
ANNUAL REPORTS

Annual reports have traditionally been the way that corporations tell their stockholders the past year's story. They highlight successes and challenges and share information about the financial status of the organization. In some states, public libraries are required by law to publish an annual report that includes certain financial information. Some have chosen simply to publish the financial data and make them available to the public on request; others have seen the public relations potential in publishing an annual report that tells the whole story—not just the financial

story. Still other libraries that don't necessarily have a legal obligation to publish a report have realized their responsibility to provide information to the community, as well as the public relations that they can get from an annual report; they develop and disseminate a report on an annual basis.

The first thing to decide if you plan to publish an annual report is who the audience is for the report. If you will use it primarily with potential donors and sponsors, you will probably develop a different report from the one that you distribute to all of your library users. For example, you might publish a slick, corporate-looking annual report for your fundraising efforts and you might also publish some brief information (data on use and finances along with bulleted highlights of the last year) on plastic bookbags that you give to library users at checkout. As with any of your print publications, format should follow function as you determine what type of annual report to develop.

While publishing an elegant annual report can be a rewarding project and can represent your library in a positive light, be sure that your report is consistent with your message. For example, if your financial data and narrative will indicate that it has been a rough budget year for your library, don't publish an annual report that looks expensive. A simple but elegant, one-color publication on attractive paper is probably more appropriate than a slick four-color book with photographs.

ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE ANNUAL REPORT

No matter what format you choose for your annual report or who your targeted audience is, certain elements are important for any effective annual report.

- **Message**

Your annual report should be developed around a clear message and that message should be the one that has guided your past year's public relations efforts. This may mean that not every library program or service is mentioned in each year's report, but it is the best way to ensure that your annual report supports the public relations message that you have worked so hard to disseminate.

- **Design that supports your corporate identity**

While you may want your annual report to be special or a little different from the materials that your library publishes on a regular basis, it should be designed based on your corporate identity. It may have some enhancements or include some more elegant elements than your monthly newsletter,

but someone should be able to glance at your annual report and know that it is a library publication.

- Letter from the library director
This letter should summarize the past year. It should include highlights and challenges and clearly focus on your overall public relations message. For example, if you have built your public relations plan around the message that “our library is a community center,” then the library director’s letter should emphasize that message.
- Narrative of the year-in-review
The length of this narrative is dependent on the size and format of your report, but it is important to call attention to highlights from the past year. Be sure that you don’t repeat information that the director called attention to in his message; this is a chance to focus on other events and activities. For example, if you had a particularly successful summer reading program or series of adult programs, you might want to highlight the actual events here and the library director’s letter might call attention to circulation increases that resulted from those programs.
- Circulation and other use information
This information helps the reader see how your library is being used. It should be presented in an easy-to-understand fashion, such as charts or graphs. You may want to think about different ways of presenting the information based on your library’s overall message and the most accurate demonstration of what really happened during the past year. For example, you might want to publish circulation and gate-count information in bar graphs by branch library to show that the branch library you are planning to close **next** year has limited use in comparison to other libraries. Or you might want to publish your circulation by collection because it demonstrates the high use of your children’s collection—and you are about to mount a fundraising campaign for children’s books. This doesn’t mean that you should skew the information, but you can publish it in a way that supports your library’s message and goals.
- Financial information
If you are in a library that is mandated by state law to publish financial information, you may have little flexibility here. If you are able to make your own decisions about what you

publish, however, you should think carefully about your audience. If your report is targeted at the general population, simple financial data focusing on broad general areas will get your message across and not confuse people. If you are trying to show the expenses incurred by each library branch, you might want to break the figures out by facility. An annual report published primarily as a fundraising tool should probably include a list of donors and their levels of contribution so that potential donors have that information readily available. The key is to provide just the amount of financial information that your target audience needs—no more, no less. You may want to “test” your annual report copy with a couple of members of your target audience, a supportive corporate sponsor, or your Friends of the Library president to see if you are taking the right approach.

- Photographs of library board members
If you can afford it, including photographs of your library board members in the annual report is a wonderful way to recognize board members and to remind the public that community members are involved in the operation of the library. You may have to invest in portrait photographs but they should be usable for several years of annual reports as well as for other publications, such as your newsletter or the newspaper.

DISSEMINATION

When you determine the target audience for your annual report, think carefully about how you will disseminate it. Mailing an annual report may be more costly than mailing a newsletter, but there is no reason to spend money on an annual report that sits on the shelf in your office and doesn't reach its intended audience. The bookbag idea mentioned above is a great way to disseminate an annual report targeted at the public. Bookmarks might be another format that would facilitate dissemination. Even if you publish a traditional booklet annual report, you may want to put a few copies in your library's pamphlet rack for the public to pick up. If your annual report targets corporate sponsors, you may want to mail copies to the past year's contributors and then use the report throughout the next year to solicit other contributions.

Another audience for annual reports is the library community. Establishing a mailing list of other libraries in your state or region and mailing a copy of your report to their directors helps you to build a professional network. These libraries will probably include your library on the mailing list for their reports; this

exchange will help you to share ideas and strategies and also will keep you abreast of what is happening in other libraries in your area.

SCHOOL AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

While school and academic libraries may not find it practical to publish their own annual reports, they should work with their organizations' communications offices to be sure that the library is mentioned in the annual report. At the time of the year when the annual report is being developed, a note to the communications director reminding him or her of the library's accomplishments during the past year (and perhaps an offer to help compile copy and photographs illustrating those accomplishments) might be just what an overworked communications director needs. Even if this strategy isn't successful the first time, over time it may prove fruitful and the library and its accomplishments will be a part of the organization's overall communications focus.

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