



TIPS ON HOW TO WIN AWARDS

*A practical guide to wowing judges
and tackling logistics*

SPOT-ON BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

DEB ARNOLD, **ink.**

*Effective Internal & B2B Communications
Winning Award Services*

Introduction: Getting strategic about winning

We all know it. Winning industry awards is powerful stuff. The recognition, the affirmation, the influence—it's all invaluable:

- Helps win business/customers
- Boosts morale
- Attracts/retains talent
- Spotlights leaders/employees who make the company look great

But between you and the award is a major hurdle: the award application.

At first glance, many applications seem fairly easy and straightforward. And some of them are. Others are long, detailed and complicated. But what they all have in common is this: they will all be read. By judges. Who will be reading dozens of other submissions, too. So, will yours stand out? For the right reasons?

Getting winning results requires producing winning submissions. Winning submissions require strategy, focus, skill, data, drama (I'll explain) and the best writing talent you've got, not to mention, of course, a truly praiseworthy initiative/team/company. Oh, and did I mention strategy? If you're going to pay the fee and go to all the trouble, do it right, no? What does that entail?

I've put together this list, *7 Tips on How to Win Awards*, to help you tackle the challenge. Why? Because people doing good work deserve to be recognized for it, not held back because they aren't familiar with the basics of applying for awards.

My guidance is based on more than 20 years of experience writing persuasively in a wide range of marketing communications contexts, an MBA in marketing and management and success applying that experience and knowledge to help clients win more than 30 awards (and counting).

Here's the line-up (the sum of which = strategy):

1. Know who you're talking to—the #1 rule!
2. Read the question.
3. Start early.
4. Tell a good story. (*This is where the drama comes in.*)
5. Keep it simple.
6. Be succinct.
7. Use metrics wisely.

I won't be unlocking any secrets of the universe (not just yet), but I will be giving solid advice. And who couldn't use more of that?

Wishing you success and glory,

Deb





The #1 rule!

My slogan is, *Who do you think you're talking to?*

Why?

First, it's a dead giveaway that I'm from New York, and I think it only fair to be upfront about that now that I live in the docile Pacific Northwest, where no one honks and no one yells (puzzling, I know).

Second, and perhaps more germane to our topic, it's really the most important rule in communications.

Marketing-driven companies get that. They spend millions on research to understand the needs, desires, motivators, fears and behaviors of their target customers.

When you're putting together an award submission, you also have to know your audience and, more importantly, what they care about. Fortunately, most award organizers will help you out.

They'll do so with explicit criteria outlining what they're looking for. And that makes sense—they don't want to waste anyone's time, least of all their judges'.

So listen closely and obey! Filter your descriptions through the award criteria.

This is a key strategy to winning. Make it as easy as possible for the judges to pick *you* (your initiative/team/company).

How?

Make it really, really obvious that you are what they're looking for.

- If one criterion is innovation, for example, emphasize what's innovative about your initiative/team/company.
- If teamwork is a criterion, describe how the team came together to create success, what factors proved critical in driving a team approach, what challenges you faced, how success strengthened the team and improved morale, etc.
- All within reason. Don't go overboard, inserting "teamwork" or "innovation" in every other sentence; it won't help to build your case.

And if the list of criteria is very long, well, you've got a bit of filtering to do. But if you're applying for the right award, it shouldn't be hard to make a good fit between what you've got and what they want.

Likewise, if you're really struggling to address the criteria, maybe you should rethink whether it's the right way to spend your time and money.

Helpful hint: *As you outline your responses to the submission questions, use the list of award criteria as a checklist. Make sure you've really covered all the territory and brought in all the salient bits of data that will make it obvious that you are who they're looking for.*



You better believe it.

The more I work on award submissions, especially when I'm offering strategic input on an existing draft, the more I'm certain that this is an incredibly important piece of advice for everyone.

What do I mean by this seemingly obvious directive?

