

## **Communications: Annual Report MassHousing – Fiscal Year 2008 Annual Report**

### **Introduction**

#### **Public sector annual reports: A delicate balancing act**

An annual report issued by a public agency – even if that agency does not use taxpayer dollars, as is the case with MassHousing and other HFAs – is always a balancing act.

On the one hand, every HFA wants to put its best foot forward with a polished product that puts their efforts in the best possible light.

On the other hand, a public sector organization must be aware of the pitfalls of overly flashy or too-clever reports. These are often seized on by government critics as examples of inappropriate spending or self-aggrandizement. This can turn an annual report into a negative news story.

This was especially true in the political and governmental environment in Massachusetts in 2008. The state was running huge budget deficits, and quasi-public agencies, which have always been viewed with some skepticism by the local media and conservatives, were under intense scrutiny for any signs of excessive spending, which would signal insensitivity to the difficult economic times.

MassHousing's annual report for 2008 is an effective balancing act. It presents an image of a successful, well-managed public agency that creates and preserves affordable housing and meets the needs of every-day people. At the same time, it conveys a feeling of understatement and modesty as well as prudent use of scarce resources.

#### **The whole is greater than the sum of its parts**

There are numerous factors at work in MassHousing's 2008 report – all of which were carefully thought out – which lead to the overall effect of not too little, not too much, but just right.

#### ***Paper stock***

The choice to use uncoated, FSC certified stock with a post-consumer waste content reflects fiscal as well as environmental responsibility. It has the added benefit of being “current” in its looks.

#### ***Environmentally sensitive printing***

As noted on the back cover, MassHousing selected a printing company that is 100% wind powered and FSC-certified (meaning it is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, an international non-profit, multi-stakeholder organization established to promote responsible management of the world's forests).

#### ***Report thickness***

At 28 pages, the report is substantive, but not overwhelming or too heavy to mail. It was more cost effective to saddle-stitch the report. This binding choice is also easy to read due to the fact

that it can lie flat on a desk. Information does not get lost in the gutter and it allows for more information on a page.

### ***A mix of black and white, color and reused photography***

Using black and white photos of the board members, executive staff and governor differentiated these top-level individuals from the other senior staff pictured. Making images black and white lent them certain seriousness and allowed us to reuse pictures (featured last year in color) and make them look new. In fact, almost all of the senior staff photos were also reused from the previous year and simply cropped for a fresh look. This saved on the staff time and the expense of getting new photos taken.

Other photos, such as those of the homeowners, were reused from a news article (again saving on time and money). Photos in the rental lending summary were gathered from various sources and used as thumbnails as a way to unify their different appearance.

### ***No stock photography***

All of the photos are either people served by MassHousing, business partners of MassHousing or properties financed by MassHousing. We eschewed anonymous, saccharin, generic stock photos. This is very important in telling a story authentically.

### ***A blend of architectural and people photos***

A housing finance agency finances buildings, but those buildings house people. The photography must communicate that the housing is high-quality, but also that real people are being served.

### ***In-house copywriting and graphic design***

The report was written and designed by MassHousing's own Corporate Communications staff. No expenses were incurred on outside vendors or consultants, except for printing and that photography which was new for this year's report (again, this was significantly less than in prior years.)

There are a number of other elements at work in the report, all of which enhance its readability and utility:

### ***White space***

Careful attention was given to the amount and organization of copy – all with the intention of preserving a good amount of white space, which makes the information in the report easy to read and understand.

### ***Numbers as headlines***

Each spread leads off with a large number. This one design element is meant to intrigue. The reader must look closely at the subhead to learn what the number refers to, further drawing them in to the body copy.

### ***Quotes and photos of business line leaders***

These elements satisfy the reader's innate curiosity to know more about the people who actually run the organization. It helps personalize and humanize the report. It is also positive recognition to staff for a job well done.

### ***Symmetry***

Each spread features a similar layout, but occasional sidebars and features keep the report from being monotonous.

### ***Dedication***

The report was dedicated to an employee who had passed away the previous year. It helps to humanize the report and reminds the reader that the organization is comprised of human beings who believe in a mission, and not by bureaucrats.

### ***Conclusion***

The quality and success of an annual report cannot be judged in a vacuum. Context is everything. So while highly creative, glossy or unusual annual reports are eye catching, they cannot be deemed successful solely for their inventiveness.

Rather, a report should be judged on the ability of the organization to communicate its successes while being mindful of the environment into which it is being released.

In the case of MassHousing, our 2008 annual report was released in the midst of the shattered mortgage market and an economic recession; a time when state government was experiencing severe budget cuts and a time when quasi-public authorities like ours were under close scrutiny for any perceived sense of extravagance or overspending.

As a result, our report needed to convey a quiet and economical confidence. The report's understated yet professional look, attractive design, compelling photography and environmentally-friendly printing methods portray a well-managed, successful public sector agency that is proud of its accomplishments yet sensitive to the stressful economic and governmental climate that existed in 2008.