

Measuring Excellence in Accreditation Portfolios and Award Entries

The following speech by Lou Williams, ABC, APR provides advice that's worth reading as you prepare your portfolios for accreditation. Our thanks to Lou for his permission to republish this speech.

Excellence is as Excellence Does *Presented at the IABC/Chicago Spectra Awards Luncheon Sept. 26, 2007*

Good afternoon and, first of all, let me offer my congratulations to all of the winners today. Winning an award in a chapter in such a competitive city like Chicago is no small accomplishment. Some of the best public relations/communications work in the world is done in and around this region.

Second, as I thought of the awards being given today, I thought of a remark made famous several years ago by Sally Field when she collected her Oscar for the movie Norma Rae: "You love me, you really love me." It was a heartfelt, totally spontaneous reaction on her part, and it rang true for actors everywhere. It's interesting how often that line is used, even today. A couple of weeks ago, Sally Field won an Emmy for a performance she gave on television last year, and the story in the paper the next day reminded us yet again of her line.

Well, just as that line struck a very serious responsive chord within the acting community, it also could easily be applied to those of us who practice the field of public relations/communication. In truth, we are forever seeking approval: from our bosses, senior management, our employees or newspaper editors who read our writing and, yes, even our peers, which is why awards programs continue to grow larger and even more important than ever.

I'm also reminded of my personal theory that basically says anyone who practices this field of ours is paranoid. The only question I have about that paranoia is whether we are born that way or we become that way having been beaten up by clients and bosses over the years.

Thus it is that winning an award gets us peer recognition . . . a very, very good thing. However, this occasion also got me to thinking about the entire subject of excellence in our business. How do we decide on what is excellence? What is it that makes one body of work product better than any other? As you can well imagine, there are no easy answers.

So, I did what any good former journalist would do. I asked some people I respected how they measure excellence in their work. I talked to my wife, who is a consummate public relations professional, and I asked an old boss of mine, Hal Bergen, and I also reviewed in my mind some of the many awards competitions I've judged over the last, believe it or not, 45 years.

I have judged in competitions ranging from IABC's Blue Ribbon Panel for Gold Quill, PRSA's Silver Anvil, the Institute for Public Relations its various competitions, the PCC's Golden Trumpet, not too mention innumerable local chapter and regional competitions across the United States and Canada. Probably in the range of 35 all together. Whew! Easy to get discouraged, as I think about it.

Anyway, I know that you have a long program today, so I wanted to just spend a few minutes talking about what factors I've seen that seemed to persuade judges that one program was better than an other. Here they are:

1. **Read AND follow the rules.** I wish I had a nickel for every time a judge I was with actually dropped an entry from competition simply because the person hadn't followed the very specific rules for entering. Whether it's a binder that was thicker than allowed (as actually happened at PRSA for many years) or not following the right format or (believe this or not) using someone else's work as their own. Awards forms are very carefully designed and must be very carefully filled out. I know it sounds petty, but remember, if others do follow the rules and you don't, how can you reward that wayward entrant?
2. **Prove your case.** This is a little more difficult to describe, but what it means is that you need to make a case for what you were trying to accomplish, then you need to prove to the judges that you actually accomplished it.
3. This comes in two parts: **a) Tell an engaging, well-written story.** And **b), present it artfully.** Writing is the basic skill of our business, and it behooves you to write your best entry. Weave the story in a persuasive and interesting manner. Don't forget that judges are human, and they get bored after judging for a day. Therefore, good writing will win almost every time.
4. **Don't let budget be the defining quality of your entry.** Time and time again, I've seen judges make decisions that were sensitive to available resources. Big budgets don't win; big results do. If the judges think money could have been better spent, or that too much money was spent for the results, they'll choose another entry.
5. **Structure your entry as requested by the competition.** That is, make sure that if the structure for an entry is strategy, tactics, budget, results, answer back with strategy, tactics, budget, results. In that order. If your entry is not capable of being strong in every category of the competition, you probably should not waste the effort. And, speaking of effort, there's a reason – beyond excellence – why many awards go to the same folks year after year. They have spent enormous amounts of time putting the entry together. In fact, I can personally remember, as a public relations consultant, getting paid to put together entries for a client – a Fortune 500 company. (I wish I could say that my entry won; it didn't. The client might have said my entry wasn't up to snuff. I say what my grandpa used to say: You can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear.)

