

Changing Lives, Growing Communities

Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency

Communications: Annual Reports

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In watching the media consumption of the audiences with which we interact, we have noticed during the last decade the trend of people wanting to read less and be entertained more. It’s hard enough to get the average person to care about the work being done by housing finance agencies. If we don’t pay attention to how they want information presented to them, then we are doomed to failure and much of our communications efforts will be wasted.

So, in brainstorming this year’s annual report, one of our founding principles was that we would reduce the amount of text substantially and move to a more visual format. In the colors we chose, in the conception of the page layout, and in the interactive features of the report (pull-out pages), we wanted to craft a report that invited the typical person “off the street” to become curious about its contents. Our goal was to create a product that could leave a strong, positive impression of the work we do even if all the reader did was skim headlines and photos and captions, and I think we have succeeded.

Next, of course, it is impossible to totally remove text from an annual report. So, knowing this, we really labored over the text to make it as free of acronyms and buzz words and jargon as possible. The text was written entirely by our internal staff. As we wrote, we envisioned the report being read by our family and friends. We repeatedly asked if it would be understandable and if the gravity of our work would come across to the reader? Would the limited text be received in a way that held their interest and helped them to comprehend, and then turn the page and read some more? Our strongest emphasis was on headlines and captions and pull-quotes, since in many cases we recognize that is all that will be read by the typical consumer. Nevertheless, every word in the report was pondered and debated and reshaped until we felt we had it right.

In summary, you might say our annual report for 2018 respects modern audiences by taking a USA Today approach to communications. Our readers are busy, and we must understand that the work of HFAs is not a top priority for many of them. So, to get our information across, we have to present our messages in simple language and – dare we say it – we have to entertain them. If nothing else, we have to make our materials so inviting that they draw the public in and hold their attention for at least a short period of time. Hopefully, too, even if they just read a portion of our report, we will have succeeded if we will have left a positive impression and if our housing mission is generally understood. We believe our report accomplishes what we set out to do.

Key elements added in 2018

A new feature we added this year was five “Housing Facts” interspersed throughout the report. These housing facts accomplish two main things. First, they provided an information nugget for skim readers to take with them after they put the report down. They are instantly digestible and work to help the reader grasp the power of housing not only for others in their communities but for them directly, as well. Second, through their introduction of white space, they give the reader a visual pause before the start of a new section of information.

Another feature we’d like to point out is our use of pull-out pages. Much like the joy one gets from pop-up books, pull-out pages keep their contents a surprise until the engaged reader draws back their third

page to reveal them. Because we were striving to communicate more visually, we needed the additional space these pull-out pages provide. Plus they are intended to make the report more interactive by having the reader participate in its sharing of information. Watching people leaf through the report, it is revealing that most go directly to these pages because they find them engaging.

A third and final feature we'd like to note are our customer stories, which were crafted with a minimum of text and a maximum of photographs. The pictures tell much of the story visually and are intended to portray the main messages even if the reader doesn't pause to read the text. The pull-quotes, too, provide a way to share a key point with a minimum of text, presented in a larger font and bright color that is inviting for readers. We are very pleased with how our customer stories work, and we plan to build on this approach again in 2019.

We believe our report is innovative because of the extent to which it uses color and graphic design and a deliberately reduced amount of text to break through to readers. We took this approach because we believe in the approach that less can be more. Is this replicable, too? Of course it is. Nothing we did is necessarily costly or difficult. But in some of the sections, like those that describe the work of PHFA, it did take considerable thought and brainstorming to design ways of conveying information visually and with as little text as possible.

Engaging our audiences

Our main audiences for our annual report are, in this order, legislators and government officials, business partners and the general public. Because our partners work in the housing field, they know housing industry lingo. Even from them, we got feedback that they appreciated the highly visual design of the report. It is with legislators and citizens, however, that this report is having its greatest impact because it can communicate with them even though their knowledge of, and interest in, housing, is limited. We have seen in action how this report is able to help newly elected government leaders quickly grasp the extent of the work we perform and the ways it changes lives. We observe their reaction as we page through it with them, and you can literally see the “light bulb go on.” This report has proven more effective at communicating our main messages.

Producing a report of this high quality that comes at communications from a visual perspective rather than a more traditional text-based approach takes a seven-month partnership between staff and key outside vendors. PHFA communications team members are the content experts. But we have limited graphic design and professional photographic expertise on staff. So in those two vital areas, we rely on input from an outside design and print firm, and from a proven freelance photographer. Over seven months, there are some in-depth huddles to brainstorm and get everyone on the same page. Beyond that, there are countless emails to let every have full and honest input as the project takes shape.

The cost, and the resulting treasure trove of communications elements

The cost from the design firm for their layout and visual expertise, and for their printing and mailing of 2,550 copies is \$34,000. The cost to have our trusted photographer travel to all four corners of the state over two weeks to capture customer's lives on digital format is another \$6,000. The end result is not

only a printed report but also a Web version that includes “alt tags” so that visually impaired readers can fully enjoy its contents, too. The Web edition is available at www.phfa.org/news/annualreport.aspx; if you hover over the images, you can see the alt tags that would be “read” out loud by technology for the visually impaired.

We are not sure how this compares with costs experiences by other HFAs. But we can tell you that we find this project to be a tremendous value. That is because we reuse this material for years after each report is produced. The customers’ stories and photos are reproduced in our brochures and on our website. Additionally, see, for instance, the five customer stories from the report that form the main body of our homepage at www.PHFA.org (at this time in late April). Some, too, provide pull-quotes and images for use on pull-up banners we use in our building to tell our story to visitors, and at trade shows. One graphic in this year’s report, on page 21, already is an extra-large pull-up banner in our building lobby (see photo). All customers and business partners see that banner and its message about our statewide housing impact. Another secondary use of the material in our annual report can be seen in the Press Kit we update every year, using some of the report’s best content; see: www.phfa.org/news/ and look under “Reporters.” Additionally, content from our report feeds many of the social media stories we tell via Facebook and Twitter throughout the year. Given the ongoing value we get from our investment in our annual report, we see its expense as a bargain.



In conclusion

Much evidence suggests that we are losing our traditional reading public. This is especially true of the Millennial generation that grew up with the Web and video games. Many in that age group are exactly the young homebuyers we want most to reach to tell about our housing programs. If we are to stay relevant and open some level of recognition and interest with our various publics, we need to communicate in ways that work best for our customers.

We believe our 2018 annual report does an excellent job of communicating with today’s audiences in a way that is visual and engaging and even fun. We think it invites readers into its pages and then holds their attention to share with them basic messages about who we are and how we can help them with housing. We are very pleased with how this report has performed for us and we plan to build on these efforts in our next one.

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