

# How H&M Uses Its Corporate Archive for Today's Business

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## Introduction

Every organization has a unique history. Put to proper use, it becomes a strategic asset that companies can leverage for future growth. At least, that's what global retailer H&M has learned — and practices. Its corporate archive is a well-used asset, with new assets consistently added, ranging from corporate documents to designer collections. That has not always been the case, though. As late as in the early 2000s, the company did not even have an organized archive. Today, it has a thriving — and growing — corporate archive, managed by professional archivists and used extensively within the company. In this essay, we will describe both the birth and development of the H&M corporate archives and how the company today uses its archive for corporate development, ranging from HR and communication to product development. This essay draws of course on the H&M archive, housed at the Centre for Business History in Stockholm, including close to 100 oral history-interviews with long-time coworkers, over 100 linear meters of historical documents and a vast collection of garments. Additional interviews with today's H&M staff and management has complemented the archival research.

## About H&M

By mid-2024, H&M Group is a global fashion and design company, with over 4,000 stores in more than 75 markets, online sales in 60 markets, over 140,000 employees, and brands catering to all price levels and styles.<sup>1</sup> But 77 years earlier, in 1947, the company started with just one store in Västerås, Sweden, called Hennes (Swedish for “hers”) and only sold women's clothing.<sup>2</sup> Its founder, Erling Persson

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1. Corporate information from H&M corporate website, <https://hmgroup.com/about-us/>, accessed 30 August 2024.
2. The history of H&M builds on archive interviews with Erling Persson and Margareta van den Bosch, held in the H&M archive at the Centre for Business History; and on texts by Eva Selin (notably <https://www.foretagkallan.se/foretagkallan->

(1917–2002), had been expected to take over the family's butcher business in Västerås, about two hours northwest of Sweden's capital, Stockholm. Instead, he struck out on his own, creating businesses wherever he saw an opportunity, from selling aged cheese to restaurants to starting a small retail chain for clocks and pens after securing contracts with Seiko and Mont Blanc. During a trip to the USA in 1946, he discovered a phenomenon that had not yet reached Sweden — stores selling fashionable clothes at low prices. Inspired by this, he opened a women's fashion store called Hennes (Swedish for "Hers") in his hometown Västerås in 1947. Although Erling was already living and working in Stockholm, he reportedly said, "I'll start in Västerås because if it doesn't go well there, no one needs to know." However, Hennes was a success from the very beginning. Soon, Erling Persson had stores all over Sweden, selling not just women's but also men's and children's clothing. The Nordic countries were next, with Norway being the first international market in 1964. The business idea of treating clothing as a perishable product was a hit with customers. Or as one woman happily expressed at a store opening: "Hennes opening here is better than a raise." According to Erling Persson, H&M should be located where "the money and the shopping bags go", meaning in the best retail locations. But it was important to be flexible — a good location could quickly become less favorable. He avoided owning store properties, reasoning that it was "easier to move clothes than buildings." In 1968, Erling Persson bought the hunting and fishing store Mauritz Widforss, which was located next to an H&M store in Stockholm. He added "Mauritz" to the company name, creating "Hennes & Mauritz", which was later shortened to just "H&M". In 1974, the company went public on the Swedish stock market. During the 1980s and 1990s, it expanded into a dozen European countries. And in 2001, H&M crossed the Atlantic and opened a flagship store on Fifth Avenue in New York, marking the company's expansion outside of Europe, first in the U.S. and, starting in 2007, also in Asia. A photo from the Fifth Avenue opening captures 83-year-old Erling Persson with his son Stefan (born 1947). By then, Stefan had succeeded his father, first as CEO and then as Chairman of the Board. Stefan was later followed by his son, Karl-Johan (born 1975), who served as the CEO from 2009 to 2020 and is currently Chairman of the Board for the H&M Group. From its single-brand origins, today's H&M Group also includes brands such as COS, & Other Stories, Arket, Weekday, Monki, Singular Society and Selpy. While "affordable clothing" might have been the starting point for the business, the company's today formulates its business idea as "always offering the best combination of fashion, quality, price and sustainability." Since 2004, H&M has also featured recurring designer collaborations, starting with Karl Lagerfeld. Subsequent collaborations have included partnerships with Stella McCartney, Viktor & Rolf, Madonna, Roberto Cavalli, Comme des Garçons, Matthew Williamson, Jimmy Choo, Sonia Rykiel, Lanvin, Versace, Marni, and David Beckham. In 2013, H&M entered the high fashion arena with its first H&M Studio show during Paris Fashion Week. More recent initiatives include the 2015 launch of the Global Change Award (from the H&M Foundation), designed to spur innovations that can accelerate the shift from a linear to a circular fashion industry; the 2017 launch of the new brand ARKET, created as a modern-day market offering a broad yet selected range of essentials; and the 2023 issuance of a so-called "green bond" valued at EUR 500 million to support financing of H&M Group's circularity and climate roadmap. As of spring 2024, Daniel Ervér, formerly the CEO of the H&M brand, serves as the President and CEO of H&M Group. Although the company remains publicly listed, the Persson family retains ownership control of the company group. About the commercial value of corporate heritage A review of a company's history, like the one above, is often interesting reading for students of business, history — or business history. But can it be of value to the company itself, beyond simply evoking nostalgia among long-serving employees? Rephrased, is there commercial value to corporate heritage for the corporation itself? Initially, H&M did not actively consider the idea, but as we'll discuss later, company management came to embrace the idea that heritage can energize today's business. Before we explore that development, however, let's consider the general value of corporate heritage. Much has been written about the strategic value of corporate heritage or history. (I'll be using the terms "history" and "heritage" interchangeably, though a longer discussion could be had about the differences in their use and definition. Similarly, I'll be using "history marketing" and "heritage marketing" interchangeably.) Many papers also reference Steve Bar-

