



Foreword by
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Creative Deviations is the fundraising communications guidebook that has long been needed! Fresh. Insightful. Human.
— Sarah Lundberg, CFRE

Creative Deviations

How you can infuse your storytelling, fundraising and direct response with more creativity.

John Lepp



Introduction

“The merest act of pioneering, the smallest deviation can lead to much greater impact.”
– George Smith, *Asking Properly*, White Lion Press, 1995

A number of years ago, while sitting on a dock in northern Ontario with a glass of rose, I flipped open a book I hadn't opened for a long time.

The book was called *Asking Properly* by George Smith. Even if you have never heard of George, I guarantee you have been inspired by his creative thinking.

In my early fundraising days, George's thinking was impressed upon me almost every day by the people I learned from.

- Good fundraising sounds like someone talking.
- Ask for one thing and only one thing.
- Every appeal should be special.

As I poured a second glass of wine, I was struck by two things. First, how much of George's thinking about creativity in fundraising still wasn't being honoured and second, how much of my fundamental inspiration and creative thinking comes from this one fellow.

Something else that has stuck with me through the years is Ken Burnett telling me that *“80% of all fundraising really is just common sense.”*

Isn't it true?

If we would only take a moment to ask ourselves if the letter in front of us makes sense. Is it clear and simple? How would I write it if I was sending it to my grandmother? Would the words make her feel seen and appreciated, understanding where she is at in her life? Does it address what she cares about? What did I send to her last? What am I hoping she will do? How can I make it as easy as possible for her to help? How do I hope she feels when she reads this letter? Why should she care about this problem? And so on.

If we put down “the data” that we look at and listen to in order to make decisions, and instead, pick up that photo of a favourite donor and remind ourselves of the beautiful privilege we have in having conversations with her, I think our sector would be in a different place.

Creative Deviations is an anecdotal and thoughtful how-to guide to help you become more creative. It's *part* graphic design, *part* design thinking, *part* storytelling, *part* strategic thinking and *part* love note to you amazing humans who work so hard for your causes, your donors, your mission and your desire to contribute and make positive change in our world. **Thank you.**

This book will not be filled with tons of stats, data, ROI's, results, percentages and dollar signs, since these things change over time and by client. However, almost everything I reference and talk about is based on standard best practice that's been developed out of testing and experience through the years, by myself, here at Agents of Good and by my friends and colleagues from charities and agencies around the world.

To do direct response and individual giving appropriately, just as in our real life relationships, you have to acknowledge where you (your organization) and your donor have come from, where you and your donor and our world is at right now and where you and your donors are going – together and separately.

If we stop thinking about donors as detached from the everyday work we are churning out and instead, think of them as our moms or grandmothers, we might slow down and think about **what we are doing, what we are asking for and how we are going about those things.**

Love isn't a check box.

The relationships we form with other humans – on any level – can't be whittled down

to a simple “10-step process.” You cannot form deep human connections through statistics and one directional talking.

There is no magic bullet or new big idea.

Direct response and fundraising is only successful when you obsess over the 1,000 small things you need to be thoughtful about.

You need to do your work with love every day. And I beg you, if you aren’t able to help your organization be authentic and vulnerable to those you are asking for help from, then move on.

But back to this book of deviations.

Every day for the past 12 years, I have had the privilege to be a part of Agents of Good alongside my business partner Jen Love (aka Jen, Agent Jen, JLo) and her dad, the legendary David Love (aka David, The Godfather of Good). So much of the creativity and ideas that are gathered in this book reflect our combined knowledge and nerdiness about our craft.

To that point, I have been peering into the mailbox of your donor and examining the fundraising that she gets every day for more than 25 years. Here's what I've learned:

- It continues to be automated, created by cold computers and digital presses.
- It looks perfect and is overly branded leaving very little space for the donor to be a part of the story.
- It tells stories without asking for anything.
- It is maintaining status quo.

This book will show you how taking small steps off the trailblazed path will lead to interesting and successful results.