Well, that's just it. It's not so obvious. Because sometimes award questions aren't obvious. They're sometimes several questions in the guise of just one, and often they're tough questions, especially where metrics are concerned.

The human brain is a tricky thing. I've seen draft responses to award queries (and RFPs and business school applications and ...), written by very intelligent people, that simply don't answer the question. They answer a part or a version of the question—focusing on a topic the writer felt most comfortable with, rather than actually answering the question.

And that doesn't win awards.

Am I saying some people don't know how to answer a question?

More or less, yes. But through no fault of their own. Here are some examples to illustrate what I mean. I recently edited and refined a draft submission for a corporate training department. The question asked about the processes and reporting used to measure the impact of learning programs on individual and company performance.

The draft extensively described how the company measures individual and company performance, full stop. Learning was barely mentioned. Why? My best guess: the writer subconsciously filtered out the learning part, providing more readily available answers. Is that person foolish? Careless? Nope. He's bright, dedicated and conscientious.

I saw the same thing while working on RFPs for a global marketing agency. Questions about various areas of expertise were farmed out to the relevant departments, and my job was to put them together into a cohesive document. This isn't too different from how some companies approach award submissions.

One time, the data group at this agency responded to a query about how the agency uses data to accomplish x (a relatively new area in the agency's world) by writing about how it uses data to accomplish y (with which the agency had deep experience). The writer did not misread the question, she filtered the question to put it back in her comfort zone. Why am I singling out the data group? Because its core expertise is not communications. And the person who drafted the answer to the learning measurement question? He was from finance and operations.

Am I saying quant jocks can't write?

It's not that numbers/formulas people can't communicate. But it's not their core competency, unlike communications professionals, whose expertise is expressing precisely what needs to be expressed, with the right spin.* On the other hand, I have seen PR award submissions crafted by PR professionals—writing about their own projects—that also miss the mark. Alas, it is part of our common humanity. It's hard to see the picture when you're inside the frame. More on that another day.

** Spin is NOT a dirty word, despite having four letters. So say I.*

So what can you do about it?

Here are some ideas for both the number lovers and wordsmiths among us:

- **Restate the question.** Write it out for yourself using different words and more detail to make sure you're clear on exactly what's being asked.
- **Make a checklist.** Break the question into discrete parts and reference it as you craft your response.
- **Outline your answer.** It works. Before you turn your outline into prose, make sure you'll be covering all aspects of the exact question, not some part or version thereof.
- **Reread the question.** Go over it as many times as you need to, checking and rechecking to make sure the question and answer match.

I go through these steps, especially the last one, every time. And award submissions are my specialty! If I need to keep myself in check, so too anyone else vying for industry recognition through an award.



As early as you can.

Until you've done a few, you have no idea how time-consuming it can be to complete an award application. The longest I've done is 35 pages (~13,000 words), but even shorter ones can take surprisingly long to put together.

Recall the famous quote, featured on my Web site:

"If I am to speak ten minutes, I need a week for preparation; ... if an hour, I am ready now."
—Woodrow Wilson

It really does take more time to be concise. More on that in Tip #6, "Be succinct."

What will you need to do?

- 1. Get organized.** Depending on submission length and complexity, this could be as easy as setting up a few meetings or as detailed as a long spreadsheet of questions, subject matter experts (SMEs), status updates, etc.
- 2. Reconnoiter the territory.** AKA *do your submission homework*. Winners carefully review not just the application and judging criteria, but also the award site, scouring it for additional resources such as tips, FAQs and often a preparatory webinar.

Another gold mine to tap is information on previous winners: lists, write-ups and even examples of winning submissions. Sizing yourself up against winners in your category is a good way to gauge your chances and understand what the judges value.