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nyheter/lektionsmaterial/hms-grundare-erling-persson-fran-ostbud-till-imperieskapare/, accessed 20 August 2024) and Ingrid Giertz-Mårtenson (notably <https://www.bizstories.se/foretagen/sveriges-modeigant-mot-nya-mal/>, accessed August 30 2024).

ney's seminal 1991 article, "Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage," which describes how to recognize truly strategic assets. (This article is also considered foundational for the resource-based view of strategic management.) Barney's starting point was that companies seeking success must understand which of their internal assets or resources create truly sustainable competitive advantages. He argued that among all the assets a business has at its disposal, some are more important and strategic than others. Which assets these are depends on the nature of the company's operations and the industry in which it operates. It is worth noting that companies in the same industry can have different strategic assets, depending on how they choose to view the business. According to Barney, a strategic asset is recognized by having four characteristics that other, more general, assets do not possess. A strategic asset is:

1. *Valuable*. It exploits opportunities or neutralizes threats in the company's environment.
2. *Rare*. Almost unique, something that competitors do not have.
3. *Imperfectly imitable*. Not easily replicated by other companies.
4. *Non-substitutable*. No other asset in the company can perform the same job.

The big question when considering the corporate value of corporate history is whether a company's history can be considered a strategic asset. Does a company's past, its legacy or heritage, have strategic value for the future?

The short answer, when matching the asset "company history" to Barney's four criteria, is yes<sup>3</sup>:

1. *A company's history is valuable*. Although what is considered "valuable" can depend on perspective, there are many arguments in favor of history being an asset that can exploit opportunities or neutralize threats. History provides meaning and context; for a company or a brand, it evokes associations and images that help keep the business relevant for its key constituents. Furthermore, history is the most authentic asset a company has, especially important in today's times when what is "real" or "authentic" helps build corporate value. History also makes the organization wiser; as all students of the past know, history helps recognize patterns from before, both good and bad, and informs today's decisions on which paths to follow. History also creates solid financial value, visible especially in the goodwill values assigned to companies when they are acquired. Additionally, history gives the company its place in the larger societal narrative, showing the contributions it has made to all our lives.
2. *A company's history is rare, even unique*. No two companies can have exactly the same history; otherwise, they would not be separate entities. In Sweden, the food retail giants KF and ICA have operated side by side in the same industry for over 100 years, but they have distinctly different histories. One emerged from cooperative movements, while the other was a counter-reaction from independent retailers. Similarly, the German shoe companies Adidas and Puma both originated from a firm founded by the Dassler brothers, Adi and Rudolf, before they went their separate ways with different brands. A shared origin doesn't lead to identical histories.
3. *A company's history is also imperfectly imitable*, it cannot be easily copied by another company. Even in an acquisition, the acquiring company cannot replace its own history with that of the acquired company (although there are examples of attempts to do so). It is more reasonable to say that they expand their already existing history. The acquired company's history often continues to exist as a distinct branch of the group's collective timeline.
4. *A company's history is also non-substitutable*. Although proving the non-existence of something is logically impossible, we at the Centre for Business History in Stockholm have not found, over our 50 years, any other resource that creates the same contextual understanding, builds brands, strengthens organizations, or reduces risks in the way that history does. (To name but a few benefits.) Moreover, if the company's history is organized, and structured in a professionally managed