At times the direction I am taking you in will seem counter-intuitive, scary and downright wrong. Just like being a human. Nonetheless, we know that if we take a deviation from the norm, a better future may be the reward.

Design isn’t about how something looks.

It about how the damn thing works. How it all comes together – in one pack and over time.

Good design should be seen, should be understood, should be acted upon and

most importantly needs to get results... everything else is garbage.

This isn’t a book full of check boxes. I know we are looking for them but I’ve found there are very few definitives in the art form of direct response. As in, next to none.

That’s what makes relationships and individual giving difficult and challenging. This is why we cannot automate it, or teach it in a single course.

It’s made up of a thousand small moving pieces at any given time. You need to thoughtfully be aware of them, acknowledge them, manipulate them and study them. This craft of direct response is an art and a science, and requires a level of obsession to do it well.

Being creative means getting messy.

It means making mistakes. It means starting over. It means you say sorry once in a while. It means you do hard things that make you afraid and that you will be judged for. It means there will be crying, and there will be laughing.

My hope is that *Creative Deviations* will help you to feel more freedom to do your work every day and not worry too much about ‘breaking something’ by making a mistake or trying something new. Donors are a forgiving bunch. They often give more when you mess up.

My hope is that by adopting some of the deviations in this book, you will feel more engaged with your work. Through perfecting your craft, I hope that you will care for your donors a little more while having pride in yourself and the good you bring to our world.

I have the beautiful privilege of connecting with many fundraisers every single day. I see, and acknowledge, all of the love and passion you put into your work and into learning more about this strange art form that is direct response.

I am honoured and appreciate your time and attention for picking this book up, moving your way through it and thoughtfully considering how you can adopt and adapt some of these ideas into your day-to-day work.

From the depths of my heart, thank you.

John Lepp
July 2021

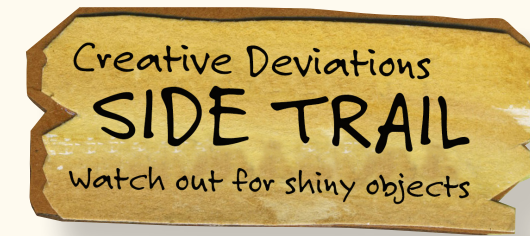
Sorry, one more thing...

I mention this a few times in the pages to follow but I am a big nerd for direct response, direct marketing, direct mail, design and storytelling. That being said, I often forget that there is a lot of inside baseball that goes on when you are talking with other nerds or nerds in training.

Sometimes I forget that not everyone obsesses over all of this as much as I do.

Both of my editors, Lisa MacDonald and Rachel Zant suggested that I add this quick note about assumptions and jargon. I try to acknowledge it as I go through the book but for a quick reference when I say:

- Pack – I am usually talking about a direct mail pack, at the very least a typical mail pack will consist of an outer envelope, a letter, a reply device (donation form) and a business reply envelope
- OE – outer envelope, the delivery vehicle for your pack, can be addressed or unaddressed
- BRE – postage paid, business reply envelope
- RE – postage paid or no postage, reply envelope
- Coupon, reply form, reply device, donation form – the part your donor sends back (hopefully) with a donation
- Letter – typically the piece that states your case for support
- Lift, insert, enclosure – basically any other piece that will go into your direct mail pack.



THE SYMPHONY OF DIRECT RESPONSE

We often talk about the “symphony” of amazing direct response.

The concept of the symphony is that every “note” is played as perfectly as possible so that the collective noise of it creates a beautiful, musical story.

In fundraising terms, that means you focus on *every* appeal, *every* tweet, *every* thank you call, *every* exchange with your donor, **every** “note”.

If you ensure that **every** “note” is sent at the right time, with the right ask, coated in love and appreciation for your donors... if you ensure it gets noticed and looked at... then, you will have a fundraising program that others will be envious of.

Here is something to consider.

Sometimes, your donor will only give to you once a year. Or maybe something in her life has changed and she won’t give to you at all this year.

Your donor might give you a small regular gift when you call and ask, or she might not. She might give a single cash gift to your direct mail pack or she might not be interested in what you need that day. She might “like” your post on Facebook and give to you online. Or maybe not.

