

## Annual Reports for Maximum Impact

Your organization's annual report provides an opportunity to showcase the good your nonprofit has achieved over the past year — and there's probably a lot you want to share! But as you begin to think about what to include, the list gets longer and longer: your services and accomplishments, recognition of your supporters, financial information, a call to action to encourage donations.... How do you streamline all this information to create a compelling, effective document? How do you craft a publication that will excite recipients, rather than making their eyes glaze over?

No matter what the size or scope of your annual report, there are some key questions that can help guide you in developing content that highlights your mission and drives donor engagement.

**Who is your audience?** It's easy to get caught up in conversations about your annual report's content, but first, *who are you talking to?* (While your annual report may go to many different people, who's the *primary* audience?) Try to be as specific as possible.

**What's the overarching message?** Your annual report should tell a story about what you do, how it makes a difference, and why your readers should care. In some cases, there may be an overarching message, or "theme," you can identify. If so, the content of your annual report can be organized to support that message. (Note: Not every annual report has (or needs) a theme. If you can't tie all your content to it strongly, it's fine to do without it!)

**What were your major accomplishments and how do they relate to your mission?** You've done a lot during the report period. As you report on it, remember to show rather than tell. For example, talking about recognition your organization has received and how this recognition demonstrates the quality of your services is more impactful than simply saying you have great services!

Also, remember to focus on accomplishments and benefits, rather than activities. Have you made any breakthroughs? Served a new group of people? Started any exciting new initiatives or programs? How are you closer to making your organization's vision a reality? (Revising your human resources policies surely took a lot of work, but is it compelling to an external audience? Does it support your overarching message? Edit accordingly!)

**Who are the best people to tell our story?** Once you've determined what you want to say, determine who can best convey it. Even if your reader is interested in helping all homeless children, she's more likely to have an emotional response to the story of Emily, a 6-year-old girl who loves coloring — and now has a new home thanks to your work. (Imagine the accompanying image: Emily's drawing of her

family's new house!) Quotes from people you serve, as well as from your employees, donors and other community leaders can all be used to increase credibility and impact. You're passionate about the work you do. Make your reader passionate, too.

**Whom do we need to thank?** Your annual report is a great vehicle for recognizing donors. Be sure to double and triple check that your donor list is accurate and up to date, and include a contact number for people to call if they need to correct their listing. It's also a nice touch to include short profiles of select major donors (and research shows that when people read articles or see photos featuring themselves or their friends, they're more likely to give).

**What do you want people to do?** This part of your report (commonly referred to as the call to action) is crucial. While there may be many reasons to create an annual report, donor stewardship and the encouragement of future financial support likely top the list. Use your annual report to let people know what they can do to help you achieve your mission. (Encouraging volunteerism or other involvement may also be important.) Including a response device will make it even easier for people to invest in your vision, and don't forget to let folks know if and how they can give online.

For more tips to help create an impactful annual report, please visit [Annual Report for Maximum Impact \(Part II\)](#)

*To learn how Thurlow/Associates can help your organization create compelling annual reports and other materials, contact us for a no-cost consultation. You can reach us at (310) 675-6497 or at [hello@thurlowassociates.com](mailto:hello@thurlowassociates.com).*