3. A longer discussion on how "history" meets Barney's requirements for what constitutes a strategic asset can be found in *History Marketing — Using history as a corporate strategic asset* (Business History Publishing, 2023)

corporate archive, it becomes even more challenging to identify any other asset that could replace it. So no, there is no other type of asset that can perform the same role as the company's history.

Now, when we have established that "history" is truly a strategic asset, what use can a company put that asset to? Let's see what H&M did.

## Project *Secure H&M Heritage*<sup>4</sup>

To use any asset strategically, it helps if that asset is easy to overview and access. That was not the case for the asset "history" at H&M for a long time. In fact, it wasn't until 2008 — shortly after the company's 60th anniversary and just a few years after the founder's passing — that H&M began to seriously consider its heritage and archival practices. Margareta van den Bosch, the company's head of design from 1986 to 2007, was instrumental in initiating this process. She had lived with the company through some of its most formative years, including its global expansion, its evolution in clothing styles and ambitions, and the launch of its designer collaborations, starting with Karl Lagerfeld in 2004. In the fashion industry, van den Bosch was a legend, and within H&M, she was an organizational linchpin.

Equally instrumental was Ingrid Giertz-Mårtenson, a trusted advisor to H&M and the Persson family, who just previously, in 2006, had been the driving force in establishing fashion as a scientific discipline at the Stockholm University.

There had been earlier attempts to establish archiving and preservation processes, but real progress was not made until van den Bosch and Giertz-Mårtenson, in conversations with the Persson family, made history a focal point for the organization. If the company had once viewed itself as a "simple retail chain," (as a quote from internal documents showed), they made it clear that H&M not only had a global impact in its business but was also a prominent figure in the international fashion industry. As such, it had a legacy that required careful curation and preservation, "unless our heritage is to be determined by others," (to quote another internal discussion.) But before H&M could leverage its history, it needed to gather it. Thus, in 2008, "Project Secure H&M Heritage" was launched. The Centre for Business History in Stockholm<sup>5</sup> was enlisted to manage the project for H&M, with close oversight by Margareta van den Bosch and Ingrid Giertz-Mårtenson, and regular check-ins with chairman Stefan Persson. The project ran for three years and was built on three pillars:

1. *The external view*: a review of over 60 years of media coverage of H&M across all its markets, with a particular focus on Sweden, was conducted. This helped create a comprehensive timeline of externally covered events and captured the evolving sentiments toward the brand.
2. *The internal view*: close to 100 interviews were conducted with H&M employees, both current and former, from all levels and areas of the organization. These interviews followed established oral history practices, were recorded and transcribed, and added to the growing H&M archive.
3. *History inventory*: an inventory of historically relevant documents and files was conducted at H&M's main offices in Stockholm and key locations in other markets. Initially, expectations of finding preserved documents were low, but as word spread about the project, employees began to contribute materials they had saved personally. This was of course in addition to documentation from top management at the C-level functions. An open call throughout the organization led to further contributions from early international markets such as Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, and the UK.

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4. The history of the "Save H&M Heritage" — project build both on the many oral history interviews (described as part of the project), and on recent interviews with project participants.

5. The Centre for Business History in Stockholm is an archive organization, that helps Swedish companies take care of their historical material in professionally managed solutions. It also offers them help in actively using this archival assets for history marketing or other purposes. Through its independent research secretariat, the Centre also conducts independent research and initiates academic projects. The author of this paper is employed at the Centre.