My point is, just because one of your “notes” isn’t pitch perfect to her does not indicate failure. It is the totality of the sounds you create for her that matters.

If your direct mail appeal results are low, that doesn’t mean it’s a failure — especially if you have worked hard on the things mentioned.

You can never gauge your program on the success or failure of one appeal, or one channel. Or even on one donor for that matter.

It’s the totality of the notes that matter.



Deviation One - Forget About Your Logo

This deviation will respectfully ask how your brand can leave space for your donor to be a part of your story. At the end of the day, effective fundraising has very little to do with your logo or brand story. In fact, your branding could be working against you and pushing donors away.

Sorry, not sorry.

Throughout my career, I have seen too many great ideas dismissed with a swoop of the hand and someone saying, “I’m sorry. This doesn’t adhere to our brand guidelines.”

#cries

Every director or fundraiser I have worked with will tell you that I’ve tried to skirt around their “guidelines.”

That’s because guidelines are often created by branding agencies or by people who do not have donors at the front and center of their mind. They are getting in the way of your ability to tell great stories and create effective fundraising that your donor will love and cherish.

There. I said it.

Branding is a commercial idea, acting as a sort of professional bubble wrap, that tends to get in the way of emotive, vulnerable fundraising conversations with

our loving donors.

In the context of effective fundraising, your branding guidelines and your logo really aren’t that important.

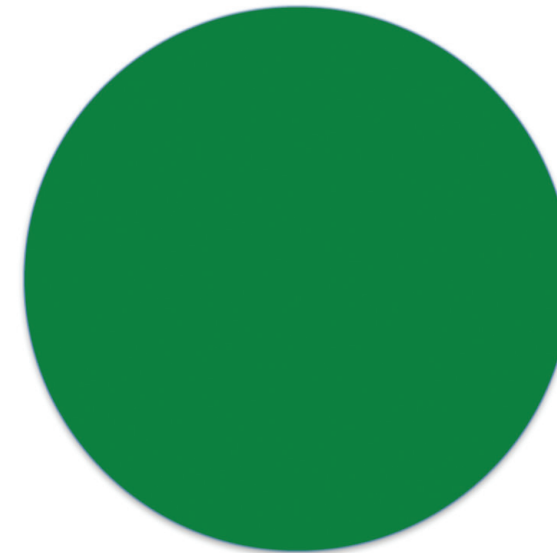
In fact, I’ve seen instances where including your logo on the outer envelope lowers the response rate.

That said, branding and your logo probably are *not* the deal breaker between getting a gift vs. not getting a gift.

Your brand should be about how your donors *experience* you in the stories you tell them and about the problems you solve together. It is the way the donor *feels* when they give to you. It is the promises you make to them and the values you and they share together.

All branding, all marketing, all communications, are part of fundraising. They serve the same master, which ultimately is your ability to raise funds and the ability to meet the needs of your mission.

Factors influencing a donor’s decision to give following a rebrand



- Strong, temporal new logo
- Inspiring colour palette
- Appreciative new font
- Because they want to help tackle a problem they care about

Source: Mark Phillips: Blue Frog UK

Your donor doesn't know, nor do they care:

- what your font is
- what PMS colour your logo uses
- that it's your 10th Anniversary
- about your latest "awareness" campaign
- when they are scheduled to get your next e-blast or piece of mail
- about all the amazing things you do
- about your brand story
- what your mission statement is.

Your donor wants to:

- know how you used their last gift
- feel like they are important to meeting the needs of your mission
- know what problem they can help solve today and why they should care
- know what the problem is
- feel needed, like a part of the team
- feel appreciated for their efforts
- be remembered
- make the world a better place
- help you **WIN**.

Design for donors

What does "design for donors" mean?

It means that the donor's needs are placed ahead of the needs of your boss, your designer, and marketing and communications team with all of their subjective opinions about design.

As a "designer," I need to meet my donor where she is, not where I want to be.

I may not like certain fonts or that when I remove myself from "design," something becomes more effective but... here we are.

