

Putting people first

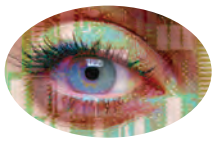
With employee annual reports, thoughtful design helps showcase the people who make the business succeed

by Jonathan Hanwit and Guusje Bendeler



Online travel company Expedia received more than 300 pictures and quotes from employees who wanted to celebrate their teams and share personal travel tips in the company's employee annual report.

Can I get everyone's attention for a moment?" the art director authoritatively asks the 200 employees who pour onto the front steps of their office building. It's the first day of a photo shoot, and these pictures must be perfect—without professional models, wardrobe or even a good backdrop. Creativity is taking center stage. "We've got about a dozen beach balls we're going to throw into the crowd. Your goal for the next five minutes is to keep them in the air, OK?" she says, slightly nervous, for what sounded like an ingenious idea 10 minutes ago now seems a bit silly. But it's too late—up go the beach balls. And there it is—the perfect shot.



visual appeal

Even when a company is going through difficult times, an employee annual report can help pave the way toward renewed success, inspiring employees to push the envelope even further.

This is a typical moment during a not-so-typical photo shoot. These photos will be used for an employee annual report. The reasons why a company might publish an employee annual report are endless, but in essence, it is for and about employees and their relationship with the company they work for. It can be a printed report (just like the annual report sent to stockholders) or a web site. Not only does it showcase employees' work, it also showcases the employees themselves. No models wanted here, just employees.

Connecting employees

Companies around the world are constantly looking for ways to increase productivity and effectiveness. One of the pieces

in this puzzle is ensuring that employees are well educated about the business, understand their role within the organization, are motivated and feel appreciated. An employee annual report helps achieve all of these goals.

For example, an employee annual report could include short stories on individual or team successes. Explaining the impact of these achievements on the business's bottom line helps connect an employee's everyday role to the company's ultimate success. Moreover, telling the story from the employee's perspective humanizes the business.

"We created our *Annual Report About People* as a way to recognize our employees and their contributions throughout

the past year," says Rick Jimenez, director of employee communications at Qualcomm. "The report provides a unique opportunity to share company successes and milestones by featuring the people and teams that make it all happen."

Even when a company is going through difficult times, an employee annual report can help pave the way toward renewed success. For example, when a company is struggling to develop innovative products, employees are the centerpiece of the solution. An employee annual report is one way to point out all of their positive accomplishments and inspire a workforce to push the envelope even further. Employees need to feel even more connected to the company they work



When crafting an employee annual report, it's important to identify the right visual style to reflect the company's culture and spirit. Here, designer Edison Miclat and Guusje Bendeler, creative director for Parallax Visual Communication, review the progress of Expedia's report.



“This isn’t a press release—it’s a people piece. The content is where you get the details, but the layout is where you get the story.”

—Kristin Graham,
Expedia

Expedia’s themes “We get the world going” and “Go!” inspired the design of its 2007 employee annual report, showcasing employees in motion and including their comments throughout the piece.

for when times are tough, and a report offers one way to recognize employees for their contributions.

Depending on the information it contains, the report might be used as a recruiting tool for prospective employees as well, giving them a glimpse into the company that no staffing brochure could provide. It can also be used as a marketing piece, giving potential partners and clients a peek inside the company.

But the content is just half the battle. You also have to bring the words on the pages of

an employee annual report to life with strong visuals.

Inspired design

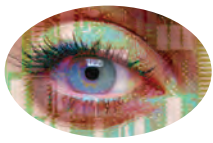
Of course design is important to any project. Visuals give life to text—they can make a piece serious, fun or whimsical, while giving the reader another way to connect with the story being told. The difference with an employee annual report is that this is an opportunity to showcase employees on a personal level, so accurately representing their work, team spirit and personalities becomes critical to every design decision.

“This isn’t a press release—it’s a people piece,” says Kristin Graham, senior director of recruiting and internal communication at Expedia. “The

content is where you get the details, but the layout is where you get the story.”

Bringing visual communication specialists on board at the start of the project is key. First, develop a theme or concept for the report, and then make sure that the theme is pervasive in the writing style, content and visuals. Will the style be festive and upbeat or reflective? These decisions not only affect how you’ll write the copy, they will also guide the design of the report.

Visual communicators or designers can play a role in shaping the report’s content. If certain visual elements are



visual appeal

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needed to complement the overall design, the designer will identify them at the beginning. Indeed, just as designers can be inspired by the content, so can writers be inspired by the images and ideas a design team provides.

