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Public Tours & Open Houses: Introducing People to Your Brand

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Remember Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory? Five lucky children found a Golden Ticket and won a trip inside the secretive candy factory. Chocolate bars poured off store shelves as people vied for their chance for an inside view.

Reality? Not exactly. But it's not pure fantasy either. People have a natural curiosity about how their favorite products get made. At the Crayola Factory in Easton, Pennsylvania, more than 375,000 visitors tour each year. And in Waterbury, Vermont, the Ben & Jerry's ice cream factory hosts only slightly less at 300,000 guests.

For some brand loyalists, a factory tour is akin to a pilgrimage (think Harley-Davidson, John Deere, and Ford). For others, it's an entertaining way to spend an afternoon or beef up the educational value of their vacations. Either way, you get an attentive audience, asking (and in some cases paying) you to sell to them!

Open your doors and they may come. Few people know this better than Karen Axelrod and Bruce Brumberg, authors of *Watch It Made in the U.S.A.*, a directory of factory tours available across the United States. First published in 1994, *Watch It Made in the U.S.A.* is now in its fourth edition. Similarly, in York, Pennsylvania, tourism officials were so convinced of the value of this so-called 'industrial tourism' they rallied local companies and declared themselves 'Factory Tour Capital of the World.'

In a 1998 story in the San Francisco Chronicle, a spokesperson for Anheuser-Busch described the benefit of tours this way: "A commercial during the Super Bowl costs millions of dollars for 30 seconds," said Patty Laustrup, who oversees tours for about 39,000 people a year at the Anheuser-Busch brewery in Fairfield. "We get people's attention for one hour for just \$7.40,

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the cost of a tour guide. And it's total immersion into our product. You can't get any better than that."¹

You don't have to be a world-renowned name like Harley Davidson or John Deere to take advantage of public curiosity. Heck, you don't even have to have a manufacturing facility. You just need a little ingenuity to make it work. (See our case study at the end for how one company turned their warehouse into a popular attraction.)

Whether it's a year-round tour of your business or a one-day open house, inviting people into your workspace is a creative way to capture their attention and demonstrate expertise.

Tours & Open Houses – Not So Different

When a member of the general public visits your facility, he or she is engaging in what's called *industrial tourism*. They are visiting American workplaces as tourists, looking for diversion and personal education.

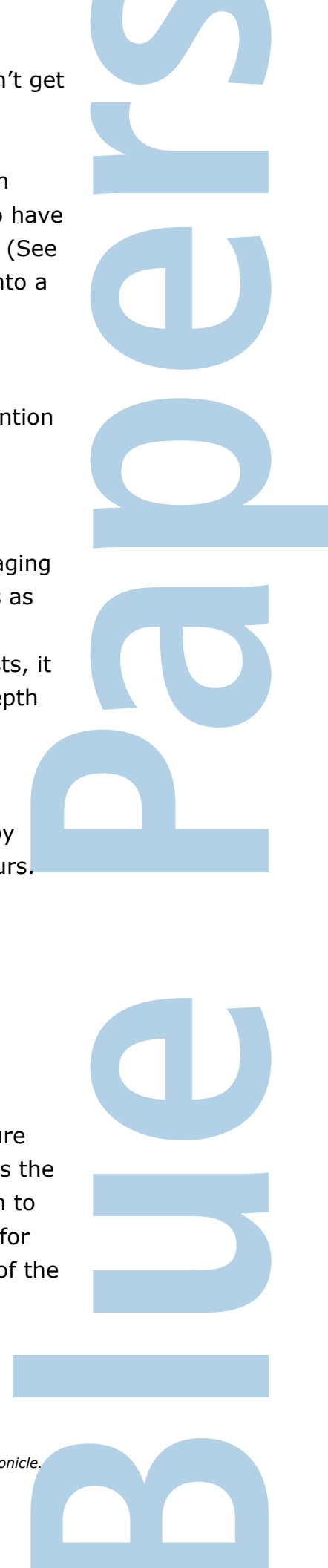
From a company's point of view, however, when it opens its doors to guests, it is conducting *experiential marketing*—giving customers a first-hand, in-depth experience with the company brand.

Company tour formats vary. Some permit viewing from behind a glass wall or elevated walkway. Others provide full escorted tours interpreted by their own staff. A few allow select tour operators to conduct their own tours. Still others open a company museum or visitor center to compliment or substitute for an actual manufacturing-floor experience.

Businesses ideal for industrial tourism include food processing facilities, breweries and wineries, farms, utilities, media outlets, mining operations, and of course, manufacturers of all kinds.

Even if your business doesn't lend itself to public tours, you can still capture the benefits of experiential marketing with an open house. The objective is the same. You want to build business by increasing familiarity and connection to your company. Likewise, you should still use tours on an individual basis for prospective customers, visiting students and potential employees. Many of the same best practices apply.

