

# Annual Report: Print Versus Digital

In our digital age, you have probably heard a board member, staff person or other stakeholder say something to the effect of “Nobody reads the annual report. It’s a waste of money to print and mail so many when you could just put it online or send people a PDF.” When money is tight, the temptation to “save” thousands of dollars in printing and mailing costs sounds pretty good. You need to make the decision that’s right for your organization.

Here are some factors to consider:

## Target Audience

Whose eyes do you want on this annual report? Think about generational differences. Think about the difference between picking up a brochure versus reading on a screen. An interactive online publication is probably going to be more effective if your target audience is primarily Millennials, than if you’re focusing on Baby Boomers.

## Shelf-Life

Think about an item in your email inbox versus a similar content item in paper format that lands on your desk or kitchen table. Maybe you save the email – or just don’t delete it. Maybe you tuck the print document into a nook, or it just hangs out on the desk or table for a while. Which one would you be more likely to take a second look at? Then, think about some individuals in your target audience. Which item would they be more likely to refer back to? Print items tend to have a longer “shelf-life” because of their physical presence. However, if there’s a link to your annual report displayed prominently on your home page for the rest of the year, it could have a similar outcome.

Are there places where you could have copies of your report available for people to browse? In the waiting rooms of doctor’s offices, law firms, and CPA offices people pick up things to read while they wait. Think about other opportunities to put it under people’s noses without mailing them a copy. Who are your partners in the community? How can they help?



## Goals of the Publication

The first goal of a publication is that you want people to look at it. What do you want them to do next? What is the end goal? Is this a marketing tool? Is it a membership or volunteer recruitment tool? Do you want it to bring in new donors or more donations from existing donors? Whatever your goal is, think about how print or digital fit with that goal.

## Designing for Print Versus Digital

Studies show that reading digital books is gaining in popularity while reading print books has dropped slightly. However, your annual report is not a book. It is not something that someone would pick up and read from cover to cover. It more closely resembles a magazine which people leaf through – often at random. It has photographs, sidebars, lists, charts and tables. It conveys information in many ways in addition to words on a page. How does the experience of viewing your document change from print to digital?

Your print publication may be lovely. Simply turning it into a PDF may not create the best digital experience. So, if you make the decision to go 100% digital, your design process may be very different. There are digital publishing platforms that can create more of a “page-turning” experience on the screen. These have associated costs where price and learning curve are usually inversely proportional.

In closing, there is no cut and dried answer to what you should choose for your annual report. It may even be something where you segment your contact lists into “prefers print” and “prefers digital.” It is, however, important to consider a variety of factors when making the decision.