- 3. Gather the data.** Some SMEs are easy to find, schedule time with, talk to, coax information from and persuade to send you PowerPoint decks, graphics, charts, metrics, etc. But don't count on it. Also, don't count on being able to identify the right SME right off the bat, especially if you work for a company with tens of thousands of employees (you know who you are). Prepare for triangulation and delays. Here is the scenario I have seen time and time again:

- Jennifer says the right person to ask for x is Enrique.
- You email Enrique to ask for x.

- A week later, you follow up with Enrique, not having received a reply.
 - Enrique finally responds, but says that it's actually Marianne who knows about x.
 - You start the cycle again with Marianne.
- 4. Write the darn thing.** If you're a fast writer and it's a short application, you're golden. Otherwise, be realistic about how long you need to synthesize all the data into a coherent, compelling story. If it's a 35-pager, steel yourself.
- 5. Manage the approval cycle.** Having only one SME who gets back to you right away with minimal edits is bliss. You should be so lucky.

Remember, too, that there are likely higher-ups who'll need to weigh in. With ridiculously busy schedules. Who might request major last-minute changes.

I once had a client who needed two weeks for five people from three departments (including Legal!) to review and approve a final-draft submission. They didn't make significant changes, but the approval process took significant time away from crafting the actual application.

- 6. Prepare to do battle with technology.** Increasingly, award applications are online. *Count on* having technical issues, *especially on deadline day*, when everyone who didn't read this post is scrambling to submit and the servers are on overtime.

Helpful hint: Be sure to carefully review the online application well in advance so there are no last-minute surprises. Trust me on this one.

How much time is enough?

So how much time does one need to complete an award submission? I once did 11 submissions in six weeks, but that's not a pace I recommend, unless you're okay with sleep deprivation. (We did win 8!)

Obviously, timing will vary according to any number of factors, but here are some very rough rules of thumb if you've never submitted one before:

- **Single-program award:** 6-8 weeks
- **Ranking award:** 8-10 weeks (not including the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For, which takes 6-8 months all told)

These are words to the wise. Use them well!



Once upon a time, we did something awesome.

Yep. Applying for an award means weaving a tale. Beginning, middle, end. Drama in between.

If you're going for an award, that means (ostensibly) that you did something important. And if it really was important, then the story should be fairly simple to tell.

The straightforward formula:

- 1. Problem.** Things were bad. They were really bad. Or, depending on the situation, things were pretty good ... but there was an opportunity to make them even better.
- 2. Solution.** Here's the brilliant thing we did and how we came up with it and made it work.
- 3. Outcome.** Now we prove that we made a difference—a big difference—using metrics. No metrics? No award (pretty much).

It's the formula for every case study, and it should be the formula for every successful award submission.

Some more advice:

- **Use strong adjectives.** Exceptional, exciting, outstanding, extraordinary. If you don't burst with enthusiasm, why will the judge? Just don't overdo it.
- **Include details.** They bring a story alive and help to support your narrative (i.e., we did something important).
- **Be saucy.** Okay, maybe not saucy, but definitely not boring. Judges have many, many submissions to read and if you keep them entertained, they'll like you.
- **Don't be afraid to use humor.** A judge who's just read 15 long applications will see yours very favorably if you make her laugh.

And now for some advice from a real master: check out [this video](#) about storytelling from Ira Glass of [This American Life](#).



KEEP IT SIMPLE

Judges are only human.

Put yourself in the shoes of an award judge for a moment. You will be reviewing 10, maybe 20 submissions at a minimum. When was the last time you read that much? Written by mostly non-professional writers?

That's why it's critical to keep it simple. By that I mean:

- **Be obvious.** Your story must be easy to understand. A is followed by B, which is followed by C. Everything is logically sequenced and tied together.

Remember that your judges know nothing about your program/product/team/etc., so you have to make everything very, very clear.

Ask yourself whether you can picture a judge nodding her head as she reads along. If *you* don't nod your head as you are reading along your draft, rework it until you do.

- **Use plain English.** I don't mean dumb things down; I mean say things as plainly as possible. Don't over-complicate. Choose the five-cent word over the 10-cent word.