Two envelopes (Figure. 1.1).

In a test, which do you think would be more effective?

The more your mail or email, whatever it may be, looks like a human made it, touched it, wrote on it, the more effective it likely will be (ie. it will raise more money).

Often in presentations, I will stop and ask the room if they can guess what my favourite font is.



Figure 1.1: In a test, which do you think would do better?

It's rare that people guess correctly.

It's:

Courier.

Do you know why?

It's my favorite because when I use it in appeals, I often raise more money.

(In actual fact, I am partial to san serif fonts. Gotham and Franklin Gothic being two of my current favorites.)

Using courier type in your appeal does a few things.

When your beloved donor pulls out your letter they see something that reminds them of a gentler time. A time long ~~ago~~ past. Perhaps, they hear the far off clackity-clack of metal type on a long arm smashing against the paper, leaving the mark of the letter behind. Then the next letter, and the next, until they hear that DING



and have to pull the arm and push the platen back to the right to start the next line.

This is a powerful moment.

Nostalgia involves remembering. It's emotionally more complex than just feeling happy or sad or angry.

These are things I need to acknowledge as a designer, yet I have never seen courier discussed in branding or design guidelines. **Donors are never mentioned either.**

By the way, I would have given you bonus points if you said:

P r e s t i g e (instead of courier).

Design for donors is what's appropriate for the donor.

For example, if you are designing anything you want your donor to read, do not set the type size to anything smaller than 12 point. I don't give a crap what the graphic standards says. If you can go bigger than 12 point, please do. Your donors will appreciate it, and thank you by hopefully giving or responding.

Design for donors is methodical.

Think through every element. What do I want the donor to look at first? Which font might work best for this piece and why am I using it instead of another? How do I want the donor to feel as they read this lift note? Does this need to be four colour or will black and white do? Does this letter need to be four pages or will two pages and an insert do better?

Design for donors is concise.

Get to the point. Communicate and ask for one thing (AND get out of the way!!!). Do it as simply and quickly as possible. Do not mess with your donor's attention span.

Design for donors can be cheesy.

Goofy. Fun. Light. Have you ever had a donor call you up laughing at the latest piece you sent them and happily make a gift? Have you ever asked yourself how you can surprise and delight your donor?

Design for donors can be ugly. (It's not ugly to me obviously.)

Most graphic designers and creatives cannot stand direct mail. Why? Because a boring 9" x 6" envelope with a logo on it will beat almost anything else most of the time. Because courier will make the letter more interesting and more effective than that latest font that they are drooling over.

I remember being dismissed as a designer because "I design mail for old people."

It's HARD to be this good. I have spent years untraining designers from making things look pretty to making them *effective*.

Design and branding for donors only works when we have them in mind.

I wanted to share this example of how sometimes, your brand can get in the way of good storytelling.

