

DESIGN COMPETITIONS:

Why? And what it takes.



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Ask anyone who has won a design award and he or she will share pride in their achievement. To a professional in the design industry, winning a design award is equivalent to winning an Oscar in the film industry. That's because it's a testimony from peers that you have done something of professional significance. And it's a confirmation to yourself and your team that your hard work and long hours were worth the effort. Ultimately, it is a validation that the innovative idea you conceived pushed your profession to new heights. It "feels great" and "is such an honor" to quote many past award winners of design competitions sponsored by IIDA.

Having facilitated, selected and participated in juries for competitions, as well as having been a recipient of a number of awards, my firm has had positive award experiences resulting in benefits on a number of levels.

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SO WHY SHOULD WE ENTER DESIGN COMPETITIONS?

For some, it's the glory of it all. For others, it's simply personal satisfaction. My firm enters design competitions to validate our work and confirm a level of design excellence. Awards allow us to distinguish our firm and its work to potential clients. It gives us an automatic independent third-party endorsement.

A recent white paper on "Winning Award Competitions" from the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) determined that 50 percent of individuals entering competitions believe that it gives them a competitive edge. It also stated that more than 75 percent of winning firms then utilize press releases to announce their wins. In this case, awards become a built-in publicity magnet.

Awards can result in new work, and not just through the publicity of the award, but rather through the promotion of the project and the firm. The "Design Excellence" program developed by the GSA (General Services Administration) requires design awards as a

prerequisite to participate in the selection process for significant federal design commissions.

Those in need of quality design search out firms that win design awards, in both the public and private sector. Award-winning work is typically cutting edge, is written about and is often glamorized in the media. As many firms have found, winning design competitions can be good for business.

Design awards are also important for the profession. We wind up aspiring to achieve the standards set by these awards. The best way to identify design excellence is to review those projects selected by a highly-respected group of peers. Design competitions show designers and the public what the profession recognizes as great design. Design competition jurors look for fresh and innovative projects and concepts. This encourages designers to "push the envelope" in their designs. So how does one go about winning these coveted awards?

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO WIN?

There are so many factors that can make or break an award-winning project. Since jurors don't have the luxury of seeing every submittal in person, communication and presentation of materials becomes crucial. But there are other factors as well. Here are ten things to consider when entering a design award competition:

Great Design. First and foremost, the submitted project must be an extraordinary design, or a good design that is well executed. Many designers cannot differentiate good design from bad design when critiquing their own work. One solution is to ask others if they believe your project is worthy of submitting. More specifically, ask someone who does not have a

vested interest, but does have a good sense of design. Then look carefully at the submission and be honest with yourself. The judges will be discriminating.

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Each jury is different. The makeup of a jury is distinct from one competition to the next. However, similarities do exist. Usually juries range from three to five people. The jurors are expected to have knowledge and experience in the field related to the projects that they are being asked to review. These individuals can be selected from the same or different regions of the country, they have definite opinions and they have usually won design awards themselves. Some competitions strive for diversity in their jury, while others look for cohesiveness. Know your jury, if you can, since its members will make a difference in the outcome of the competition. Jurors will tend to gravitate to projects of similar style to their own work, but a great project will always rise to the top. And remember that different juries will select different projects. If you truly believe in your project and it doesn't win in one competition, submit it again with a different jury. Sometimes the second time around will work.

So little time. The jury has very little time to look at your work. This is not because they lack interest, but because the process does not allow for lengthy reviews. Depending on the jury format and the number of submissions, the first round of reviews might only give a project a minute or two of review. Your project has to make a good first impression or it will not make the first cut. The IIDA jury uses common slide and electric format, meaning that all projects are viewed via submitted slides. To gain a further understanding of the project, or if questions arise during the viewings, jurors can also look at submitted binders filled with descriptions. But, the primary focus is on the slides. Due to the number of entries, jurors only have a few minutes to review each project during the first round of judging. During each consecutive round, projects are eliminated until the jury narrows the field and selects the final winners.

Good photography is critical. Solid photography will help create a good first impression that is critical to advancing and winning. The quality of the photograph is the one thread that seems to permeate all the conversations between jury members. The juries expect the best quality photography. How can you expect jurors to perceive design excellence if what you show are poor snapshots? If you are serious about winning, hire an experienced architectural photographer. Good photography depicts your project in its best light and shows jurors it is a winner. It can't guarantee a win, but it greatly improves your chances.

Tell the story. To the extent possible, each picture should build on your description of the project. Again, the jury has limited time to review each project. The more quickly they understand it, the more quickly they can draw their conclusions as to its merits. In some cases, because of time limitations, juries pass by

projects that seem too confusing or are hard to understand. The entire project submission should be concise, to the point and quick to tell the story.

Edit your submissions. Aim for quality over quantity. Don't offer bad views in an attempt to give a more comprehensive presentation of the project. Each picture must look good on its own merits and still be part of a set. Too many times jurors get excited by the first picture, and then lose interest by the last because of poor or inconsistent views and pictures. Consistency is a must. But keep in mind that eliminating too much will raise questions with juries as they are left to wonder why all areas are not shown. They may surmise that other areas of the project are not as good. Ultimately, if there are areas that are not as strong, why feature them? It will only hurt your chances. Jurors are designers themselves and like a consistency of quality.

Keep your descriptions to the point. This is not a writing competition. It's a design competition, and flowery, verbose or "archi-talk" writing will only frustrate most jurors. In many cases, the description is read because the juror wants to further understand the project. Make your description clear and concise. It is supposed to help clarify your submission to the jurors, not confuse them.

Your drawings should be clear. Again this is not a drawing competition, but drawings and plans do help explain a complicated project. However, they will only help when they are clearly delineated. Drawings should support the photography and description, and help explain the project; anything more may only confuse the juror. Don't think that great drawings and sketches will help a badly photographed or designed project – they won't.

Follow directions. In most, if not all cases, the staff of the organization running the design competition will first review submissions for compliance. Be sure to follow directions, because projects that fail to meet requirements will not even reach the jury for review. What a waste of effort to be eliminated on a technicality. Establish a checklist of requirements and carefully review your submission for compliance before submitting. A little effort can go a long way.

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Plan your submission. Don't wait until the last minute to prepare your submission. Producing a quality project takes time and so does putting a quality submission together. Set a schedule to complete the entry requirements that can include quality photos, a written description, drawings, etc. At a minimum, the submission should be neat and organized. Sloppy entries send the wrong message to the jury. Never start with a negative message.

If you follow these simple rules, your odds of winning will greatly improve. The most important thing is presenting a well designed project that is photographed in a professional manner and communicates the design with articulate and concise documentation.

For information on competitions sponsored by IIDA, go to www.iida.org. 