

"Perception is reality"

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What other people think of you and your business is often even more important than what you know to be the truth. For example, if the quality of your brochures, other printed materials and website lead people to conclude that yours is a \$20 million company, rather than the \$7 million firm you really are, so much the better. That's their assumption; you've done nothing to foster it except put your best foot forward.

And if, based on their assumption, they in turn consider you for larger and/or more prestigious projects, that's great. If you're realistically qualified and can do the job, pretty soon you will be at \$20 million.

This concept of perception equaling reality really hit home for me in 1993 when my newsletter, Words from Woody, won the first of three Construction Writers Association T. Randolph Russell Awards for Newsletters. Though I knew myself to be the same writer, publicist and consultant the day after the announcement as I was the day before, the rest of the world seemed to think otherwise.

Doors formerly closed suddenly opened, people who never returned my calls before began calling me, and I began picking up new clients from all across the country (who had become aware of me because of the award). I confess to having promoted the heck out of the honor and to being proud of the accomplishment, but to be honest, the overall response was way out of proportion to what I had achieved. (But far be it from me to complain!)

To take this notion a step further, several months later I received somewhat frantic calls from two contractor clients, each in a tizzy because the deadline for the AGC Massachusetts Builder Awards were five days away and neither had done anything about the submissions for their projects. Three midnight-oil-burning nights later, each was armed with a first class entry.

These two successful contractors, though arguably a bit lacking in their planning, recognized the value of awards competition. Though obviously there are no guarantees of winning, they clearly understood that by not playing in the game they were assured of not winning.

How many times over the course of a year do you have an announcement of some award competition cross your desk? At least three or four, I'll bet. And, if you're like most people, you'll look it over, think to yourself, "Wouldn't it be great to win this?" then stick it on one of the piles on your desk for "future follow-up." By the time it surfaces again, either the deadline's already passed or you're so busy with other things you toss it out, figuring you haven't got the time to get it done.

That's wonderful for those of us who do enterâ€”less competition! But you're really missing the boat here. The potential value of participating, even if you don't win, is enormous. Here's why:

* Putting together your submission requires organizing the information about a project. In the event you don't win, you're still left with all the essential elements of a promotional piece that can be used as part of your firm's marketing effort.

* Submitting an award entry tells the other members of your team (owner, architect, contractor, engineer, subcontractors, suppliers, developer, broker, banker, etc.) that you're proud of their contribution, that you think they should be recognized for it, and that the project is one worthy of boasting about. The goodwill that springs from this is invaluable, and increases the desire of these people to want to work with you again on future jobs. That alone makes the effort worthwhile.

* If you should be fortunate enough to win (and somebody will!), you've now got the opportunity to generate press releases, query editors about feature articles (which can then be reprinted to use as marketing tools), add taglines to all your written communications ("Winner of the 2008 Best in Show Award") and a whole host of other promotional strategies.

You'll also find that you've gained added respect within your industry. You'll be solicited more often as a speaker, panel member, for quotes in articles, and for other opportunities that broaden the visibility and exposure of both you and your company. Not only may you receive the 15 minutes of fame Andy Warhol promised us all, but more importantly, sales will increase.

So, don't be lazy or procrastinate indefinitely the next time you're asked to enter an awards competition. You may not capture the grand prize, but regardless, you'll emerge a winner—one who finishes in the money.

David Wood is a copywriter, newsletter publisher and marketing consultant in Deering, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540