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Best in Show: Merit Awards as Part of a Grant Strategy

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Abstract

Merit awards can raise an organization's credibility, steward funders, recognize volunteers and staff, and forge community relationships. All these factors enhance an organization's sustainability and may increase its likelihood of winning grant funds.

Introduction

Grant professionals sometimes use their writing skills on projects other than grant applications, such as nominations for honorary achievement prizes. When approached judiciously, merit award opportunities can be something more than a side project: they can enrich an organization's grant strategy and position it for long-term success.

Some clarification of vocabulary is in order. In this strategy paper, the term "award" does not refer to "grant awards," which are commonly understood as sums of money that a government or other institution gives to an individual or organization for a particular purpose (*Collins Dictionary*, 2021). Instead, this paper focuses on honorary awards that are given by community organizations, businesses or other entities in order to recognize achievement or excellence. Such awards may not even include money, but often do involve the conferring of a trophy or the bestowing of a title such as "Outstanding Program/Volunteer/Campaign of the Year." This strategy paper considers the value of merit awards as one aspect of a larger development plan. The following strategies are based on testimonials collected from the field and the author's work experience.

Kinds of Awards

The awards landscape offers a variety of options for prospective nominators.

Monetary vs. Honorary. The prospect of material gain is just one factor to consider when weighing an award opportunity. For instance, Nonprofit New York bestows its Nonprofit Excellence Awards, which include cash prizes and scholarships to the Columbia Business School. Most merit awards, however, bring no profit other than prestige. One well-known example is the series of philanthropy awards given by the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Individual vs. Organizational. In contrast to grant applications, the direct beneficiary of an award nomination might be a person, such as a donor, community partner, or volunteer, rather than an organization. The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) Nonprofit Federation, for example, gives achievement awards both to nonprofit leaders and to outstanding charities such as No Kid Hungry and the AARP Foundation.

National vs. Local. While high-profile awards hold a powerful allure, they tend to go to large organizations with national reach. Such awards are also highly competitive. The Atlantic/Allstate Renewal Awards program, for example, gives \$40,000 cash prizes to just five outstanding nonprofits per year out of approximately ten thousand applicants. Nominators will enjoy better luck in competitions sponsored by a local entity such as a city or a chamber of commerce. Smaller awards are not only easier to win, but may also have more meaning to stakeholders. A solid history of small wins can also prepare an organization for larger award opportunities.

General vs. Specific. In addition to comprehensive “outstanding nonprofit” awards, nominators may want to consider niche prizes – which also may offer a better chance of winning. There are awards particular to specific disciplines such as media (the Webby Awards), marketing (PR News Digital Awards) and finance (the CBIS Foundation’s Nonprofit CFO of the Year Award). Awards are also given in sectors such as the arts (Americans for the Arts’ National Arts Awards), medicine (*Modern Healthcare* magazine’s Innovators award), the environment (the National Association of Environmental Professionals’ National Environmental Excellence Awards), senior services (the National Council on Aging’s Trailblazers in Aging Awards), education (the National Science Foundation’s Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching), and many more. For all the examples cited here, nonprofit organizations are eligible.

Committee Selection vs. Popular Vote. In the age of social media, it is common to bestow awards by way of a public vote rather than the deliberation of a qualified committee. Author Vu Le likens these divisive contests to the dystopian “Hunger Games” franchise, arguing that competing with other nonprofits for clicks or votes is a “demeaning” waste of time (Le, 2018, p.1). Grant professionals should consider such warnings seriously before undertaking any popularity-based award opportunities.

Benefit of Merit Awards

Since most merit awards do not come with money, what is to be gained by applying?

Build Credibility. Awards validate the quality of one’s work. Awards announce to constituents, peers, funders and the general public that an organization aims high and succeeds. Organizations can build awareness of their accomplishments by:

- Sending a press release to mass media.
- Plugging the win on social media, annual report, and website.
- Showing an award plaque in a public area, like a lobby or a display window.
- Mentioning the award in an email signature and in a LinkedIn or Twitter profile.
- Including the award in the organizational overview section of grant proposals.

Merit awards can position an organization to win grants, provided they cite the award thoughtfully as evidence for the caliber of their programs and personnel. In an interview with the author, one Chicago-area grantmaker said, "If all proposals were equal, the award could help one stand out if it has relevance to the proposed activities and comes from a respected source. An award could signal a history of performing excellent work or leadership in a field." Well-publicized awards also build an organization's name recognition with grantmakers and can be the extra factor that nudges a proposal over the finish line.

A real-life situation that illustrates these principles comes from an ecological nonprofit in the central USA. (Case studies cited here will remain anonymous.) The organization's president told their grant professional and a marketing staffer to apply for a prestigious national award. The pair were given ample time in their workdays to prepare a competitive proposal. The small regional entity ended up tying for top honors with a big-city nonprofit. Said the grant professional, "It was a tremendous coup for our organization and has become a concrete signal to our local leaders and donors that we are in a different league now. The cost was tremendous in terms of time and labor, but it was absolutely worth it. It is a symbol of our organization's transformation."

