



## **How to make your next annual report work harder for you**

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. 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 parties 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**

Although ultimate responsibility lies with the company secretary, in most organisations it is the communications or PR department that co-ordinates the annual report. The key to success is to start early and apply professional project management disciplines. You will almost certainly need the service of a professional designer. 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.