This is a lesson I learned from the great Ann Fudge, who at the time was CEO of Young & Rubicam Brands. I was one of the first YRB employees to join the recently won Microsoft account in 2004. On July 1, the official start of the agency's engagement as Agency of Record for direct marketing, I was asked to draft an email from Ann to Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer. I had about 20 minutes. Ann had just one edit: instead of, "Today is an auspicious day for our companies," she wanted, "Today is a great day for our companies." And she was right.

Remember, the writing here is just a means to an end: winning. Flowery language and/or long, compound sentences will not help your cause, nor will excessive buzzwords.

- **Be selective with jargon.** Avoid what I like to call “the quirky lingua franca spoken on your corporate planet.” No one knows what any of your acronyms mean, for example. They really don’t.

DO use jargon appropriate to the context, i.e., if you are applying for a learning award, as many of my clients do, you should surely use learning terminology.

- **Just the facts, ma’am.** There is a lot to say about any potentially award-winning project/product/team/etc. Stick to the basics. Know the difference between details that will help you win and details that are extraneous, and delete the latter.
- It might be helpful to show your draft to a colleague in another department or in the same field at another company—assuming they are not applying for the same award! The person should know just enough about the subject matter to be able to follow along, but not so much about the specifics that they cannot see the forest for the trees (like you and your team).

Some inspiration from two greats who knew how to make an impact:

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” —Leonardo da Vinci

“Simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance.” —Coco Chanel



I'm serious.

I'm tempted to stop there. I shan't.

Reasons to be concise:

- Submissions are easier to read. Judges like that.
- You'll make your point faster. Judges *really* like that.
- Most award applications limit word counts. See above.

Make no mistake, being succinct is hard. It takes work. But you'll be amazed at how much you can say. Here are some great ways to write short copy with punch:

Eliminate unnecessary words.

Grammarians greater than I can guide you on avoiding sentence-stuffers like prepositions, helping verbs, passive constructions, expletives (that is, constructions beginning with "there is/are" or "it is") and nominalizations (noun forms of verbs, e.g., "The focus of the program is management" vs. "The program focuses on management").

This free series from the excellent Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) can help:

- [Conciseness](#)
- [Eliminating Words](#)
- [Changing Phrases](#)
- [Avoid Common Pitfalls](#)

Eliminate unnecessary ideas and details.

Discerning information "wheat" from "chaff" can be challenging, especially when you're very familiar with a program/project/team. Yet paring down information to the essentials is critical.

Get focused by returning to the award criteria (see Tip #1) and applying these two litmus tests:

1. Is this relevant to the question?
2. Will the judges care?

Break up text into bullet points.

Highly skimmable bullet points make information digestible:

Before

To promote Initiative X, we screened a “teaser” video promo at our November 2009 Annual Partners Meeting, generating top-down awareness, intrigue and buzz. Then in April, Initiative X launched at our Leadership Conference to rave reviews from managers through partners. Finally, the Senior Manager Development Program introduced Initiative X in August.

After

Promotion for Initiative X has been top-down:

- Screened “teaser” video at November 2009 Annual Partners Meeting*
- Launched at April Leadership Conference, to rave reviews*
- Deployed at August Senior Manager Development Program*

The only disadvantage: Microsoft Word counts formatted bullets and numbers as words—see below.

Be sneaky.

Okay, these tricks won't make you more concise, but they will reduce word count in a pinch:

- Instead of *and*, use a slash: design/development process.
- Instead of *question 6*, use #6.
- As mentioned above, Word counts formatted bullets and numbers as words. Instead, use a hyphen or asterisk with no space after (-like this). Hyphenations count as one word; e.g., enterprise-wide.

One final suggestion.

You may want to hire a professional copyeditor to review your final draft.

“I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had time to make it shorter.”

—Blaise Pascal



You have to prove your point.

