

Secrets to winning Azbee Awards

Here's how long-time winners do it

BY KATY TOMASULO
President, Washington, D.C. Chapter
Deputy Editor, Building Products

Effectively, the ASBPE award season is year-round, even though the deadline for entries for the annual Azbee Awards of Excellence is typically February 1.

If you have not been planning more than a year in advance, as some editors do, late in the calendar year is the time to gather your entries and take the last-minute steps to ensure your spot in the winner's circle the following year.

Each summer, the list of Azbee winners showcases a healthy cross-section of business-to-business (B2B) publishing. But it's hard not to notice that some names come up more than others. What's their secret?

Here are a few tips from some of the industry's seasoned winners (plus a few observations I've made in my years as a judge), from the pre-planning stage through post-win publicity.

Plan ahead

Though publications should not choose winning awards over serving their readers, it's worth considering that the two go hand in hand — and that you can and should plan accordingly.

Several editors emphasize that the criteria the many awards are judged on — such as value to the reader and craftsmanship — are the same things that make them appealing to your readers, so incorporating those criteria into your work and into the editing process can be as good for your trophy case as it is for your audience.

- **Incorporate service journalism.** Most B2B editorial awards recognize service journalism, says Harry McCracken, editor-in-chief of *PC World*, which correlates with the mission of most magazines. "We never want the awards culture to override making our readers happy," he says, but they do think about them.

- **Don't wait until award season rolls around.** Determine in advance if there are certain topics planned for the year that may be award winners so that you can allocate space and staff accordingly. Forward-thinking also helps ensure quality control. If you're working on a story that you believe would be a contender in an awards program, says Abbie Lundberg editor-in-chief of *CIO*, make sure it gets extra scrutiny and tightening to make it even more worthy.

- **Look for stories that are controversial and understandable.** Stories that are controversial — but still relevant — often win awards, says Boyce Thompson, editorial director of *Builder* magazine. This means that writers must have the guts to take on topics that might make readers, advertisers, and company executives uncomfortable. Judges like to see journalistic enterprise, he says. They like to see editorial staffs take action on behalf of their readers.

- **Help readers help themselves.** Don't just report the news, McCracken says, tell readers what they need to do about it.

Consider the entire package

Though the writing itself is important, for many award programs the judges also consider how the whole story package fits

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American Society of Business Publication Editors
214 N. Hale St., Wheaton, IL 60187
Phone (630) 510-4588; Fax (630) 510-4501
E-mail info@asbpe.org; Web www.asbpe.org

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mispizziri@rcn.com

NEWSLETTER LAYOUT / PRODUCTION
Robin Sherman, Editorial & Design Services
editorialdesign@bellsouth.net

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About the Author

Katy Tomasulo is deputy editor for *Building Products* and *ebuild.com*, part of Washington, D.C.-based Hanley Wood Business Media. During her seven-year career at Hanley Wood, Tomasulo spent five years as managing editor for *ProSales* and *Tools of the Trade* magazines. She was an ASBPE Young Leaders Scholarship recipient in 2004.



together to serve the reader.

■ **Think of the overall presentation.** Begin at the story planning stages. Conduct joint edit/art meetings to brainstorm not only the article's direction, but also art concepts, infographics, sidebars, and other opportunities to give the reader action items.

■ **Consider how your headlines, images, sidebars, and extra content fit together.** Does everything work in concert to catch the reader's attention and provide entry points? Do sidebars and illustrations add value rather than fluff? Do they make it easier for the reader and the judge to understand the topic and how it applies to them? Does the article take every opportunity to help readers do their jobs better?

Focus on excellence

Quite simply, quality is key. Ensure your articles are well-researched, well-supported, and error-free. This starts with smart hiring and continues with creating a culture that values, delivers, and rewards quality. Make excellence a way of life.

■ **Invest in a hard-working, committed staff.** Staff investment plays a key role at *Baseline*, says Deborah Gage, a former senior writer for the magazine. "Excellence was the culture" at *Baseline*, she says. "Everybody just pushed as hard as they could."

■ **Teamwork builds content and quality.** Articles in *Baseline*, for example, undergo several rounds of substantive editing and intense fact-checking. In the past, the staff often would work on large feature stories in pairs, which allowed them to cover more ground and raise the quality level. *Builder* has found success with large, multi-part features that explore, in depth, many angles of a timely topic. Most of the senior writing staff contributes, with one senior editor in charge overall.

■ **Pay attention to the little things.** Nothing annoys a judge more than typos, careless mistakes, or inconsistencies. While a few misplaced commas may not mean ultimate disaster, they may cost you points in some programs and certainly will play a role in the judges' overall impression.

Write a strong entry statement

A poorly crafted entry form can hinder the chances of an otherwise great article.

■ **Remember that judges don't know your industry.** The judges reading your entry likely will have no clue about the inner workings of the restaurant business, the technology sector, the medical profession, construction, or whatever industry you represent. The essays required on the entry form are key to giving the judges what they need to know in order to understand why the article is important to your readers. In my experience, simple explanatory language is much more effective than fluff and marketing-ese.

■ **Don't treat entry essays as an afterthought.** Give as much attention to what you write on the submission as you did to the story, advises Lundberg, who has one of her best editors write a lot of the entry essays. "You have to describe what your readers care about," Lundberg says. Describe why it is compelling and why it matters.

■ **Enter those stories that are accessible to the judges.** Try to imagine it being read by someone outside your magazine's area of expertise, McCracken advises. Make it clear to them why this article matters to your readers.

■ **Avoid silly entry mistakes.** "Read the instructions carefully," McCracken says. You don't want your entry disqualified for an avoidable entry error.

Participate

Expand your scope of vision beyond your own magazine and industry to see what works and doesn't work.

■ **Be a judge.** This is one of the most effective ways to improve awards success, and one that many winning editors recommend. You can quickly learn which entry essays work and don't work, what separates a good article from a great article, and how winning articles are packaged. This also provides a rare look at the awards process for the category you are judging that may prove helpful when you are selecting and compiling your entries next year. Award entries also offer a pool of ideas from other industries you may be able to apply to your own publication.

■ **Review winning entries, if available.** If you can't judge, this is the next best thing to help you decipher what sets the winners apart from the pack.

■ **Study other magazines.** Thompson, for example, shares subscriptions with

leading B2B publications from other industries.

Cultivate the culture

A common theme among many award-winning companies is the creation of an "awards culture." As mentioned earlier, awards shouldn't outright dictate what stories you publish, but keeping them in the backs of everyone's mind can encourage editors to explore new topics, push boundaries, and work together toward a common goal.

"It's good if you try to cultivate an appreciation for awards in other parts of your company," McCracken says. Top management should make it clear that winning awards is a top priority, agrees Thompson; management also should provide the resources to support that goal.

What else? Here are a few other important considerations.

■ **Publicize your awards**—and the editorial quality they represent—to readers and advertisers with logos on your masthead and in your media kit.

■ **Send a company-wide email post-awards ceremony,** Thompson recommends, acknowledging the individual writers, editors, and designers who contributed to the winning entries.

■ **Display awards prominently** in a trophy case where employees and visitors alike can see them.

■ **Reward staff members** involved in winning entries, as *PC World* does.

■ **Factor awards into performance reviews and bonuses.**

■ **Make sure award entry fees are a line item in your annual budget.**

Persevere

Don't give up, editors advise.

"Be patient. Keep entering," McCracken says, pointing to his own magazine's multiple attempts at ASBPE's B2B Web Site of the Year award before it took home the top prize last year. "You might have good years and off years ... Don't get discouraged."

Ready to get started? Enter the Azbees online at www.asbpe.org.