

IN-HOUSE ISSUES

BACKSTAGE AT THE DESIGN AWARDS

Feeling unsure about entering a design competition? Our award-winning in-house guru offers tips on where to enter, how to prepare your work and how to use your win to foster credibility and camaraderie within your company.

Design Awards. Yeah, I know, I know. Mention that you received a design award to another designer and their eyes roll—followed by a sarcastic grin. It's worse than name-dropping.

But if you're part of an in-house design department and you share the good news with your boss or colleague from another department in your company, most likely you'll get a much different reaction. You'll feel the love. You might even feel the respect. That's because your one and only client, the people who are up the stairs and down the hall, want to work with the best—and the best are often recognized with accolades, honors and awards. And those big agencies that your company works with are always flaunting their awards, so you'll have to work harder to change the mindset and show that you're just as good or better.

Every January, I carve out some time to sift through the previous year's work from my in-house design team in search of award winners. And I know they're in there. My department provides creative and production support to several divisions of our company. Last year, my mighty team of seven designers completed more than 1,500 projects—packaging, product concepts, newsletters, brochures, motion graphics, collateral for meetings, logos and photography. They do good work, and I want people to know about it.

When my mailbox begins filling up with direct mail from organizations sponsoring design contests, I know

I've got some work ahead of me. First, I review the applications and determine whether they're worthy of our submission. Is it a reputable organization? Are they well-regarded in the design and business community? Who are the judges? By what criteria is the work judged? How much are the entry fees? Beyond the actual award, do you receive any other recognition? Is the work published? Is there a charge for the award certificate or statuette if you win?

WHERE TO ENTER

Let's begin with some of the organizations that sponsor these competitions. There are the usual suspects—the design-centric competitions that are backed by the leading graphic design publications: HOW, Print, Communication Arts and Graphic Design:USA. These annual awards usually recognize work completed the previous year. Each organization offers various competitions that target a specific area: interactive, self-promotion, international, in-house, etc., with a broad range of categories to choose from including annual reports, packaging, brochures, environmental design and self-promotion, to name a few. You'll find that most are judged by design gurus, design professionals, peers, editors and art directors, or members of the academic community. Here, the competition is fierce but the payoff is sweet and usually includes publication of your work in a design annual.

Then there are the competitions that are open to a broader audience, such as The IABC Awards (International Association of Business Communicators), The American Business Awards' Stevie Awards, Magnum Opus Awards, The Communicator Awards and The Hermes Awards. These international awards programs honor excellence for communications and business professionals, and have print, video, audio and interactive categories. Many of these also have a wider window of eligibility that allows you to enter work that was completed up to two years prior.

There are also industry-specific competitions. For instance, if you work in the pharmaceutical industry like I do, check out the Medical Marketing Awards and the Aster Awards. These narrow the playing field a bit and could give you a better chance at picking up some gold. Also check out local communications, advertising and business organizations in your area that host annual award events. And don't forget about regional Art Directors Clubs or local chapters of the AIGA or Advertising Federation.

HOW TO ENTER

Completing the applications can take time, especially if supporting documentation is required. This could be anything from the name of the submission and designer to a 400-word essay describing the business case. Although not required by all competitions, I always provide a brief but comprehensive overview with a project summary outlining the challenge, communication objective, intended audience, strategy, creative solution and results for each submission. It's usually a one- to two-pager, and the great thing about working in-house is that I have direct access to all my clients who are always more than happy to help me fill in the blanks.

Submission fees vary, and you'll find some are more affordable than others. I've been fortunate to have the financial support from my company to cover the expense of fees, awards and award banquets. If you don't have a budget to cover the expense, reach out to your public affairs department, which is in the business of establishing and maintaining relations with the media and business community.

I prepare the artwork with care and note any specific instructions regarding the presentation. Most organizations ask that the artwork be mounted on black presentation board, but watch out for the IABC: They require a binder and have very strict guidelines on size and how the contents are organized. This scared the heck out of me. If your binder spine is one-sixteenth of an inch off, or your margins are too narrow, you're out. I double-check the list of submission rules, make sure everything is packaged well and kiss it goodbye.

WHY TO ENTER

A few months later, if you're lucky, you'll be notified that you've won (don't expect to be contacted if you didn't win). The first thing I do when we win is congratulate the designer at our weekly staff meeting. Then I contact the internal stakeholders and include them in the celebration. This small gesture can help

strengthen your business relationships and lead to lasting partnerships.

Then I write a short blurb and send it to our public affairs department, which will usually include an announcement in its e-mail communications to employees and on the company intranet. I also arrange for a photo op with the designer, client and award, and then broadcast this image on the network of plasma screens throughout the company. It's amazing how many people see this stuff. I receive congratulatory e-mails from all over the world, and the recognition goes a long way in enhancing our credibility.

Now, the payoff varies with each competition. Some send you a classy certificate worthy of framing and the opportunity to be featured in an issue of their magazine. Others provide certificates but also give you the option of purchasing a gold or platinum statuette. The American Business Awards, known as the "Oscars of the Business Community," hosts a pretty impressive awards ceremony in New York City, complete with a cocktail hour and full-course meal. When my department was nominated, it was a perfect excuse for us to have a night out and celebrate, whether we won or not. I invited my boss, who was equally impressed with the spectacle of the event. I would suggest extending an invitation to the client who initiated the project and, if needed, ask if they'll assist in expensing the affair.

Over the years, my team and I have amassed quite a collection of award certificates and statuettes. They're not cheap, and award submissions take a lot of time to prepare, but I've found that the return on your investment is worth the effort. My designers really appreciate that their work is being recognized by the design and business community. This validation in turn boosts morale, fuels their creative energy and keeps them motivated to continue doing good work. In addition, you may notice a gradual perception shift in how your peers view your department once you're bona fide award winners. All this attention adds to the department's credibility and gives your team the exposure they deserve. And let's not forget bragging rights, which make all the difference in the world. Especially if you brag to the right people. **HOW**

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» EDITOR'S NOTE

Don't miss your chance to enter HOW's In-HOWse Design Awards, a competition just for corporate creatives like you. The deadline is April 15. Get the scoop and download an entry form at HOWdesign.com/in-howsdesignawards.