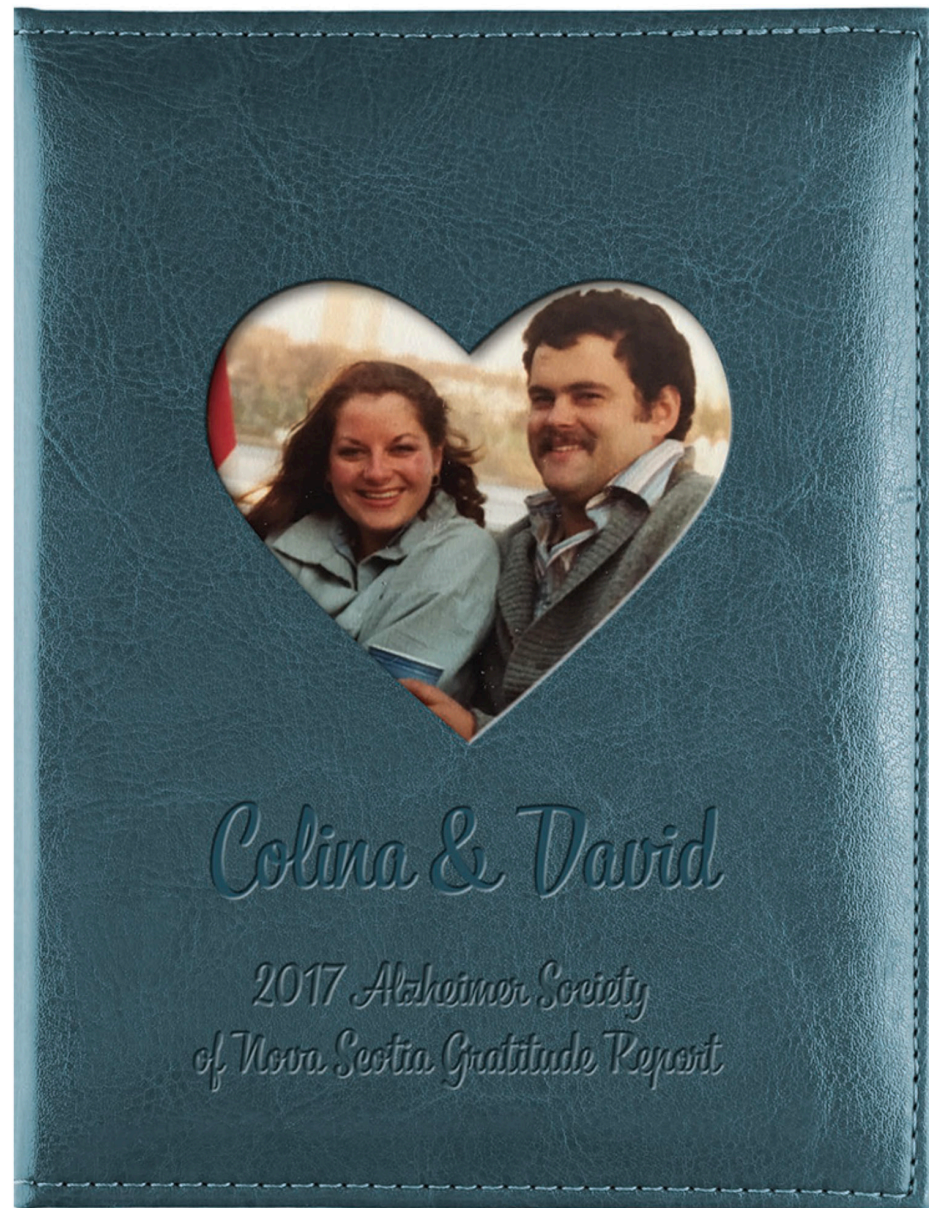
It's not that your logo and graphic standards should be ignored or pushed aside but as a storyteller, I always let the story dictate the format.

STORY OF COLINA

This is a gratitude report Agents of Good worked on for the Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia. It told the story of Colina and her family.



After Jen Love interviewed David, Colina's husband and her family, I knew that the gratitude report should feel as personal as their story. It had to represent their life together; something sticky, tactile and vibrant. Something like a photo album that our parents had kicking around on a shelf in the basement.



The cover of the 2017 Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia Gratitude Report.

The best examples of direct response, of #donorlove, of conversations with donors, feel like they were created with someone's hands and heart.

Any other solution would have felt detached from the personal nature of Colina and David's story.

