula of fulsome praise of the founder, with far too little objective information about him as a person and the kind of world he lived in. Even more reprehensible is the custom of lauding current and fairly recent management and of giving a great deal of space to their portraits. Coming across such a book five or ten years after its publication, when some, if not all, of those executives have died or retired, you wonder, "Why did they waste so much space on such drivel?" When the book is handsomely produced, the contrast between format and content is even more painfully obvious.

Promoting the book and getting maximum benefit from it are just as important as producing it. One medium-size firm put all its anni-

versary budget into producing and publicizing its company history, with excellent results. As each chapter was completed, it was offered to a publication of large circulation on an exclusive basis. Some used the chapters as offered and others adapted them, with total coverage reaching millions of readers. The book was used as the basis of radio and television programs. The source material assembled became the nucleus of an exhibit which was sent out on tour. But these things did not happen spontaneously. A wise public relations counsel and a cooperative management pooled their efforts into thinking up ways to get every ounce of benefit out of the slim, but meaty, little volume, and its byproducts.

Films

A motion picture released during the anniversary period gets off to a good start, because the sponsoring company is in the limelight at that time. To be released early enough during the celebration to benefit from the attendant publicity, the film should have been started a year, or perhaps two or three years, earlier. Even though the main theme may be the company's bright prospects, "Our Second Hundred Years," the script should tell something of the past; and, if that past is colorful, perhaps quite a bit about it. This entails research and checking, and that takes time. But the company which produces a film (or two or more) as part of its anniversary program usually issues a company history or draws upon its background for its company magazine and its advertising; so that the research necessary for the film's script has been conducted.

If a film stresses the company's history, it's a good plan to inject nostalgia into the tools used to promote it. For example, the announcements, invitations, and posters dealing with it may be printed in old-fashioned type. If a leaflet or booklet is distributed to viewers, it might also have distinctive lettering and illustrations based on the historic content of the film.

Community Relations

There's growing awareness of corporate responsibility in being a good neighbor in the community. The anniversary period offers an opportunity to invite local residents to visit the plant and otherwise become better acquainted with the firm. It's a logical time for members of the firm's administrative staff—from president to branch officers—to be available to address clubs, luncheon groups, students, and to be interviewed on radio and television programs. (Large organizations, which send anniversary kits to their various operations, usually include suggested scripts for speeches.) Copies of speeches made by company executives in connection with the anniversary should be sent to local papers. If there's an anniversary film, it should be offered to clubs, schools, church groups. This is a good time, too, to offer to stage exhibits at libraries, banks, schools and other public places.

Each year hundreds of communities celebrate milestones of various kinds: original settlement, granting of a charter, incorporation, completion of a bridge, the coming of the railroad, the founding of the first school, the fighting of a battle.

Tying a company's anniversary to such a civic milestone offers an opportunity to honor public officials and other community leaders.

Most large corporations now consider it their duty to support public causes and to contribute to community welfare without thought of profit, for example in promoting safety, research in health problems, education, child welfare. During an anniversary period such participation might be stepped up. Or special grants might be made, for example, for an anniversary scholarship fund or for provision for a hospital bed. Another useful contribution might be a contest tied to a community cause, with prizes for the best suggestions on "How to Keep Our City Clean," or "Why We Should All Take an Interest in Our Local Government."

Telling Shareholders

Corporate managements are increasingly aware of the value of good stockholder relations. In many instances shareholders are potential customers, and even when they are not, they may be in a position to influence others who are. The number of persons who "own a share in American business" is steadily increasing. It's worth while to make friends and allies of them. One way to do it is to tell your stockholders, "It's your company's birthday and we want you to help us celebrate."

The best method of calling their attention to the milestone is through the annual report, preferably starting with its cover which may carry the anniversary seal as part of the design, or the words, "Our Golden (or 25th, or 40th, as the case may

be) Anniversary," or perhaps just the dates, "1860-1960," or whatever they may be.

Since space is needed in the report for the president's message and various charts and earnings statements, the coverage given to the firm's history is necessarily limited. But the president's letter should at least refer to the event. And there should be a brief history of the company, even if only a chronology. Other attractive touches are: "Before and After" pictures of products, pictures of the founder and the first factory, or even a view of the town or city as it was when the company began. (These may be actual photographs or simple sketches.) Such treatment need not be elaborate or expensive, but if tastefully presented with appropriate lettering, it may lift the report into the "Keep-as-a-souvenir" class.

Mailing quarterly dividends provides an opportunity to remind stockholders of the company's birthday, through newsletters or other enclosures. Some firms start telling investors about the celebration well before it begins. One, for example, enclosed reply postcards asking the stockholders for suggestions as to how to celebrate the company anniversary.

Other opportunities to promote the anniversary to shareholders are afforded through the annual meeting (president's address, decorations, special exhibits, favors). If, in accordance with a growing custom, a summary of the annual meeting is later issued as a booklet, its chance of being retained as a souvenir is increased if there is emphasis on the event as an "anniversary meeting."

Here are other suggestions for

calling attention to the value of the company's stock during the anniversary period: honor long-term stockholders, if possible by having them attend the annual meeting and making photographs of them . . . give away small blocks of stock (perhaps single shares) as contest prizes, to honor long-term employees, as gifts to children born to employees on the same date as that of the firm's founding.

Summing Up

"Is it worth while," one might ask, "to go to so much trouble and expense to celebrate an anniversary?"

The answer is that it must be. Some of the nation's best run and most successful businesses make a practice of celebrating not only their traditional "big" birthdays, such as the 25th, 50th, 75th, 100th, but brand anniversaries as well, and the production of their "umpteenth" units. They also join in industry-wide anniversary promotions. Today especially, when the importance of the "corporate image" is recognized, stability is a quality of which any successful business may be proud.

A company may win good will, publicity and probably added sales, through marking a milestone—provided the program is skillfully planned, coordinated and executed. Aside from its promotional benefits, observing the birthday usually inspires management to interpret the past in terms of the future, into useful self-appraisal and long-range plans.

The rewards from the anniversary program are usually in direct ratio to the time and effort put into it.