



ADVICE FOR ENTERING BUSINESS AWARDS

by Charlie Gunningham, CEO of Business News



WHEN I RAN MY STARTUP, back in the 2000s, I found that one of the best ways to get a free kick with media was to win business awards.

When our business was a fragile 6 month old we won the 'Best E-Commerce Innovation' award at the grand sounding WA Asia-Pacific IT&T Awards. (It does not exist anymore!)

We were up against some big players, and we were amazed to be a finalist, let alone win the whole category. It gave us a massive morale boost, and it got us through some tough months. It also led to a lot of free press, and from then on we could refer to ourselves as 'award-winning'.

After that first win, we would enter about 2 or 3 business awards a year, and make sure we picked wisely (the entry process can take up quite a bit of time) so that we had a good chance of being a finalist, if not an outright winner. I am proud to say we won at least one major award every year from then on.

The proliferation of awards programs may have devalued some of them these days, but there are still valuable ones out there. You can choose from industry specific ones organised by your peak body or overall business awards run by the media organisations or local business associations.

These days I tend to be on the judges' side of the table. The advice I give below is not to be construed as specific for any such award, but when entering awards, please do bear in mind some of the following...

1. RTQ, ATQ!

When I was a school teacher, I used to drill this into my students

RTQ = Read the Question ATQ = Answer the Question

As a judge, it is soul destroying to read submissions that veer off the point, and do not stick to the judging criteria.

A very good business may not do itself justice if it does not hit the points the judges are looking for (when they may have them in spades, but did not commit them to paper). I'm sure your product and people are lovely, but if the question concerned is all about your online marketing strategy, why are you wasting precious words talking about other stuff?

Read the questions and criteria very carefully, make sure you give the judges the ammunition they are looking for. Judges are looking for the good stuff, make it easy for them. Don't leave questions out - you get zero points for a nothing answer. Answer every question as well as you can.

2. Easy to Read/Follow

Lay out your answer clearly. Use space. Write in clear sentences. Make sure at least two other people proof read it, and review it with a critical eye. What you leave out is as important as what you put in, but make sure what you put in matters, and is easy to follow. Some businesses get PR companies to write up the final copy - this is not a bad idea. It can look and read well, and it does make it easier for judges. But you can do it yourself, just don't make it look too home made. Make it look grown up, professionally laid out with perfect grammar and spelling.

Increasingly, submissions are now done online, and you have to stick to the word limit on each question. Type out your answers in documents first, spell check, and proof BEFORE copying and pasting your submission into the online submission. Having a copy offline also means if your internet drops out you don't lose your submission half way through. And it means you know what you've submitted.

3. Use evidence

Use examples to back up your points. There's nothing like independent evidence, what others have said about you, testimonials, other awards you have won, Profit and Loss, revenues, perhaps even the number of Facebook fans or your Klout score.

4. Don't use Jargon

You understand all the ins and outs of your industry, but the judges may not. Speak in plain English. Let your passion flood out. If you can use less words, use less words. As few as possible. Judges have lots to read, make sure your best points come out clearly, so they are not missed inside wads of text. Don't waffle. Don't waste words.

5. Take your time

Don't leave it to the last minute. Be prepared, and plan out your answers early, weeks before the deadline. Don't enter it all at the last minute either, enter with days to spare. This will set you apart from the others as being well organised. Your reputation will travel. Get in early.

6. Involve your staff

Invite relevant members of your staff to help you with the submission. Writing the piece actually makes you all look back collectively at what you've achieved, where you are going, and think about what you want to do. This is a good process in itself, irrespective whether you win or not. And take them along to the gala dinner where the winners are announced. Win or lose, it's a team thing. Have fun on the night, and congratulate the winners if you are not among them.

7. Practice your pitch

If you get to the finalist stage and have to make a presentation to judges, then make sure this is extremely well rehearsed. Get other people to listen to your presentation. Make sure you have your slides on various versions so there are no nasty surprises with technology on the day (this can be a killer). Drink some water beforehand, take a deep breath and take it slow. You know your business, you've got

the words, let it come out of you. Do not read a script, do not read bullet points, use your slides as a visual aid only. You (yourself) tell the story, you have to be believable. Look the judges in the eye. Believe it. So will they.

8. Be Yourself

Be human. Include something humorous. Explain some of your mistakes, and what you learned from them. What you would have done different. Talk about your biggest wins, where you took a risk, planned your action, and went for it. Explain why you're in business. I doubt it's "to make money", there's a deeper reason. There's something you want to build, something you want to deliver, something you want to prove, something you want to fix or disrupt.

9. Enjoy it!

Awards should be fun. Make the submission sing, and enjoy the night. You never know, you might just walk away with a gong. And if not, no worries, come back next year, or choose another one. Get some feedback on your submission. Make it better next time.

I wish you all the best with your business award submissions...

Disclaimer: This article is given as advice, following this advice may increase your chances, however will not guarantee your success in an awards programme.

