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Viewpoint -- Plant Tour(ism)

Forget Wally World, take your family on a plant tour vacation. They'll soon be as excited about manufacturing as you are.

By Peter Strozniak

You're sitting around the kitchen table with your spouse and kids trying to decide where all of you want to go on your summer vacation. The kids want to go to Disneyland, but your spouse wants to go camping. For once in your life, you actually have a vacation idea.

With trembling excitement in your voice you say, "What about traveling to York County, Pa. It's the world's only factory tour capital where we can see how they make really cool stuff like motorcycles, pottery, and snack foods."

Your kitchen suddenly becomes as silent as the city morgue. Your kids and spouse look at you as if you've just fallen off Planet Dork.

Okay, I know, it's a hard sell. But tourism officials in York County, about 50 miles north of Baltimore, are successfully promoting their county as the factory tour capital of the world. In other words, it's easier to convince strangers to take interesting tours of factories than your own family.

The York County Convention and Visitors Bureau unveiled its marketing plan to promote the Factory Tour Capital of the World in January. Central to this new promotion are free tours of 14 manufacturing companies such as the Harley-Davidson Inc. final assembly plant that attracts more than 100,000 visitors a year; Pfaltzgraff Co., America's oldest continuously operating pottery manufacturer; Snyder's of Hanover, makers of sourdough hard pretzels; and the Frito-Lay plant, which makes Doritos.

York, by the way, is known as the snack-food capital of world. Other snack-food manufacturers include Martin's Potato Chips, UTZ Quality Foods, and Wolfgang Candy Co. Now if that doesn't make the kids salivate, what will?

What's intriguing about all of this is that York County officials have embraced the manufacturing industry not just as a means to create jobs and wealth, but also as a new way to promote tourism that creates even more jobs and businesses.

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- Significantly higher
- Somewhat higher
- About the same
- Somewhat lower
- Significantly lower

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"The factory tour idea had been talked about for a while," says Neal Goulet, a spokesman for the bureau. "It's kind of a no-brainer given that York's County's strength is its manufacturing base. Manufacturing is everywhere in York County."

To give you some idea of what Goulet is talking about you have to start in downtown York where several murals illustrate the county's rich and long manufacturing heritage. One mural shows manufacturing workers from 1895 who are dwarfed by a gigantic iron wheel gear. During the 1800s, the country's first iron steamboat and coal locomotive were manufactured in York County. And York Manufacturing Co., founded in the late 1800s, later became York International Corp., a global manufacturer of heating, ventilating, air conditioning, and refrigeration products. Today 687 manufacturing companies are based in York County, and more than 25% of the county's workers are employed in manufacturing.

Since the Factory Tour Capital promotion was announced five months ago, 19 newspapers from around the country have written stories about it. A short story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* generated more than 1,100 calls to the visitors bureau office in just one week. The bureau also recorded over 3,000 additional hits on its Web site, www.yorkpa.org.

"Considering that we've only been promoting [the] factory tour[s] since January, the response has really been pretty phenomenal and suggests that other people see the value in it too," says Goulet.

In addition to the plant tours, there are 10 factory outlet stores and four factory-related museums including the Industrial and Agricultural Museum that features a Grist Mill with an operating water wheel and an A-frame ammonia compressor that stands more than 30 ft high. It was originally manufactured in 1904 to refrigerate a meatpacking plant.

On June 21 and 22, York County is sponsoring its third annual Manufacturers Days. This allows companies that can't open their plants to tourists throughout the year to conduct tours for two days. When the event was first held in 1999 it was a one-day event that attracted about 4,000 people. Last year attendance grew to 5,700. This year the event has been expanded to two days in order to give visitors more time to tour more plants. Participating in this year's event are about 30 manufacturing companies such as Honeywell International Inc., Svedala Industries Inc., and Doucette Industries Inc.

If you still have a hard time with your family, let them know that York County is near Hershey's Chocolate World, Gettysburg's historic Civil War battlefield, Lancaster County's Amish community, and Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

If that doesn't work, dissolve your family's Democracy and declare yourself supreme ruler.

Peter Strozniak is an IW associate editor based in Cleveland.