¹*On-the-Job Experience: Bay Area Firms Finding Public Tours Are Good Business.* Ilana DeBare. *San Francisco Chronicle*. San Francisco, Calif.: Dec 4, 1998. p. B1



If you decide to hold an open house instead of a factory tour, provide a distinct reason for your event by planning it around some sort of special occasion:

- Grand opening
- Anniversary
- Award win/celebration
- Product launch
- New facility, equipment
- Networking, chamber function
- Annual – holiday, thank you



If you're offering year-round tours, publicize it with a press release and advertising. Promote your tour to school and youth groups, contact tour operators, the local chamber and your regional tourism and convention center. Be sure to contact the author's of *Watch It Made in the U.S.A.*, and get yourself included in edition five.²

Reasons To Hold a Tour or Open House

Holding an open house or organizing a facility tour is all about building business and cementing customer relationships. These events give you one-on-one access to a captive audience that has already demonstrated an interest in your business. Here's what you can accomplish:



- a) Educate attendees
- b) Create customer connections
- c) Demonstrate capacity and expertise
- d) Distribute company literature
- e) Give a lasting thank you/reminder

You probably have any number of audiences for your facility tour or open house. No matter who you are speaking to, you want to communicate quality. Other messages vary by audience:

Neighbors: When your company serves a local customer base, you want to make your neighbors your customers.

²www.factorytour.com

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- Retailers:** Encourage retailers to stock your product by demonstrating capacity and productivity.
- Consumers:** Get consumers to buy your product by creating customer affinity the way only one-on-one experience can.
- Employees:** Labor market getting tight? Plan company tours for all interviewees. Create personal bonds by showcasing the intimate qualities that make your company special.
- Students:** Opening your business to students of all ages marks you as a good corporate citizen. If skilled employees are hard to find in your market, this is a great opportunity to encourage children to pursue further education in science, engineering, or technical skills. If you can take the long view, consider it laying the foundation for future recruitment.
- Existing Customer:** Like any good thank you campaign, open houses are a way to show appreciation while providing subtle customer education at the same time.



At PDQ Manufacturing in Green Bay, a maker of carwash systems, the company provides personal tours to potential customers. Guests are escorted through assembly areas, where the facility is clean, employee-centered, and equipped with the latest technology. The company has dedicated a fair amount of floor space for product demonstrations, so customers can work with the systems hands-on.

“By experiencing the complete PDQ brand during a personal tour, potential customers can see our dedication and know that we have their best interests in mind,” said Charlie Lieb, CEO. “It’s difficult to convey that same sense of loyalty in a product brochure.”

The ONLY Good Reason NOT to Hold an Open House/Tour

People come up with plenty of reasons not to host an open house or tours. We understand that everyone has different challenges, but we encourage you to really think about how an open house could work for you. With the right idea and the right marketing, we think just about anyone could do it.

Challenge #1: *I Don't Think Anyone Will Come*

If you don't market it they won't. Plan a worthwhile event that provides real entertainment, education or networking value, and then tell lots of people about it. Promotion is critical.

- Invitations:** Mail invitations well ahead of time. Start with save the date cards if you don't have all the details worked out. Enlist your salespeople to encourage attendance. Yard signs and banners are a good idea if your location is hard to find and/or you're open to public visitors.
- Local Bigwigs:** Remember to include chamber officials and local lawmakers. Invite members of the press as applicable.
- Joint Events:** Joint open houses work well for complimentary businesses that are less of a draw in and of themselves. Maybe pulling people into your business brokerage office is a tough sell, but host a party for your network of lawyers and accounts and you have a more meaningful gathering.

Challenge #2: *There's Nothing to See Here.*

You may be right. Your ten-person accounting office filled with cubicles isn't real, ah, stimulating. People want something to do, something to see, or something to eat—or better yet some of everything. Provide these draws and you can host a function in your 'boring old office' or company garage.

- Food:** While not a requirement for year round public tours, food is essential for one day open house events. But really,

that's stating the obvious. If you own a neighborhood business that doesn't have a natural food tie-in, talk to local restaurants. Hire them to provide the food and ask them to co-promote your event to their own customers.



Mini Seminars: If you are a professional service business without any production work to put on display, offer mini seminars as part of your open house. This is most appropriate for day-long drop-in events, not short after hours functions.

Hands-On: For any event, hands on activities are always a draw. The National Autobody Collision Center recommends members put a damaged car on display and hold a 'guess the estimate' contest. Think of ways to apply this same concept: guess the tax return, identify the wood, and guess the gallons of water processed... If you do any product assembly, get guests involved with that. Provide instructions and let guests try to put one of your 'widgets' together while an experienced employee sits nearby and cranks them out.

Displays: Set out different types of equipment used on the job or display a historical collection of memorabilia. We know one area cell phone provider that displayed half a decade's worth of mobile phones. Long-time staff members were on hand to share memories of the earliest equipment. Do you have a business-relevant collection that could be put on display? Think menus, old uniforms, antique typewriters and cameras.



Non-Profits: Charitable groups can ask guests to participate in pseudo, mini-work events, like painting one section of a mural or stocking one grocery bag from the pantry shelves. This is not an all out work event, mind you, but something rather more symbolic to break the ice and help guests network.