Expedia's theme for its 2007 employee annual report was "We get the world going," with a secondary theme, "Go!" Employees became "transporters," moving people into the future and creating motion, change and growth. As part of the design process, we proposed additional ideas for content, including posing questions to

challenge was to make it authentic, so who better to tell our story than our own people? We received more than 300 pictures and quotes from employees who wanted to celebrate their teams, tell customer stories and share personal travel tips."

Understanding the elements of design

Imagery

Photos, illustrations and other graphic elements have an immediate impact on the reader. They can set the tone for the piece even before the reader looks at any of the words on the page.



Qualcomm's *Annual Report About People* highlights the technology company's employees and their role in Qualcomm's overall success.

employees and including their feedback in the report as a graphic element.

"As the largest online travel agency in the world, we wanted to create a piece that celebrated the people behind our global brands," Graham explains. "The

You can write about the teamwork and the spirit of employees, but a photo shows the reader what this really looks like. You can describe how employees do much more than just work their eight-hour shift, but a photo reveals the pride in an employee's eyes when he talks about why he loves his job.

Although internal communicators may have a specific

theme in mind, oftentimes there are secondary messages they are trying to convey as well. For example, if a company is looking to show unity, it's important to use images that convey a team or people working together. Posing individuals standing together in a circle expresses togetherness and harmony, because the circle is the most unified and finished form found in nature.

Typography

Typography is just one of the subtle ways to ensure the reader gets the message you are trying to send. Most of the time, well-designed typography goes unnoticed, but that's almost the beauty of it. Good typography has a profound impact on the meaning of the words you are communicating. Take the word *happiness*. It's defined as "a state of well-being characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy." If this word is typeset in bright red with large, bold, uppercase letters, it conveys a festive, confident and vibrant tone. When the same word is typeset in lowercase, italic, blue letters in the bottom right corner of the page, it becomes a more personal, intimate, careful happiness.

Rhythm

Rhythm is a critical component to overall flow. A good rhythm for a printed report is comparable to a magazine where you have articles of varying lengths and formats. For longer feature-type stories in the report, it can

be beneficial to break up the text with images or a sidebar including relevant employee anecdotes or brief facts related to the content of the article. The diversity of rhythm makes the report more approachable and easier to read.

Online, rhythm is applied in a different way. Typically, readers can browse through the report in whatever order they please. Using sound and movement are two ways to create that rhythm online. These two extra dimensions make an online report more engaging and interactive, especially when you're working with a tight budget.

Walking through the creative process

One of the biggest design challenges is finding a visual style that reflects the company culture and connects with employees. How do you ensure that the visuals you use send the right message?

As mentioned earlier, establishing a theme is the first step. This theme will guide the entire design process, from photography, typography and color palette to paper selection.

For example, Qualcomm, the global wireless technology company, chose "Changing the world" as the central theme for its employee annual report. We expanded that idea by comparing the impact of one employee's positive influence and work to the ripple effect when a drop of water hits the surface of a pond. Creating visual comparisons streamlined

the design; in this case, radial and circular forms and spiral growth were used to create engaging layouts that captured the theme.

The next step is to decide on a visual concept or direction. After a series of brainstorming sessions, the design team develops written concepts with hand-drawn sketches along with descriptions of potential imagery. After a direction is chosen, the fun begins and the designers get to work creating layouts with photo directions, type choices, color palettes and other graphic treatments.

Identifying the right visual style to reflect the company's culture and spirit is another important factor when creating an employee annual report. Anything from employees' work habits to company slang contributes to culture, and it's essential that this is represented.

This culture will also drive the style of photography used. Would a journalistic approach work, or would more traditional portraits be better? Are individuals looking into the camera when they are photographed, or are they engaged in action?

Culture can also be conveyed through colors. For example, greens represent an eco-friendly feel. Warm, bright colors can be used to signify a bright future for the company.

We've shared a few ideas about the importance of design, and believe that visual communicators can help you connect to your audience. Designers make your content come to life. That becomes even more critical when think-



Qualcomm's "Changing the world" theme inspired radial and circular forms, echoing a ripple effect.

ing of an employee annual report because it is a reflection of a company's most valuable asset—its employees. It may take every trick in the book to get that perfect shot, but it will happen. The rest is up to the reader. ●

about the authors

Jonathan Hanwit and Guusje Bendeler are founders of Parallax Visual Communication in San Diego, California, a full-service design firm that specializes in internal communication. A completely customizable intranet, virtual employee trade shows and employee annual reports are just a few of their innovative internal communication projects.