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Nonprofit annual reports cut the flash, save cash

Boston Business Journal - by [Mary Moore](#)

Once the showpiece of most nonprofits, the annual report has taken on a new look and a new role, reflective not of how well an organization is doing, but rather of how deeply an organization is cutting back to ensure donor dollars go to the cause and not to the collateral.

Some organizations are printing fewer pages. Others are printing fewer copies. The **Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston** has taken what appears to be the biggest step, for the first time this year posting its annual report completely online, saving 50 percent on printing and mailing costs compared with previous years.

Thick and super-glossy are out. Trim, streamlined, two-color or black-and-white, and posting a version of the annual report online is in.

Scaling back is happening not just with annual reports, which tend to be the largest line item in most marketing budgets, but also with all types of brochures and pamphlets that nonprofits traditionally have distributed.

The Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts saved between \$75,000 and \$100,000 on printed material by cutting pages and using different paper and fewer colors, said Martha Waldron, chief marketing officer.

So far, sources said, the audience is not complaining.

“Donors don’t necessarily want to see glossy, full-color information from a nonprofit,” said Jennifer Ebisemiju, director of marketing for the **Greater Boston Food Bank**. “Some donors will look at that and say, ‘Why are you spending my money that way?’ ”

Imparting financial information is the reason annual reports exist in the first place, said Susan Bonanno, owner of the nonprofit consulting firm **Bonanno Marketing Group**. The reports have evolved into a way of thanking donors and telling stories about the organization’s accomplishments, she said.

“Now they’re saying, ‘We can tell the stories in other ways and we can use the annual report as a more practical medium,’ ” said Bonanno. “There are more effective and

cheaper and, in my opinion, more connective types of communications than an annual report.”

But do organizations lose anything by leaving tradition behind?

“Organizations that don’t do anything else except for an annual report need to make sure they don’t lose the opportunity to tell stories about the great impact of the organization,” Bonanno said. “But print is not the vehicle of choice. It’s not a dinosaur, but it has a different place in the media mix than it used to.”

The Greater Boston Food Bank started paring back on its annual report earlier than most. Since 2003, it has been printing in black-and-white and cut the pages to 20 from 32. Last year, the Food Bank printed 2,000 reports, a significant reduction from the 3,000-plus annual reports it published in years past.

While one of the Food Bank’s goals has been to save money, higher printing and paper costs have offset the savings, Ebisemiju said, adding that the Food Bank typically spends between 75 cents and \$2.50 for its annual report.

That is a strong argument in favor of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston’s decision to go completely online with its 2009 annual report, supported by a postcard reminder mailed to all donors, informing donors that the report is available on the organization’s Web site.

In years past, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston has printed and mailed annual reports to everyone whose name appeared in the document.

“It does save us a lot of money and does feel better from an environmental perspective,” said Jan Goldstein, director of marketing and communications. “When cartons of annual reports arrive, you get a sense of how much paper is used.”

Paper is a concern for The Home For Little Wanderers, and to that end, the organization cut its annual report to 20 from 28 pages and reduced the number of printed copies. But the Home is not ready yet to go completely to the Internet.

“We have donors that have given to the Home for many generations,” said Heather MacFarlane, public relations manager. “And a lot of donors still like the hard-copy piece.”