

## Making the most of your NGO's annual report

For public institutions, charities and other non-profit organizations, an annual report can be far more than an exercise in accountability, important though that is.

Done right, an annual report can strengthen the commitment of existing donors and stakeholders. It can serve as a powerful tool to draw new supporters to your cause. And it can boost morale by reminding staff and volunteers how much difference they make.

However, achieving that requires more than slapping together financial statements, donor acknowledgements and a laundry list of your organization's accomplishments. To give your annual report more impact, here are some key things to consider:

### **Tailor your format to your audience**

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to creating an effective annual report. Let your audience dictate the tone, length, format and more. If your stakeholders are short on time, a simple four-pager or even a postcard might be all you need.

However, if you depend on passionate donors who dig deep into their pockets, a mini-website packed with stories, infographics and videos might be more appropriate. A printed publication can be a great leave-behind when you're pitching major donors. Or perhaps you want a combination of formats to serve different audiences and purposes.

### **Tell stories**

Stories let you communicate not just what you're doing, but why you're doing it. They engage readers on an emotional level and add meaning to your facts and figures. While the number of food baskets you distributed to families may be impressive, what will stick with readers is the story of how a nutritious breakfast helped James ace his grade 10 math exams.

### **Be visual**

Photos capture attention and tell great stories, so don't make them an afterthought. Use them to document your organization in action and the people, places and creatures it serves. Consider hiring a professional photographer for important events or a half-day session with your team, or recruit a talented volunteer.

Graphics like charts, diagrams, icons and maps can also give your report visual oomph. They're a perfect way to convey complex information and break up dense blocks of text.

### **Make it skimmable (both in print and online)**

Most people won't read every page of your report, so find ways to communicate your key messages at a glance. Pull out strong quotes and stats and make effective use of headings, subheadings and captions. Consider including short profiles in text

boxes — readers will often look at those even if they don't read the main text. And if you have testimonials to include, make sure they stand out.

### **Focus on the “so what”**

It's not about what your organization did last year. It's about the impact those actions achieved or the possibilities they created. How did your services transform client lives? How did your report change policies — and what will that mean on the ground? How will the foundational work you're doing today pay off in the future?

### **Put your supporters front and centre**

If your work wouldn't be possible without your supporters, make sure your language reflects that. Don't talk about what “we” did last year — talk about what “your donations” did.

### **Get personal**

When it comes to the message from the president, executive director or chair of the board, make it authentic. Telling a personal story and sharing their passion, excitement or frustration will help foster a more personal relationship with your supporters and stakeholders and deepen their commitment.

### **Be transparent**

It might be tempting to gloss over or ignore the challenges your organization faces, but being upfront about both the bad and the good helps build trust. If something went wrong internally, explain how you're addressing the issue. If you're facing a shifting political climate, a recession or some other external problem, use it as a rallying point and explain why you need help from supporters now more than ever.

### **Look forward as well as back**

An annual report is the perfect opportunity to inspire supporters with what's ahead. Talk about how the past year's achievements fit into your long-term strategy, and give your supporters reasons to stay excited and engaged.

### **The importance of planning ahead**

Crafting a high-impact annual report takes time, so start early. When you factor in tasks like interviewing, writing, translating and layout, even a seemingly straightforward annual report can require four months of work. Gather material throughout the year to make it easy to remember all the high points. Set up folders where you can file stories, photos, media hits, testimonials and other material you might want to showcase, so your job is easier when annual report time rolls around.

*Need help adding impact to your annual report? Put Cadmium Red's expertise to work — just call or email us to discuss your project.*