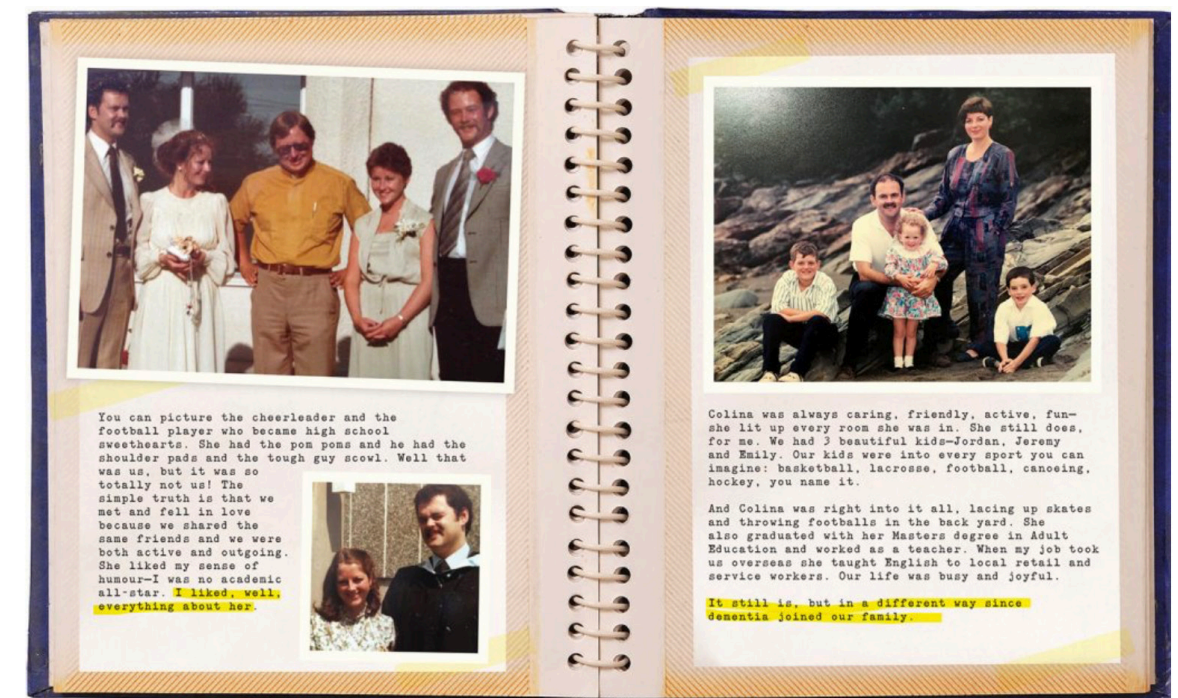
There are a lot of senses and emotions involved with this sort of treatment.

Nostalgia is one of them.

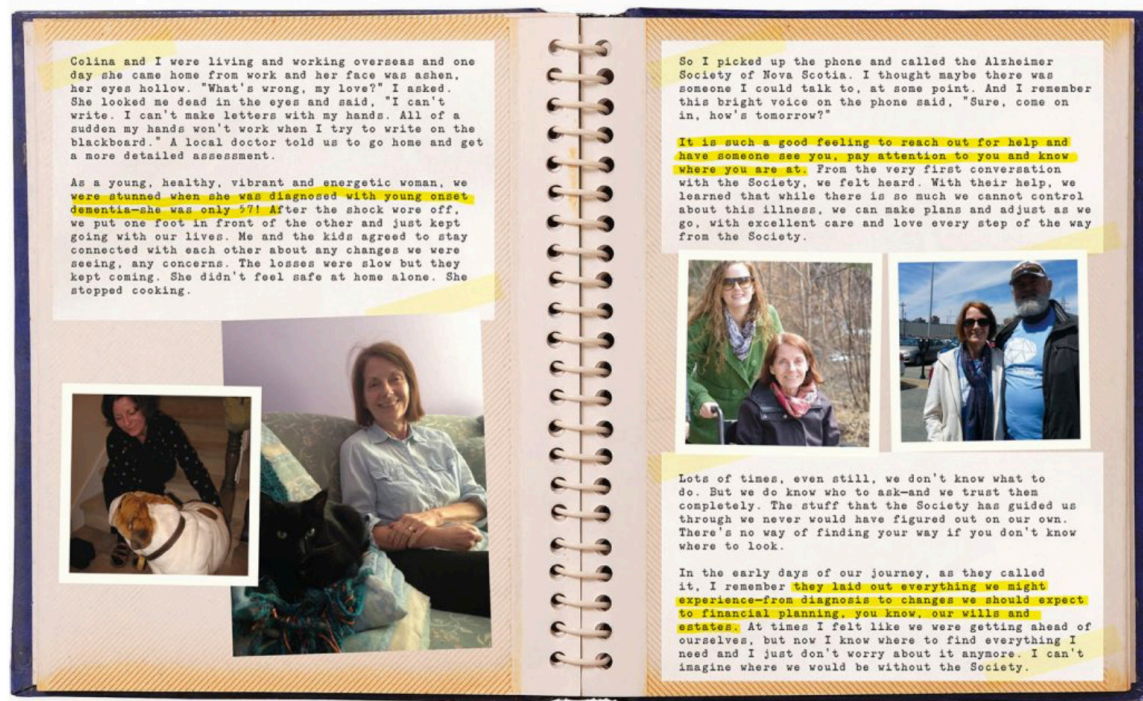
Your donors have photo albums like these tucked away in boxes and bookshelves filled with moments of their lives: growing up, long gone family members, Christmas' past, picnics...

