

# Annual Reports Get a Brand-New Makeover

Film tracks, sms lingo & social networking theme— cos use report as marketing tool

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You could try television commercials or social but there's another vehicle — a well targeted one at that — to send your message across to potential consumers. Hint: it's sent out once a year, it's packed with numbers and information — and it's sent out to company's shareholders.

Yes, it's the often mind-numbing annual report that managements send out to inform, impress, and often comfort, people who own their shares. But such yearly accounts of profit & loss do not have to be humdrum affairs.

Of late, a clutch of companies has figured out that annual reports can serve two vital purposes beyond the core ones: project an image that is in sync with the brands they market and services they provide; and, two, connect with an increasingly young audience in a language they understand.

*Baar baar dekho...haazar baar dekho, Yahan ke hum Sikandar, Sar jo tera chakraaye...* these songs could be a compilation of some of your all-time favourite hits. Perhaps. Yet, these are also some of the famous Bollywood chartbusters that Emami has used in its latest annual report!

Its grt 2b 25, Vr 25 too :-). That's the language of a texting, tweeting Gen-Y that Kotak Mahindra Bank has used in its latest annual report.

Bright colours, appealing illustrations, attractive graphics, innovative designs, and whacky ideas—India Inc is leaving scripting a new chapter in communicating with its shareholders.

Abraham Koshy, professor of marketing at IIM Ahmedabad, says companies are now using annual reports for reasserting their brand's value in the minds of the shareholders. "When Emami uses songs and Bollywood in its report, it's talking to the investors in their language. It's communicating to them that it's a young brand," says Koshy.

Annual reports give companies with old-world businesses a chance to create a contemporary landscape. Shriram Transport Finance, India's largest trucks financier, has used the theme of social networking in its latest annual report to drive the home the connect between communication in the real world and amongst people. By using innovative graphics, bright colors, talking and thought bubbles, the company has used social networking icons — Facebook's 'Like' icon, emoticons on fingertips, human icons connected with each other—to position itself as a youth-



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cussed organisation.

Managements have also realised that nostalgia has a great pull effect. So, if Emami used classic film tracks, Kotak Mahindra has — along with sms lingo — added some rare old pictures of its board members when they were 25 years old. The report highlights how a company communicates when it feels 'young at 25'—a theme that it used to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

#### REPORTS AS LOVE LETTERS

Shankar Jaganathan, economic historian and author of the book Corporate Disclosures 1553-2007, says an annual report can be a love letter written to the investors. "Whilst many view it as chore—like a travelling salesman filling up a travel statement — there are reports in which the joy of communication is visible," points out Jaganathan.

Emami, for sure, doesn't belong to the travelling salesman group. The cover page of its annual report proclaims in big, bright and bold font—*Munni Badnaam Hui Darling Tere Liye*. And this is just the beginning. Apart from the use of lively colours, informative snippets and catchy infographics, the annual report is interspersed with first line of some popular songs to go with the respective subheads.

N H Bhansali, CFO, Emami, says: "An annual report has to be seen from an investor's perspective. It's a marketing tool to connect with them."

Karthi Marshan, Executive VP & Head (Group Marketing), Kotak Mahindra Bank, points out that the annual report of any company is first and foremost a vital brand document that has both emotional and rational arguments about the brand.

"Behind every analyst's eagle eye is a human being who responds to emotional stimuli," says Marshan. "Hence, we choose to treat them exactly like we do our consumers, and provide content, information and brand stimuli in every way possible."

Kotak's report bagged Gold Award for being the most creative report in Asia Pacific, and Platinum Award for

being the best report in the banking category at the prestigious League of American Communications Professionals Vision Awards 2010. This is the largest annual report awards programme with over 5,000 companies applying from 25 countries.

#### BONDING WITH YOUTH

India Inc is gradually realising that the profile of its investors is changing; a new breed of young, ambitious and restless investors is replacing the old, orthodox and conformist ones. So, there is an urgent need to talk to them in their language, address them in a

manner that makes them feel comfortable and, most importantly, connect with them to gain their confidence.

Brand expert Ramanujam Sridhar feels annual reports are now used more as a means to build image of the brands. "India now has young investors and bankers. So a company has to be tuned into their demands and expectations. And they are doing it with the help of annual reports," says Sridhar, who is CEO of brand consultancy firm Brand-comm.

In fact, the best known case in India of using annual reports to build brand is Infosys. "The IT giant used pictures of Madhuri Dixit, Anil Kumble, CK Prahalad and Shivram Karanth in one of its annual report of the 1990s," points out Jaganathan.

Arvind Agarwal, CEO of corporate reporting consultancy Atherstone Investor Communications says annual reports must look and read attractive so as to evince interest. HUL, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Hero MotoCorp and Monsanto are among Agarwal's clients.

However, companies should not go overboard in their attempt to look different.

Says Agarwal: "Sometimes whackiness isn't the best solution. The annual report is, at the end of the day, a serious legal document accessed by all around the world. So, the communication should be universal, and one must avoid flippancy in visual rendition and textual tone."