

Crafting engaging annual reports

 By [Teresa Jenkins](#)

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An annual report is part of the organisation's human talent recruitment programme and it needs flow, not structure, and it needs to be a 'good, attractive read'...

Creativity, storytelling and design in an annual report are essential requirements if one wants readers to be engaged in the organisation's activities for the past year and not be put off by dense chunks of numbered text.

This is particularly true of government departments that need to involve their stakeholders in the processes and potential of various projects and capture their imagination, buy in and support.

This requires much more than just design. The initial step is to take the data needed and convert it into prose. Too often, each department produces copy with extensive numbering that looks more like a lawyer's contract than a story about the successes and setbacks of the year.

If one was describing the satisfaction gained from a successful delivery of services to a colleague or interested party, one would relate it as a tale - one would not use lists and numbers but rather speak of the difficulties surmounted, the excitement of well-executed projects and programmes and the look on people's faces as they received benefits.

Even obstacles can be instructive, by providing valuable lessons learned for the forthcoming year and offering an opportunity to mitigate the circumstances by outlining new preventative measures.

Do more than outline the organisation's mission, vision and values - show how committed staff members, executives and all who play a part in the department deliver them. An annual report is part of the organisation's human talent recruitment programme - potential employees, directors or shareholders can be motivated and excited by this information and long to participate in its efforts.

Designing interest

Photographs are an essential in an annual report but are often simply large, static photos of executives, which again fail to capture the readers' interest. One group photo of the executives/board should be sufficient. Let the rest intensely capture the mood of the report.

During this next year, start capturing photos of executives actively participating in events and recipients of the organisation's projects and programmes. With a large library of such photos, the choice for annual reports can widen to

incorporate vivid images of the board, executives and key staff members actively engaged in service delivery. Team these up with captivating captions, not "the Minister/CEO."

If single or group images of the board/executives are required, ensure that a professional photographer comes in early in the year and shoots the photos with the correct lighting and background. If necessary, use a consultant to advise on the kind of makeup, styling and clothes that are used in television studios to produce attractive photographic effects. Low-level cellphone images do not translate well into high-gloss printing and rushed photos detract from professionalism of the design.

Figures, while essential for the financial aspects of the report, should be used sparingly in other parts of the report. Graphs, pie charts and flow charts are visually more appealing and easier to read and comprehend. However, if one is supplying these as locked images to the editorial and design team, ensure that they have been spellchecked, as locked images cannot be corrected.

Bullet points serve to break up long lists and highlight certain sections - however, they are not used with punctuation but appear as single lines. If there is more than one sentence per point, rewrite it to achieve one idea per point.

Headings and crossheads create interest on a page and, used with white space, create a pleasing aspect to the reader, albeit subliminal. Extensive use of capital letters, unless referring to a legal entity should be avoided, as they break the reader's concentration and flow.

Editing - more than proofreading

Though clients ask for proofreading services, what is usually required is editing, which is 'the making revisions to and suggestions about the content of a document, focusing on improving the accuracy of language, flow and overall readability, as well as checking for grammar and spelling'.

With multiple authors, there are often inconsistencies in the document between US English and South African English in the use of such words as organization vs organisation or program vs programme. There can also be changes in style, where one department uses the third person and another favours first person.

Here is where the use of a highly experienced editor is so essential; the editor reads the entire document, gets the flavour of the house style, the underlying tone of the document and the visual effects of the messages and ensures this continuity throughout the report.

Perfection requires time

With all of the above however, sufficient preparation time is an essential. Even before the financial year-end is reached, selected writers should be selected within the company to begin collating data. Despite the late inclusion of the final financial figures and auditor's reports, it is possible to create the bulk of the report within weeks of the year-end, based on quarterly reports, media interchanges, progress reports and events. However, convert Excel spreadsheets containing key performance indicators into more readable prose, as readers find table a strain on the eyes and tend to overlook or skim through them, which means vital messages may be lost.

Once collected and assembled, the external editor can assemble this into a readable chronicle of the year's high and lows, ready for the first draft, usually produced as a Word document for ease of reading and proofing. The designer, in the meantime, can create the design shell into which the text will be inserted. Once the text is adjusted, rewritten and signed off, it is proof read and then inserted into the design for the first PDF proof, which creates the look and feel of the final report. The client can then view the first text-correct design, suggest any possible changes and the final copy can be produced for printing.

Annual reports are not only legal documents but can be powerful marketing and fundraising tools.

Litha Communications offers design, editing, proofing and printing services for annual reports, newsletters, brochures and any marketing communication.

ABOUT TERESA JENKINS

I am a passionate international marketer with particular bias for building sustainable brands, from inception to managing premier clients' marketing strategies and results-driven Public Relations. Outside work, I cherish spending time with family and friends, exploring wildlife and oceans through travel, indulging in reading, and embracing the adventure of lifelong learning facilitated by the internet of things.

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