

Publishing your annual report is not just a statutory obligation: it can be the single most important marketing and communications opportunity you have each year. Judgements about your performance will be made on the strength of your annual report. Use its power to deliver your messages with impact, so they will be remembered.

### **Messages**

Companies, government departments, charities and NGOs have to publish statutory information about their annual performance. However, there are many other good reasons why a voluntary organisation should be interested in producing a good quality annual report. For example, it:

- Explains your organisation to the outside world and tells the story of its aims, achievements, commitment and style of working.
- Reports back to donors and others and is one way of thanking them.
- Encourages staff and volunteers and gives them pride in their work.
- Motivates and attracts quality job applicants.
- Gives a clear picture of a well run organisation showing good use of supporters' money.
- Can directly request involvement and raise money.
- Reinforces public trust and gives credibility to the organisation.

The way you present that information and reinforce your key messages can dramatically affect the impression on the reader.

For maximum effect your main messages need to run through all aspects of the annual report - the front cover, the annual highlights, page design, photographs, charts and editorial content.

### **Structure**

Most readers will not start at the beginning and read through to the end. The structure of your annual report can make it more inviting to browse, by making use of techniques such as:

- 'At a glance' summary of the year.
- A user-friendly contents page and page numbering.
- Charts showing financial and operational highlights.

- Clear section headings on every page.
- 'Special reports' on topics such as your environmental performance or equal opportunities policy.
- A financial overview - a concise summary for those who will not study the accounts in detail.
- Small charts and diagrams in the margins illustrating the adjacent text.
- A glossary of technical terms.
- Contact names and addresses for further information - including your website address if you have one.

## **Style**

The best annual reports are written in the style of a good quality business magazine. Most annual reports fall far short of that standard, and are often dull and full of jargon. Chairmen and chief executives can be among the worst offenders. Using a professional writer will help to make your copy readable. An outsider's view can also make sure that you do not make assumptions about your readers' knowledge of your sector.

## **Audiences**

Consider who will read your annual report. It is also an opportunity to inform and persuade people such as

- potential funders
- members and donors
- Parliament and government officials
- local communities
- employees
- suppliers
- regulators
- environmental and other lobbying groups

In any one year, up to 25 per cent of your readers will see your report for the first time. For their benefit, it is worth including basic information about your activities and history.

## **Photographs**

The casual browser can learn a lot from photos and captions. A skilled photographer, briefed at the beginning of the year covered by the report, can capture key moments in a way that communicates not only the year's events, but also the personality of the organisation. Reinforced with crisp captions, photos are often the most eye-catching and informative element on the page.

## Managing the production

The key to success is to start early and apply professional project management disciplines. If you can't afford a professional designer then there are plenty of design packages for you to choose from. To achieve a report that really stands out from the crowd, you should decide on your key messages and themes at an early stage, and appoint a single co-ordinator to oversee the copywriting, design, photography, approvals and print production.

## Checklist

Here is a list of just some of the things you need to think about:

- Understanding your readers – have you an annual plan for research and collecting feedback?
- Being brief – are your formats concise, convenient and accessible?
- Do you use only great stories?
- Do you use short copy and striking pictures?
- Do you use bullet points, lists and captions in order to make reading and access to information easier?
- Do you signpost your publications so readers can easily find their way around?
- Do you avoid making the assumption that your readers know all about you already?
- Do you make use of the opportunity to involve readers by offering them chances to contribute/be listened to?
- Do you encourage response from readers at every opportunity and offer readers opportunities to contact you?
- Do you make financial and other financial information interesting and accessible?
- Do you publish photos of the people you would like your readers to contact?
- Are you open and accountable?
- Do you make your annual report available in a number of different formats such as audio - cassette and computer disk?
- Have you got a sponsor for your Annual Report?

## Further information

*Charity requirements & guidance - Accounting and reporting*

Charity Commission

Tel: 0845 3000 218

[www.charitycommission.gov.uk](http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk)

Companies House

Tel: 0303 1234 500

[www.companies-house.gov.uk](http://www.companies-house.gov.uk)

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For further information contact

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