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Winning Banking Awards

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For the last three years I have been a judge for banking awards in Kenya. Banking awards are a great way for financial institutions to showcase the innovation happening in a rapidly expanding and evolving sector. However, for the awards to be truly representative a wide range of financial institutions must submit high quality entries. This blog explores how to submit winning entries.

Generally, there are two types of award – awards driven by performance, and awards driven by application. Awards driven by performance are objective and are driven by tabulation and calculation - the fastest growing bank, the most profitable bank. This blog considers awards driven by application that are awarded through a judging process which seeks to be as objective as possible.

<u>Misapprehensions</u>: Decisions on whether to apply for banking awards often revolve around common misapprehensions. These include, ‘it’s not possible for my bank to win’; ‘it’s not worth the time’; ‘certain banks always win’. I’ll return to these misapprehensions after considering how banks produce winning entries.

Banks that win banking awards:

1. <u>Recognise the value of banking awards for brand building</u>: Awards are used to build customer perceptions of the institution and its products as being innovative, impactful, and meeting customer needs. They note that brand building works internally as well as externally, awards motivate staff and build morale.

2. Aim to win the banking award through producing high quality applications: Winning banks realise that not every application is written well or responds fully to the questions being asked in the award. They maximise their chances through producing high quality applications.

3. Submit awards that meet the judging criteria: Meeting the judging criteria is important. Some applications fail to meet the set criteria or are ‘creative’ in how they respond to difficult questions. Such approaches usually fail.

4. Supply additional supportive information where this is permitted through attachments: Many categories allow for additional information to be provided in support of the application. However, even where additional information is available within the financial institution, it is often not provided.

5. Spend time on the application: Applications often appear last minute and rushed perhaps to meet the submission deadline. However, well-managed awards provide time for applications to be submitted and have entries against a similar but evolving set of criteria year-on-year. So, determine early which categories to enter to provide the writing team time to generate the application.

6. Provide more than the minimum information required on an individual question: It is easiest to answer the award criteria succinctly. However, where possible winning banks, support each answer with additional information specifically related to the question being asked.

7. Demonstrate innovation: In demonstrating innovation, winning entries show innovation relative to other financial institutions; to be catching up with other institutions is rarely sufficient. Increasingly innovation means integration of technology and/or fintech; carefully considering use cases, user experience and user interfaces; partnerships; and the incorporation of data into decision making.

8. Demonstrate going beyond best local practice: In categories in which Central Banks ensure minimum standards through guidelines – entries appear similar. Winning institutions demonstrate that they have gone beyond local best practices. For example, if considering governance awards – a winning application would demonstrate – an institutional code of conduct, better qualified directors, a greater breadth of experience, improved certifications and improved risk management practices.

9. Demonstrate impact: Winners demonstrate real impact – impact that shows in terms of numbers, customers, usage, uptake, and growth are a good start. Where this is not possible for a new service, then show customer feedback and appreciation and/or how the product responds to particular customer issues.

10. Carefully select the awards to enter: Financial institutions should select which awards to enter based on an internal assessment of their chance to be placed, an internal shortlisting process could be developed for this.

Applicants should be aware:

1. There are sometimes relatively few applications per category significantly increasing the opportunity to win or to be highly placed.
2. The quality of applications is highly variable, many applications are of poor quality, making high quality applications stand out.

3. Smaller institutions can win awards where there is high degree of targeting, innovation and impact. Its not just about the absolute numbers served.

Re-examining the misconceptions

It is not possible to win: Every category has a winner. The best prepared application often wins. Write carefully, provide supporting documentation, answer each question fully, provide evidence of impact.

Certain banks always win: They do not win all awards every time, but they have figured out they need to submit large numbers of quality applications. At the same time they benefit from the poor applications submitted by other financial institutions and the decisions of peers not to enter the awards.

It is not worth the time: Banking awards build brands. As third-party validation of success, they provide more objective marketing material than normal product marketing. Brand building can be especially valuable to smaller institutions that may not have the marketing budget of their larger competitors.

Judging

Lastly it is important to understand the judging process, for the process provides credibility to the awards and ensures to a significant extent that the awards are objective and impartial. The following standards should be applied:

1. There is a points-based scoring system against multiple pre-set criteria. The criteria are weighted to reflect the importance of the criteria for the specific award. There is an annual review of the criteria so that the awards become increasingly representative over time.

2. There are multiple judges for each award, decreasing the potential for personal bias.

3. Judges are briefed on the judging criteria for each award to improve consistency in judging

4. The awards process is audited, observed, and validated independently of the judges or the awarding body. There is a moderating process where agreement is reached on the awards to be provided.

5. Judges should be highly experienced, senior and from a range of disciplines which support banking and financial services. Ensuring diversity increases objectivity through reducing bias that may come from a particular professional perspective.

6. Judges should declare any potential conflicts of interest so they can be sure to be impartial.

This blog is one of a series of blogs, should you wish to sign up to receive additional blogs, please write to David Cracknell at david@firstprinciples.consulting

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