

NCSHA 2012 Annual Awards
Communications Category
Subcategory: Annual Report

Entry: The Lives We Touch: 2011 Annual Report

We are submitting our 2011 annual report for consideration for an NCSHA award because the response from our partners and the public has been considerable, telling us we hit the mark with our messaging. The overall sentiment in those responses is reflected in this email received just a week after the annual reports were mailed to 3,000 of our business partners and state residents:

Brian [our executive director]:

Although I received the PHFA Annual Report earlier in the week, today was the first time I had some time to read it.

I have never seen an annual report that in so many ways tells the story of an organization and why it exists. The report goes beyond data and statistics; it goes right to your heart. The stories of people, lives changed and human triumph is truly uplifting.

I just wanted to thank you for sending it to me. It has truly made my day.

Herb

Responses like this let us know our 2011 annual report has been effective with our diverse audiences. So regardless of whether or not we win an award, we feel this report has been successful. The true secret behind the power in this year's annual report is simple indeed. As NCSHA knows firsthand, we learned this year to let our customers tell their stories of how their lives have been made better as the result of affordable housing. These moving stories go beyond the statistics and dollars spent to drive home the positive impact of the work done every day by our agency. The graphic design and customer photos were crafted to reinforce the messages in the stories told in the report.

Our annual report is our most important marketing product of the year. We use it to communicate with many audiences that are critical to our success, including our investors, legislators, the development community, our counseling network and affordable housing advocates, not to mention state residents. As a result, our staff makes a sizeable creative investment in this piece. The 2011 annual report was given special care because we all believed so strongly in the messaging as we saw it take shape.

An Inspirational Theme Drawing on an NCSHA Initiative

Our inspiration for this year's annual report was NCSHA's "Faces of Home" campaign. That initiative clearly demonstrated the value in letting our customers tell their stories about how affordable housing and associated housing services had positively impacted their lives. Working with our division directors, we sorted through countless customer testimonials to find the most powerful stories that would best communicate the many benefits provided by the agency to Pennsylvanians. Interviews with these families confirmed the best choices, and each was given the chance to speak from the heart about what PHFA programs had meant to them.

It's our goal every year to learn from prior reports so that we improve each subsequent product. We knew the written word would be important for telling the story of "the lives we touched" in 2011. But we also wanted to use visuals as much as possible to bring these emotional stories to life. We were fortunate to find a photographer up to the challenge who was willing to put in the time and travel

necessary to get the supporting photos for the report from Pennsylvanians living at opposite corners of the state.

A Team Effort Builds on Each Person's Expertise

After several meetings of our creative team, including PHFA staff and our graphic design vendor, the design theme of using photos displayed in a variety of picture frames was selected from a number of strong candidates. The varied wallpaper backgrounds used throughout were also meant to establish a tone for each story and to suggest the intimacy of stepping into the homes of the people we are meeting. The goal was to give the feeling one gets when you go into a friend's house that has a wall of meaningful family picture. Struggle, achievement, pride – these are the sorts of emotions conveyed by such photo walls, and our report seeks to duplicate that impact.

The report cover was printed in four-color process on a felt cover stock and then embossed using a multi-level, sculptured die, to give texture to the picture frames. The effect of having glass over the image was achieved using a clear foil stamp. I am told this is a printing technique rarely seen. The result gives the cover photos more of a 3-D feel, adds texture, and replicates the visual effect of glass covering each framed picture. It provides visual interest and established the design thread that carries through the report.

Simple Storytelling Can Produce Powerful Results

Great care was taken in the writing of the five testimonials to share people's heartfelt stories in a way that would demonstrate their appreciation for PHFA programs and share the ways their lives had been changed for the better. We wanted enough text to cover important details but not so much text as to be burdensome to read. The stories were written in such a way that the average citizen could appreciate the results produced by PHFA without being turned off or bored by housing acronyms or jargon. During meetings between our staff writer, the photographer and the graphic design team, all collaborated on how these creative elements could best be combined to powerfully tell these stories. The exchange that took place helped to elevate the final product.

Ultimately, it was decided to include some testimonials from staff, too, because the connection that occurs between PHFA housing professionals and our customers affects both groups in positive ways. A circle of giving and taking arises from which everyone benefits. We sought to capture that in our storytelling.

Getting the Most from this Creative Effort

An additional benefit of this effort to capture and share our customers' stories is that these testimonials can be adapted for other media, as well, multiplying their impact. We are working to reuse these stories on the Web, in our brochures, and in interviews we do with the press so that we get an expanded benefit from the cost invested in collecting and telling these successes. In fact, many of the annual report photos are being used in a large-scale wall mural we're producing this summer to tell the PHFA story in our building lobby. So, while producing this year's report took an extra measure of effort, the benefit of having these powerful stories available will help our marketing and communications efforts throughout the year.