6. **Remember the difference between process and impact measurement.** That is, if you are asked to show why the entry was a good one, don't point to the number of clips as the defining result. Anybody can sell media on a good story. Show me a good story and I'll show you lots of clips. What really counts is impact. What did the entry accomplish? Increased sales? Increased productivity? Increased safety records? Increased ANYTHING? Show the judges your results. Don't just expect them to believe you.
7. And, while we're on the subject of measurement, my next point would be that you'd better **understand the difference between a qualitative measurement and a statistical measurement.** (I recently judged a competition where the results were justified by the "many comments" by management after the meeting that were "universally" positive. Positive comments may build relationships so you get a good raise; they don't prove anything to judges who are more neutral.)
8. **The best entries of all are those that show or prove that accomplishment could be measured in how the entry met management strategies.** That is, was the program truly aligned with what the company was trying to accomplish? What is the company's strategy, and how does your program advance that strategy? Not an easy thing to do, but it does concentrate your attention to appropriate entry information. Believe it or not, creativity is only one, relatively small factor in the judges' minds. It's about the organizational strategies.
9. **Sometimes the best entry is the one you don't enter.** Remember, if you enter a competition, you are setting a level of expectations. What will your management think of you and your work if you don't win? I certainly don't want to discourage you, but I must also admit that I am sometimes amazed at what people think might qualify as a winner.
10. Finally, having said that you should think about not participating in awards competitions, I would unequivocally tell you that **you should enter competitions.** I've learned more about excellence than you can imagine by seeing what did win a category I entered. When you feel up to it, **volunteer to be a judge.** Volunteer first at the chapter or local level, and work your way up to the national and international levels. Seeing the good, the bad, the ugly is a great teacher. You listen to others as they critique work, and you can then begin to compare your own ideas to others. Just having the opportunity to see and hear work from various segments of our business, with big and small budgets, and learning how expectations of audiences was met is – in and of itself – a big plus in your own learning process.

So there you have some of the things I have learned over the years in judging competitions. But, I want to close with one final comment on the subject. And that is something that is difficult to define: personal integrity. What do I mean by that? Well, there is no more powerful a motivator and definer of quality than your own personal definitions of good and bad, ordinary and extraordinary. You need to be sure, deep down in your heart and soul, that the work you are doing is the best you can do. Don't use lack of budget or other resources as an "out" or

excuse for not having done better. There truly is always a way to get the job done – with excellence as the guiding force – no matter how much money is available.

In the end, you have to be able to go home at night knowing you didn't leave any piece of the equation unexplored, or fully finished in a way that makes you personally proud of your work. Yes, it's nice to be recognized by your peers. But the bottom line is that excellence is what you make of it. Nobody controls that but you. Excellence is what you do.

Thank you.

Louis C. Williams Jr., ABC, APR is chairman of L.C. Williams & Associates (LCWA), a full-service public relations and research counseling firm headquartered in Chicago. He founded LCWA in 1985 after holding senior management roles at Savlin-Williams Associates, Hill & Knowlton, and Harshe, Rotman & Druck. Among many honors, Lou is a past chairman of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and was selected as a Fellow, the highest award IABC bestows on a member. In addition to consulting and public speaking, Lou has authored Communication Research, Measurement and Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Communicators, which discusses how to use research in public relations and communication. He currently serves as a trustee, member of the executive committee and chairman of the research committee for the Institute of Public Relations.