Special Guest: Potential guests include local authors, current or retired sports players and local politicians. If you are part of a franchise or multi-office corporation, think about interesting management or technical staff who might be a draw. Wells Fargo, for example, has a company historian who tours the country talking about the importance of maintaining a family history.

Challenge #3: *Our Facility Isn't Safe for Visitors.*

Safety concerns are not a good excuse. If your facility is too dangerous for visitors, then it's probably too dangerous for your employees. You are well-advised to require safety glasses, hard hats, even closed toe shoes and shorts. Many customers will be expecting this. Just be sure to put it on the invitation if particular dress is required.

Challenge #4: *We Need To Maintain Sanitary Conditions*

Believe it or not, people will don those paper shower caps and plastic booties to tour your facility.

Challenge #5: *Our Competitors Have Spies*

Okay, we'll give you this one. Kellogg's halted its factory tour in the 1980s to protect their trade secrets. Put away confidential information and turn off employee computers before guests arrive.

Event Planning

Once you've decided the structure and audience for your event, it's time to get to work and start planning. Some of these tips apply only to open houses or one-day tours, but others—like facility clean-up and safety—apply to year-round tours as well.

Budgeting:

Think about everything that goes into an open house and plan your budget accordingly. Remember food, thank you gifts, extra literature, staffing the event, facility clean-up, invitations, signage and other promotion.

RSVPs and Name Tags:

Ask for RSVPs. Train your reception staff to request the proper spelling of an attendee's full name, their employer, and guests. Print out nametags and have them ready ahead of time.

Facility Clean-Up:

You want to present a clean, attractive facility both inside and out. If your staff is plenty busy with their regular jobs, you'll need to budget extra staff time or hire an outside crew to get this done.

Safety:

Take a particular look at safety issues. Stock ear plugs, hard hats and other equipment as necessary. Update caution signs and yellow boundary tape. Plan small tour groups for better control, and warn all employees that you will have guests on the floor.

Employee Prep:

Choose carefully when appointing employees to the job of tour guide or event reception. Prep everyone on the key messages you'd like to get across at your event. Write scripts for tour guides, opening remarks and management speeches.

Company Reminders:

Thank guests for coming with free product samples or a small gift. This will provide a lasting memory of their visit and help keep your company top-of-mind. Visitors to the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory, for example, get to take away a miniature souvenir bat.

Photographer:

Hire a wandering photographer or appoint a qualified staff member to the job. Email photos to your guests after the event—it's a good 'excuse' for a follow-up contact. Or, buy or rent an on-demand photo printer and give guests pictures of themselves before they leave.

Follow Up:

Remember to follow up with a letter, phone call or email, thanking guests for coming. This is a good time to include more company literature and ask for business.

Case Study: Even a Warehouse Can Be a Draw

Think your business isn't quite right for a tour group? The folks at the Jelly Belly Candy Company didn't let negative thoughts stop them when they opened public tours of their warehouse facility in Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin. That's right; it's a warehouse tour, and a highly successful one at that.

The Jelly Belly Center is a 233,000 square foot distribution center storing approximately 4.9 billion Jelly Bellies at any one time. Visitors tour the facility aboard an electric train leaving from Jelly Belly Junction--a mock train station inside the retail store at the front of the warehouse. The tour is free and lasts about 30 minutes.



Once aboard the Jelly Belly Express, visitors are driven around the perimeter of the warehouse. They stop at seven video screens showing how Jelly Bellies are made. To their right are boxes upon boxes of Jelly Bellies, cased, shrink-wrapped and ready to go.

Not fun? Think again. In addition to the engineering lesson on candy manufacturing, visitors pick up some interesting facts along the way:

- Jelly Bellies went into space aboard the Challenger shuttle.
- Unlike regular jellybeans, Jelly Bellies have flavored insides and coating.
- In the last two years, enough Jelly Bellies have been eaten to reach to the moon.

Guests also view some rather unique artwork along the way. The Jelly Belly Center houses a number of mosaics made entirely of Jelly Bellies. Among them are portraits of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, George Washington, and Superman. The mosaics typically use anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 Jelly Bellies and can take six weeks to more than six months to complete.

Back inside the Jelly Belly visitor center, guests can stop at the sample station where they are welcome to try any of the Jelly Belly flavors (including vomit and earwax, part of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, the press-your-luck candy fictionalized in the Harry Potter series).

Also inside the visitor center is a display case commemorating former President Ronald Reagan. He championed the sweet beans while still governor of California and then helped make them famous during his presidency. The blueberry flavored Jelly Bellies were created especially for him.

As a thank you, all tour guests receive a generously sized snack bag of free Jelly Bellies. Then, they're invited to shop the gift store offering a variety of Jelly Belly merchandise.

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Touring a warehouse—it's what we call creative thinking 'inside the box.' Notice the organizers used several best practices including multi-media features, fun company trivia, historic displays, hands-on product interaction and thank you gifts.

Whatever your business, find a way to make it a fun--or at least hands-on--experience. Then open your doors and let people see how great you and your employees really are. You'll reap the benefits of increased customer affinity, and you may even discover a few brand loyalists along the way.

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