

Write reports people will actually read

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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I was recently asked to coach two young women whose sole job was to prepare their company's annual general report. That was all they did. They spent an entire year preparing this epic tome that of course no one would ever read. At least, not in its entirety.

There are certain legal constraints involved in producing such a report, meaning financials have to be laid out in full, accounting to shareholders for each rand and cent earned and spent. Even this part of the report is never fully read, as most people just look at the bottom line to see whether they have in fact made or lost money.

The one part of the report that would have had any relevance or interest to anyone was their corporate social responsibility work. As this was a mining house, their projects included housing and health and welfare work - all reasonably interesting.

As I was going through these pages I asked, "So what was the miners' reactions when they were handed the keys to their own apartments?" "How did the new clinic go down with the families?" The reply was silence as one lady looked at the other for an answer. There was no answer as neither had bothered to get off their backsides and out of their office to go and ask the right questions.

There were pictures of buildings and accounts of how much was spent for how many.

Thrilling reading!

This meant that the bulk (and here I mean serious bulk) of the pages were straightforward facts and figures. Whole forests had been sacrificed in the printing of these books that would simply sit and gather dust on other people's desks...

In a time where people don't even read a whole page anymore, how can you expect them to read whole books of boring facts and figures? I mean when did you last see a Facebook post or a Tweet saying 'Yay, read ----'s Annual General Report - wow, what a page turner!

So what can be done to make people even remotely read the important stuff? Today when people want to know something they go to one place - Google - and that's the way they expect to find information. They want to press a button and up it pops and if they can't find it fast and read it quickly they'll give up.

This means you have to signpost your report in a way that lets the reader navigate their way through it in the shortest time possible. Note the word short - highly relevant. These days a good report is a short one, perhaps accompanied by a brief

video.

Here are some tips to make report writing easier and more effective:

- Cut out the fluff - get to the point quickly without wearing out whole dictionaries in the process
- Use good subheadings - signpost the way for the reader
- Make use of bulleted lists (like this) - they grab attention
- Use strong images - they immediately capture attention
- Keep the financials all in one part of the report - numbers in paragraphs stop people reading!
- Add some podcasts - people speaking are generally more interesting than words on a page

Above all, remember you have to entertain people. Yes, I used the word entertain. If you want to hold people's interest then entertain them...

ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.mediamentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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