

## How to Win Awards

### **And the Winner Is....Your Association**

**(alternate title – Confessions of an Award Junkie)**

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and Anthony Snyder

For most of us, this time of year involves shoveling snow and working on our New Year's resolutions. For award junkies – communications pros who have discovered the value of contests in gaining local and national recognition – this is award season.

From January through May, we sweat over our entries, writing summaries and placing supporting materials under colorful tabs in stacks of thick black binders. We spend evenings and weekends detailing our associations' most successful communications programs. We often have to beg our accounting office to rush our entry fee check. And then we sprint to FedEx boxes to beat the last pickup so we can meet the deadline.

## Benefits of entering award programs

Observers of this frenzy ask, "Why do you put yourself through all this?" The answer comes down to four basic reasons.

- **Prestige.** An organization that wins awards enhances its image among its members, potential members, customers, constituents and the community. It is seen as a knowledge leader, and awards enhance its members' positions within their industries.
- **Professional development.** Creating an entry makes you examine and document the whole program. You get a clearer view of what worked well and what you need to improve on. After completing a few entries, it becomes second nature to think through all the important elements in a communications plan – research, objectives, actions, measurements of success – before you start a new project.
- **Validation.** Association staffs work very hard to make sure their volunteer leaders and members understand the benefits of existing and new programs. An award provides outside validation of membership value and the professionalism of the staff.
- **Morale boost.** Staff and volunteers often wonder if anyone notices how much they contribute to the organization. Awards can be an excellent way to give credit to everyone involved and provide a little boost to the ego.

While employed at the Naperville-based National Fraternal Congress of America (NFCA), Anthony Snyder became hooked on award entries with the launch of the association's annual JOIN HANDS DAY volunteer day on the first Saturday in May.

NFCA's communications department rolled out this brand new and fairly expensive program for members and some weren't sure it was a keeper. Some big awards that first year helped build the

credibility of the event and, some 30-plus awards later, the program continues to grow and be well-received by the NFCA's membership.

## **Budgeting Resources**

You could spend half of your time and thousands of dollars entering all the award programs out there. Here are some tips on how to budget your time and money for maximum return.

### **Start small**

Hone your award-writing skills by first entering local awards programs and those with low or no fees. Then go for the prestigious national awards, which are often harder to win, when you have a creative program or tool with outstanding results you can document.

Cecilia Green was project leader for a professional society's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. She entered the program or components of the program in more than 20 contests, refining the entry each time to build up to entering it in the more competitive national contests.

### **Pull the program apart**

Many awards competitions have categories for full programs and also for smaller-scale tactics, which often have lower entry fees. Many contests have one fee for the first entry and a lower fee for subsequent entries.

Green realized that some of the aspects of the anniversary were more noteworthy than others and concentrated on those for contests. The 345-page, four-color history book had extensive research behind it, was well written and edited, was beautiful graphically and had bursts of humor and surprising anecdotes. It alone garnered 7 of the 15 awards, including the Bronze Anvil, the Public Relations Society of America's most prestigious award for public relations tactics.

### **Get the money**

Make sure you sell senior management at budget time on the value proposition and get a line item in for awards. If you bring a project in under budget during the year, get agreement upfront to put that money toward another award entry or to hire a freelancer to help you prepare the awards.

### **Make the time**

Although a few award programs require only a sample, an entry form and a check, most require extensive documentation. Estimate the time you think it will take you to prepare your entry and then double it. A minimum of 20 hours goes into submitting a credible entry into a full program category, even if you're an experienced award entrant. Other entries are easier once you have the basics down. However, each contest has different requirements and judging criteria, so schedule at least eight hours for adjustments for each contest.

## **Recognizing a winner**

Almost everything can be entered in an award competition of some kind, but save your money and energy for those projects and publications that go beyond just "good work." If you had a

passion for the project and you're really proud of it, your enthusiasm and passion will show through in your write-up. Here's a good checklist:

1. Can you clearly state a problem your communications program solved?
2. Do you have detailed information on the project/program/publication's purpose, execution and measures of success?
3. Did you set and meet measurable goals based on your research?
4. Did it have an especially creative or innovative twist?
5. Did it have a significant impact on the intended audience?
6. Were the creative elements or collateral materials, if not flashy, at least graphically interesting and helped convey the key messages?

## **Improving your odds**

Nothing increases your chances more than a brilliantly conceived and executed program and nothing can kill your chances faster than common mistakes judges see all the time. Here's some ways to avoid them.

### **Read directions**

It seems almost too basic to mention, yet many entries are discarded because they've ignored the requirements for an entries. Read the award program materials carefully and then read it again. Important elements to consider are:

- Category details – which category is the best fit for your project?
- Elements that must be submitted – Determine now if you have all the details and materials you need, like budget figures.
- Timing – Make sure your program falls within the time parameters for that year's competition
- Form of entries – Note size restrictions, notebook required or envelope OK, graphics on the binder allowed or not, tab titles
- Deadlines – Are they “postmarked by” or “received by” deadlines?
- Fees -- Payment by credit cards or checks. Do you pay significantly higher rates as a nonmember? Is it more cost effective to join?

### **Enter in the right category**

Sometimes it appears at first glance that your program or publication could fit into two or more categories. Often terms are not clear – what's the difference between “institutional” and “public” programs; an “instructional” and “informative” video? That's when you pick up the phone and call the award program chairperson and ask for his or her help in finding the best category. The chairman will often share which category typically has fewer entries if you ask. This is your chance to ask what the judges are really looking for in that category so you can make sure you address them in your entry.

### **Write a “killer” opening summary.**

A short narrative is often required as the cornerstone of the entry and is your first – and could be your last – chance to impress the judges. Green observed as a judge for the Public Relations Society of America's coveted Silver Anvil award that most judges scan the two-page summary quickly and toss the entry in the “nonwinner” pile without opening another page if they are not

immediately impressed with the quality of the program. Tell the story in such a compelling way that they want to know more.

### **Spelling counts**

Ask other people to read the award rules and the entry materials to make sure you followed instructions correctly. Give yourself time to share the entry with a creative co-worker or even an outside professional to get their constructive feedback or rewrite of your summary. Ask others how you could make this entry more attractive but stay within the rules. The last stage is to read the whole entry again for spelling, grammar and style. Again ask for help in proofreading.

### **Celebrate your award**

- Notify the staff. If possible, ask the executive director or president to make a presentation to the project team at an employee or board gathering. Give credit publicly to co-workers who were not involved initially but helped put together the entry.
- Ask the executive director to make sure the board is aware of this accomplishment.
- Ask the communications department to issue a media release.
- Post the winning announcement on your organization's Web site.
- Display the award at your association's annual meeting or convention.
- If the award program has its own "award winner" logo, consider including the logo on the cover of the next version of the winning piece.

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