These three pillars laid the foundation for what became the H&M archive, which is now preserved at the archive facilities of the Centre for Business History on the outskirts of Stockholm. In 2011, a “history preservation policy” was established, and H&M has continued to add material to its archive over the years, including new interviews. Given that garments are a key part of H&M’s history, the preservation policy includes guidelines on how and which clothing items to add to the archive. For instance, designer collaborations are nowadays added to the archive at the same time they hit stores. Other special collections are also incorporated into the ever-growing clothing section of the H&M archive.

In August 2024, the continuously expanding H&M archive stood at

- Documents: 106 shelf meter;
- Images: 10,5 shelf meter;
- Objects: ca 50;
- Box-based material (i.e. clothes): 96 boxes.

## H&M Heritage in Action

The H&M archive is today a well-utilized asset in the H&M group. H&M continuously both updates its archive and makes use of it, internally as well as externally, leveraging its heritage for today’s business activities. The physical archives, located in Bromma outside of Stockholm, is frequently visited by various departments across the organization, particularly by the design and sales teams. The archives’ digital assets can be accessed online, via a custom-built “digital reading room”. The departments often seek inspiration from the archive as they plan new collections or sales collaborations, aiming to learn from the company’s past successes (and not so successful projects). Worth noting is that although use of the corporate archives are heavily encouraged, they are not by default an open resource, free for everyone to just request for usage. Anyone interested in visiting the archive has to be granted access by a designated H&M “permit issuer”. Although few requests are ever denied, this formal process helps both keep track of usage and also gives a touch-point to ensure that all heritage users understand the principal limits of how historical material can be used. These limits refer to issues such as a copyright and intellectual property rights, or personal integrity and data protection rights. The person assigned to granting archive access is thus key to the archive’s continued usage. The person currently holding this position, walking the balance between encouraging more usage of the archive and ensuring its proper use, is Netan Lasseby, a veteran at H&M and senior advisor in the Group Communications department at H&M Head Office. Individual projects also draw on the archive. For instance, for the latest Met Gala in New York — the annual haute couture fundraising event held for the benefit of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute — H&M’s participants created new garments inspired by old styles, drawing directly from the company’s archive. Ann-Sofie Johansson, H&M’s creative advisor and head of design, explained to the media: “The theme was Sleeping Beauties. We brainstormed about what that would look like for H&M, and since we’re quite an old company, the team went to our archives and looked at ’40s and ’50s dresses that had been saved. They found little features, decorations, and certain shapes that are now part of the dresses.”<sup>6</sup> In 2017, the Australian filmmaker couple Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin created a four-minute film for H&M’s then-new Erdem collection. Before starting the project, they visited the H&M archive in Stockholm to learn more about their prospective client and its heritage — and a short evening visit grew to a long night in the archives, as they dove into the cultural DNA of the company.<sup>7</sup> Internally, H&M’s 2D/3D designer Ralf van der Schaaf continuously creates 3D mod-

6. Quote from “H&M’s Creative Advisor Started Off Folding T-Shirts There 37 Years Ago”, Bustle, [https://www.bustle.com/style/hm-ann-sofie-johansson-creative-advisor?utm\\_source=Newswav&utm\\_medium=Website](https://www.bustle.com/style/hm-ann-sofie-johansson-creative-advisor?utm_source=Newswav&utm_medium=Website), accessed August 30, 2024.

7. More can be read in the following article: Kyle O’Brien, “Baz Luhrmann brings vibrant storytelling to H&M Erdem collection campaign”, The Drum, accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/10/25/baz-luhrmann-brings-vibrant-storytelling-hm-erdem-collection-campaign>. Information about the Luhrman-Martin visit to the archive is from sources at the Centre for Business History; the visit was kept under-wraps and also kept secret for many months

els of old garments found in the archive, bringing the company's historical designs to life in a modern format.

## Looking Forward

It may take time for a company to realize it has a legacy and heritage worth preserving. But as the H&M-development shows, a company can become surveyors and keepers of their own history no matter when they start. The H&M-development also shows how a professionally organized archive quickly becomes a useful asset for all parts of an organization — as it looks forward to its future.

And as to the future of the H&M-archive, it has all the foundations for future growth, both in scope and use.

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afterwards.

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