You recognize the puffy, squishy cover and remember the faux plastic leather smell, the etched-in type and what it feels like as you run your fingers across the stitching at the edges.

This report was designed to unlock a different response than that you would get with just a nice shiny photo and logo with "2017 Annual Report" typeset on it.



Most donors would be familiar with the sticky, tearing noise these pages would make as you pull back the acetate page to place your photo. These pages were all computer generated but I didn't want it to look like that at all.



Other elements included the taped edges, staining the paper beneath, highlighted, imperfect copy, and glossy 4" x 6" images or older square format.

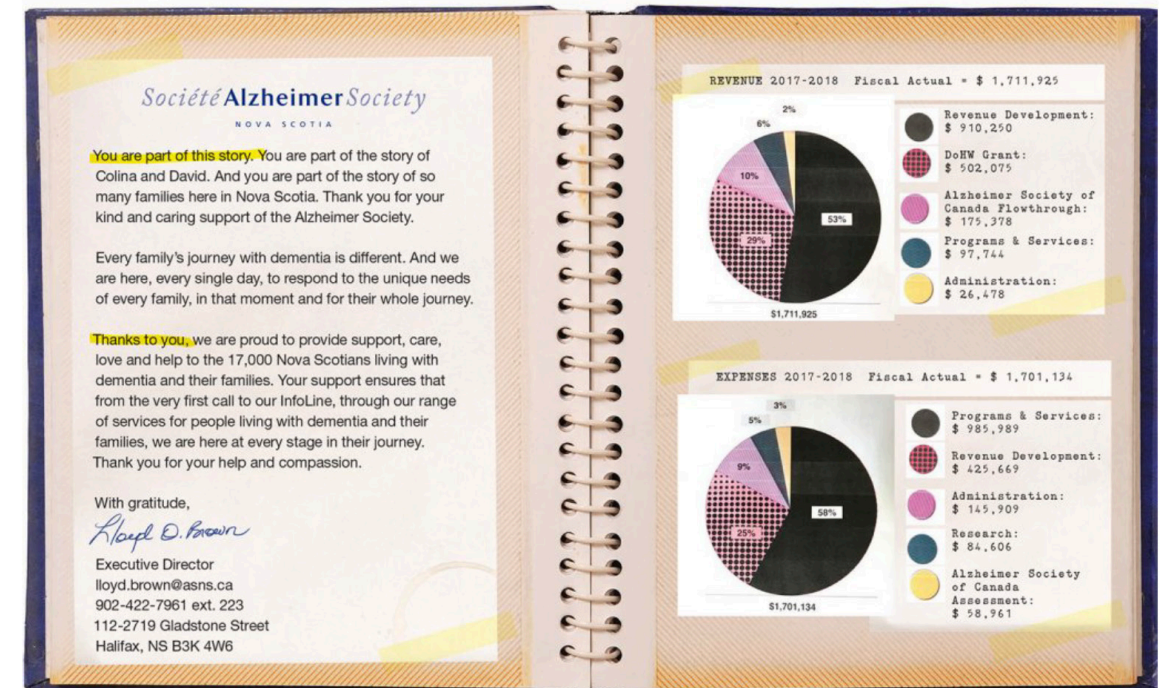
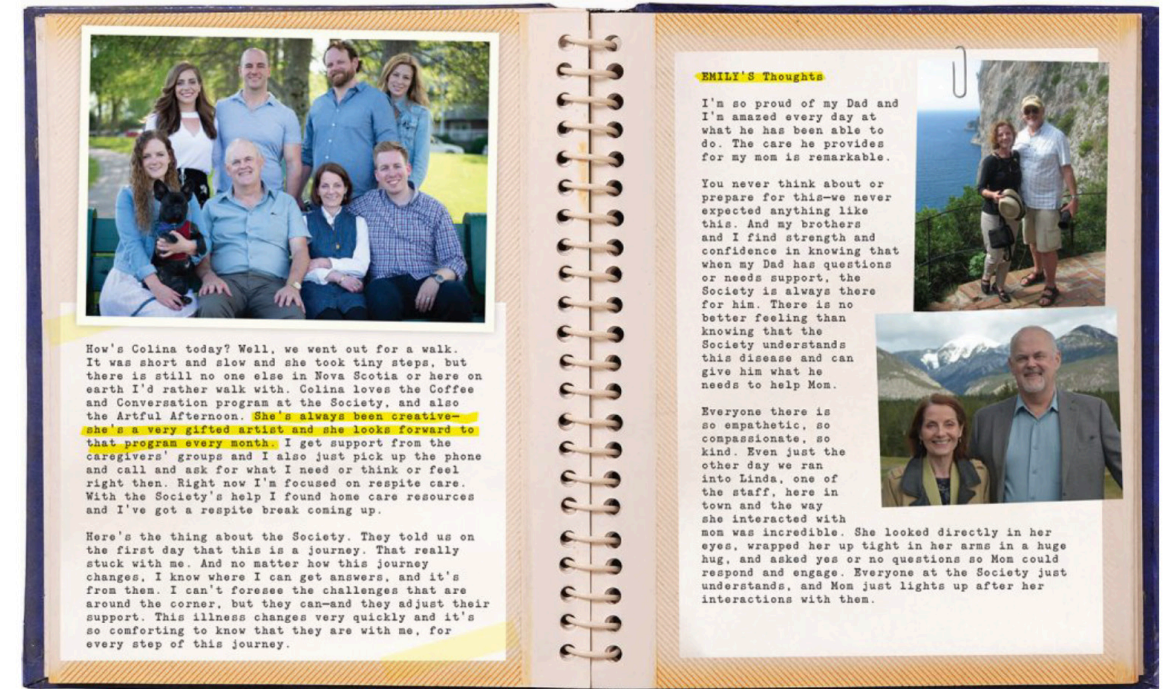
Even the financials reflect the period. They were designed, printed, hand-coloured, photographed and filtered to achieve this effect.