Regardless of what type of award you're applying for, metrics will undoubtedly be key.

You can't just claim to be great and expect that judges will believe you. You must provide proof, empirical evidence, objective measures. And they can't be just any objective measures; they have to be clear, accurate and compelling. You can't vaguely toss around numbers and expect to impress a panel of experts.

Here's a great example of this point, which I used in a final project for the excellent [Virtual Facilitator Trainer Certification](#) course I recently took, paid for by my company (nice employee benefits, right?). How would you answer this poll?

The revamped sales training yielded \$5 million in new revenue. Is that a good result for a sales training program?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) It depends

If you answered C, give yourself a gold star. It depends. For starters, what was the goal? If it was \$2 million, fantastic. If it was \$10 million, not so stellar.

They say content is king? With metrics, *context* is king.

Let's try that sentence again:

The revamped sales training yielded \$5 million in new revenue, vs. a goal of \$2.5 million.

Ah! Now we're getting somewhere. There's a basis for comparison—what you did versus what you aimed to do. But wait ... what if you provided even more context?

The revamped sales training yielded \$5 million in new revenue, vs. a goal of \$2.5 million and dwarfing the \$1.8 million in new revenue generated after the previous year's training.

Even better—you beat the target AND significantly improved over last year.

To further show impact, you could indicate:

- These results vs. industry benchmarks, if available (and superior).
- Marketplace implications, such as outselling competitors in the same category for the first time.
- How it compares to your company's other sales training programs, if warranted (e.g., greatest improvement, most significant impact on sales in 2011, biggest revenue boost in 100 years, etc.).

Conclusion: To use metrics wisely, always put data in context.

In other words, state results versus:

- Goal
- Previous year(s)
- Total (points, population, etc.)
- Previous version
- Benchmarks
- Competitors

And be sure to include all the implications of these fantastic results.



About Deb

Guided by **20+ years of experience** in marketing communications, Deb Arnold helps leaders at Fortune 500 and growing companies better influence stakeholder and other internal audiences with memorable communications that **drive results**.

Deb also applies her core strengths—**thoughtful analysis, strategic approach, compelling writing and drive to excel**—to help clients **win more and rank higher** on prestigious industry awards. Deb’s award services include full-service application development, feedback and editing on draft submissions, coaching, consulting and training. She also develops smart online award resources.

On Deb’s **win record** of 30+ awards:

- **Seventeen winning submissions in 15 months** for one Fortune 200 company
- **The #1 and #2 slots** on an influential global ranking
- **A lift from #68 to #11** in a coveted top 125 list
- **Unmatched multiple category wins**

Deb has developed successful strategies, vehicles and winning award submissions for such diverse industry leaders as **Microsoft, Yahoo!, LinkedIn, Abbott, SuccessFactors, TELUS, Jiffy Lube International, T-Mobile, Sun Microsystems, Scotts Miracle-Gro and Grant Thornton** as well as global agencies like **Waggener Edstrom, Ogilvy Public Relations and Young & Rubicam Brands**.

Deb earned an **MBA in Management and Marketing from Columbia Business School**, and graduated cum laude with a BA in International Relations from **Tufts University**.

She established her **first communications consulting practice in 1994** in Israel, where she lived for seven years. There Deb served both nonprofits and the private sector, **rode the first Internet wave** and hosted a weekly jazz show.

Now based in Seattle, she has **lectured on internal communications** at the University of Washington and Washington State University and serves as **pro bono communications advisor** to local non-profits. Deb loves travel, hiking, design, being a choir geek and winning “iron chef” competitions for charity.

Thanks for reading and good luck!

I hope you've found *7 Tips on How to Win Awards* helpful and that it has inspired you to go for it—to tell your story and win recognition for your outstanding efforts.

I welcome your comments and feedback: deb@debarnoldink.com

debarnoldink.com

t 877 670.8851 m 206 734.9899
info@debarnoldink.com