

Award Competitions: Route to a Publicity Bonanza

By Marcia Yudkin

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Inc. magazine is currently in the process of judging sites for its annual small business Web award winners. Since I was a judge last year, I thought I'd offer some observations on how and why to enter your Web site for prestigious awards like this.

First, there were less than 800 entrants in six categories. If we eliminate entrants that were clearly not ready for serious consideration (rampant misspellings, garish color schemes, unfunctional links, no business focus), you may have had a one in 50 chance of winning -- and much, much higher odds in certain categories.

Second, it's essential to read the entry instructions carefully. Every question or item asked for in the instructions is there for a reason, and you run the risk of disqualification if you don't provide all the requested information.

In the case of the Inc. awards, some excellent sites were removed from the running because they did not answer the questions asked in the entry procedure. Even after being e-mailed for more information, they still did not address the questions. I couldn't tell whether they did this because the answers might not have placed them in a favorable light or because they had a cavalier attitude toward the judging and thought they could set their own terms for the competition.

Third, for a Web site award, make sure you don't schedule a site upgrade during the judging period. This happened in more than one instance, believe it or not. A couple of companies that might have won were eliminated from the running because their sites weren't available at all during the week that the judges were viewing the finalists. Inc. bent over backwards to give sites a second chance when judges complained they couldn't access some finalists. Even so, this factor knocked a couple of promising candidates out of the picture.

Fourth, take your own competence seriously. The sole proprietor category was sorely lacking in quality entrants, and if you had entered a site that was clear, functional, readable, decent-looking and businesslike, you could very well have had an excellent shot to win.

According to Anne Stuart, senior writer for Inc., material about their awards is among the most-read stuff at their Web site throughout the year, with awesome click-throughs to the winning sites. The only cost of entering this sort of competition for such a publicity bonanza is the effort required to submit a considered and complete entry.

Adds Dan Janal, author of several books on publicity and founder of PR Leads, "You will get mindshare from the judges, who are very important, influential people who could write about your company or tell their audiences in speeches. I know -- I've judged many contests and have found many interesting companies as a result."

Remember this the next time you spot an announcement for an award competition. A blue-ribbon credential -- and attention from the media and the public -- may be closer than you would assume.

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