This report was built with the donor in mind. It told a moving story in a way that would have the most impact.

The best brands should leave space for the donor to be a part of the story and help you win.

In actuality, very few do.

Thanks to Sarah Lyon of the Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia for all of her trust and help with this passion project.



ST. PATRICK'S HOME

St. Pat's of Ottawa, Ontario is a lovely long-term home and very much an important part of the community.

As a 'brand', they have always understood that they serve their residents and their families in the most loving and supportive way they can and that donors are an important part of that being able to happen.

St. Patrick's Home of Ottawa abides by a vision to provide residents with the highest quality of care, within a welcoming home, where everyone feels supported and cared for.

The Foundation is honoured to work alongside the Home, and with the community, to support this vision.

They have always understood that it isn't about **what they** (the Foundation) does, it's about **what you** (the donor) make possible. They live and breathe that.

There are so many way to support St. Pat's

Give in the manner that works best for you

Your support enhances care and daily life at St. Pat's

At St. Pat's, we work with volunteers, and with feedback from residents and their families to ensure excellent, personal care and the delivery of quality programs that support residents and enhance Home life. Your donation today helps to make this possible.

The following appeal focused on the importance of the music program.

The outer envelope featured the tagline, "*All it takes is 1 song to bring back 1,000 memories...*"



All it takes is
**1 song to bring back
1000 memories...**



The donor is instantly thinking of, and hearing, a tune.