

ANNUAL REPORTS: Print, Online and Going Green

From the smallest nonprofit to the mightiest international conglomerate, an annual report is an annual necessity (and annual headache, some would say). But, beyond the challenge of pulling together financials, letters and layouts, annual reports present a powerful communication opportunity — the chance to reach key stakeholders and potential new audiences in ways that share critical information and drive growth.

Getting started

The first step to creating a successful annual report is to commit to the process. Annual reports require time and resources, but, if well executed, are worth the effort — and can pay for themselves through increased shareholder investment or donor support. A recent poll by Rivel Research Group found that:

- 70% of respondents agreed that an annual report is helpful in stock-buying decisions
- 69% said annual reports are helpful for tracking stocks once purchased
- 80% of long-term investors (3+ years) found annuals useful for tracking their portfolio

A second step is to define the purpose and qualities of the annual report. What do you need the annual report to communicate? How do your stakeholders like to receive information? And, how can an annual report best represent your work in today's marketplace?

Choosing the medium

While there is nothing quite like holding a beautifully printed piece, many organizations are increasingly choosing to supplement a slimmer printed annual with online features or are moving to Internet-based annual reports completely. When choosing the best medium for your annual communication, it is worth considering:

- *Print*: No matter what your marketing guru may tell you, print is not going away. Print is tactile, personal and powerful — and can be sent directly to stakeholders' homes and offices. While some companies may be slimming page counts to reduce costs, print remains the medium of choice for many companies and their investors. Printing may come at a cost to both your budget and the environment, but a good design partner and printer can produce exceptional reports with environmentally sustainable papers and inks that will ease the impact on both your budget and the planet.
- *Print/Online combo*: Many firms are dipping a toe in the online pool by supplementing a trimmed-down print piece with online features, such as a video introduction from a CEO or creating a simple mini-website that mimics the print piece.
- *Online*: While some organizations have balked at moving annuals online, the trend toward interactive reports — set by giants such as GE, Cisco and Procter & Gamble — is undeniable. In addition, a survey by the SEC in 2008 revealed that 50 percent of retail investors use the Internet to help make investment decisions. The Internet provides a level of interactivity that speaks to today's investor, and moving a report online sends a powerful message to stakeholders about an organization's commitment to innovation and the environment. Using the power of the Internet for annual reports can include:
 - *Mini-websites*: Creating a mini-site goes well beyond simply placing a printed piece online. The interactivity of a website gives stakeholders control of their experience and introduces features and resources in ways that are both informative and compelling.
 - *Video*: From footage of your mission in action to messages from leaders, video goes beyond the scope of words and still images to personalize your mission and highlights from the year past.
 - *Flash*: Moving graphics, slide shows and imaginative approaches to navigation add a "cool" factor that compels interaction.
 - *Social networking*: Placing video, announcements and elements of the annual report on YouTube, Facebook, Docstoc, Twitter and other sites reaches your audiences via these innovative channels.
 - *PDF*: Perhaps the most cost-effective move online is to simply place a PDF of what would have been a printed piece on your website for downloading. A simple email or postcard can serve as an announcement to stakeholders that the annual report is available.

Going green

Today's social and financial climates seem to be converging in ways that make a powerful case for going green in the workplace. Reducing the size of an annual report, using sustainable produced papers, inks and power sources, or moving part or all of a report online can have a significant impact on the environment, your company's reputation and your budget.

Take two examples:

- *Walmart*: By utilizing Forest Stewardship Council certified paper and wind energy, Walmart's annual report saved an acre of trees, electrical power equivalent to that used in five homes for a year, 608 metric tons of greenhouse gases (equal to taking 122 cars off the road for a year) and nearly 205,000 gallons of water.
- *American Water Works*: The association estimates that its online annual report allowed it to skip the financial and environmental costs of printing 10,000 copies of its 160-page annual report, which saved 300 trees and 98,000 gallons of water.

Conclusion

While there is no silver bullet for solving all your annual report challenges, there are a few points that will smooth the process:

- *Serve your audience*. Select a direction and medium that will speak to and inspire your audience.
- *Start early*. Nothing facilitates a project like good planning.
- *Go green*. It's good for the planet — and will play well with investors, supporters and staff.
- *Less is more*. Your audience will probably spend less time with your annual than you'd like them to. If readers were to give you 10 minutes, what would you like them to know?
- *Work with the best*. Special communications, such as an annual report, can benefit from an outside eye and the insights of communication experts. Partnering with a talented creative partner will allow internal resources to stay focused on their work and engage the expertise of an experienced team.

Suka is a strategic design and marketing communications firm located in New York City's Soho. Since 1992, we have provided creative print and interactive solutions for a diverse range of clients in both the public and private sector. We combine smart marketing strategy with compelling graphic design that delivers award-winning results. To learn more, please visit www.sukacreative.com or contact Susan Karlin, President, at skarlin@sukacreative.com.