Steward Funders. Awards are a powerful way to recognize grantmakers and major donors. Many readers are no doubt familiar with the Grantmaker of the Year awards, bestowed at the Grant Professionals Association (GPA) annual conference. The grant officer who nominated one recent winner said that she was motivated by the desire to deepen her organization's relationship with that funder and gain recognition for their joint accomplishments on a national level. The grantmaker was flattered and featured the news on their website. As a result, the nominator says, the grantmaker is more accommodating to her organization and takes her input more seriously than before.

Recognize Volunteers. Awards can also steward those who give time and talent. Consider nominating board members, rank-and-file volunteers, and corporate groups for public service awards from a local volunteer center, United Way, municipal government, or professional association.

Build Relationships. Award-related site visits, ceremonies, or media coverage might lead an organization to the next funder, program collaborator, or political ally. About a decade ago, an independent governmental body in California nominated one of their business partners for a prominent environmental award. The business owners received a monetary prize and were invited to a White House conference on conservation. This positive attention helped the nominating agency win additional grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In an inventive twist, the California agency also created an award to recognize people in the community who supported their work. The agency recruited state government personnel to sit on the award panel and persuaded a utility company to give out the awards at their annual barbecue party, which many state and federal officials attended. "It not only raised awareness in the community for the work we were doing, it raised our visibility with those who were providing grant funding for our work, and we often referred to the Partners Award in our education and outreach strategy in grant applications," said the grant professional involved, adding: "I can say without a doubt we received grant funding because of it, and it didn't really cost us anything but time."

Tips for Successful Merit Award Applications

What can an organization do to increase the chances of winning an achievement award?

Mission and Motivation. Consider the awarding entity's reason for giving the award and then write toward that purpose, just as one would with a grant opportunity. If the award represents a niche field (for example, achievements in social media), then its purpose is to recognize technical excellence. An award from a professional organization (like the GPA) highlights the value of expertise and credentials. Civic organizations, business associations, and government agencies want to call attention to the positive aspects of living, working and investing in their area. Trade publications and newspapers seek captivating stories that people will want to read. In an application, focus on those points where the awarding organization's interests align with yours.

Process. The means by which award contests are decided can be obscure. If the application does not outline a scoring process, there might not be one. Some award decisions are made by informal consensus. If, however an award rubric is provided, focus on the most valuable questions, just as one would with a grant. Try to find out who sits on the award committee. If the decision-makers are experts in your field, provide data and vocabulary that are meaningful to them. If the committee is made up of non-specialists, then compelling case studies or testimonials may persuade them.

Ask First. Confer with a representative of the awarding organization about what they want to see in applications. Also consider approaching past winners for their advice. Finally, ask the nominee whether they want to be considered for the award and would be available to accept it.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Is applying for merit awards worth it? Here are some factors to consider.

- How long and complicated is the application?
- What is the opportunity cost; that is, what could your organization be doing instead?
- Does the award come with money or other material benefits?
- How prominent and prestigious is the award?
- What is the likelihood of winning? Are there many applicants? Are you a good fit?
- Are there associated costs, such as membership dues or banquet tickets?
- Is the winner obliged to attend other events or make media appearances?
- Might a monetary award impose tax obligations on individuals or for-profit businesses? If you have any doubts, consult a tax professional.

What if an award application does not result in a win?

- A second-place finish or honorable mention can still be impressive and can be worth mentioning on a list of achievements.
- Consider repurposing the award application (or parts of it) into a grant proposal.
- Try again the next year. As with grants, persistence pays off.

A final case study illustrates the concept of return on investment. The grant professional at a human services organization on the West Coast nominated their new branch office for an achievement award from the local chamber of commerce. The application process took about three hours. When the agency was chosen as a finalist, staff spent another three hours creating a video for the awards luncheon. The organization won in the nonprofit category. The resulting benefits were both tangible and intangible. The organization received significant positive media coverage. In the two years following the award, the agency also won a new city contract, two Community Development Block grants, and a new donation from a local business. The agency's grant professional attributed these positive consequences to the ripple effect of the chamber award.

Opportunities

Where can one find award opportunities? Here are some ideas.

Organizations:

- Chambers of Commerce
- Service clubs
- Nonprofit networks (the National Council of Nonprofits has a state-by-state list)
- United Ways
- Volunteer Centers
- Colleges and universities, especially those with nonprofit management programs
- Units of government, including state service commissions
- Professional associations or networking groups
- Foundations

Media:

- Local newspapers
- Industry newsletters
- Business and nonprofit publications (e.g. the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*)
- Social media, especially channels run by funders or industry leaders in your sector

Conclusion

Merit awards confer prestige which can enhance an organization's credibility and increase its chances of receiving grant funds. New award-seekers can start with a small, low-stakes opportunity, and then use that experience to determine how merit award competitions can best complement their long-term grant strategy.

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