Many communications and marketing teams want to enter awards because even being shortlisted is great for staff morale and patient confidence; but as a time-consuming and expensive activity, focusing on the right ones is critical.

NHS Employers has teamed up with awards experts Wordsmiths Unlimited to produce a guide containing all you need to know to maximise your chances of succeeding.

Wordsmiths Unlimited have been writing award entries for clients for more than five years. They have a strong pedigree of producing quality entries, with 80 per cent shortlisted and 40 per cent taking a prize.

**WHAT’S IN THIS GUIDE**

This guide will support communications, marketing, HR teams and others involved in selecting, writing and submitting award entries. It will help you to think about:

- If you’ve considered what, when, why and who.
- Your strategic approach to award entries – if you have one and how to develop and implement it.
- Before you start – areas to consider when putting together an award entry.
- Putting pen to paper – how to best impress the judges and showcase your initiative.
- That extra mile – creating an advantage and warning signs for when you should not be entering.
BEFORE YOU START SELECTING AND DRAFTING YOUR AWARDS (AND DUSTING THE AWARDS CABINET), HERE ARE A FEW KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER:

- Any awards entries you produce should fit within the context of your communications strategy.
- It doesn’t matter whether you first choose an award you want to aim for, or the project you want to get an award for. What matters is that your achievements match the criteria.
- Entering awards is time intensive. You should prioritise those which will make the most impact with your key stakeholders.
- The cost of entering an award doesn’t stop with the entry fee. Think hotel bills and travel for any presentation days as well as tickets, travel and accommodation for the awards dinner itself.
- Most of the work for putting together an award submission happens before you put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard).
- There are things you can include in your entry that aren’t required in the criteria, but will likely garner you extra points.
- Saying no to putting together an award entry is just as important as perfecting the craft of writing one.
A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO AWARDS

WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE AN AWARDS STRATEGY

Entering awards costs money, both in terms of time spent writing the entry and taking part in any other judging rounds, along with the cost of entering and attending the ceremony.

As with any other communications activity you should be clear on:

- Why entering awards in general is a good thing for your organisation, aligned to your communications objectives.
- Why particular awards are the right ones to enter.

Set in the context of good communications planning, you should have clearly identified the audience you intend to impress by attempting to win the award and be certain that awards are the right vehicle to achieve that outcome.

ARE WINNERS BORN OR CREATED?

The answer is both.

With awards you can either identify the one you want to win and set about planning a project or initiative to align with the criteria, or you can identify a great project and find the right award to put an entry into. Either approach is valid as long as the award meets the overall objectives of your communications strategy.

However, taking a medium-term and trust-wide view of awards would encourage a much more strategic approach and would mitigate against pressure from within the trust/service to enter certain projects into awards on an ad hoc basis.

There are myriads of awards suitable for the NHS to enter, so a strategic approach is likely to be the most efficient. It’s better to choose a small number of awards and direct resource to doing a brilliant job on the entries, than spread that resource too thin and not achieve recognition because there wasn’t enough time to craft a compelling entry.
WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AWARDS

With so many awards ceremonies it can be hard to assess which are the best to target. Here are some questions to help you consider which awards are right for your trust/project/team.

- **What’s important to your stakeholders** – is a general local award likely to be better received than a technical but national one? Would an award for your people carry more weight than one for a piece of software you’ve implemented?

- **Transparency of judging** – many awards ceremonies are simply a commercial vehicle for making money and others are dependent on relationships to create winners. You need to carefully assess the judging process to ensure it is robust and transparent. A judging panel containing industry experts is generally a good sign.

- **Budget** – consider not only any entry fees, but ticket costs, travel and expenses for attending the ceremony and any associated judging stages. Many awards have a secondary stage where the shortlisted applicants deliver a presentation. This is often on a different day to the awards ceremony itself.

- **Categories and criteria** – can your project fit into more than one? Is one category likely to be less popular than another? Could you enter it into both and would there need to be any changes to make it fit? It’s good practice to make adaptations rather than submit exactly the same entry into two categories.

Top tip: Browse our online awards calendar to see the options available.
BEFORE YOU START

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Before you start to write any awards entry you need to gather the relevant information. You need to know about the award itself, and you need to know about the project or initiative you’re entering.

Here are some things to consider about your project/initiative.

- Have you agreed what the **narrative** is? The most compelling stories involve a transformation. What’s important is the difference you have made to others – whether that’s to patients, internal stakeholders, suppliers, the community or to your customers.

- Do you have the **headline statistics** which are the evidence for your pitch? Do you have the most current data and do the numbers support the narrative?

- **Testimonials** – ideally you’ll source these before you start writing so they can be woven into the content.

- Who needs to **sign off** the entry? Can you do it? Your manager? Does it need director/member sign off? And can you put time in their diary now to make sure they’ll be able to do it before the deadline?

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**Top tip:** You don’t need to share any deadline extension with the wider project team immediately. Nothing focuses the mind – or resource – like an impending deadline.
You should also find out key information about the award you want to enter.

- **Criteria** – what boxes are you trying to tick?
- The **layout of the entry** – are they asking specific questions or do you just have 1,000 words to make your pitch?
- Can you supply **extra information** as appendices? Are there size limits?
- What **additional requirements** are there? Some awards want you to produce a video, others need a high res logo and team photo to be submitted with the entry.
- **How do you submit** the entry? Most are online, but some still ask for hard copies in triplicate to save them photocopying everything for the judges. In this case you’ll need to factor in the time and cost for posting the entries.
- **How to pay** for your entry – is a PO number acceptable or do you need access to a company credit card?
- Any **additional judging requirements** – is there a presentation day and is your diary – and that of anyone critical to the project – free that day?
- The **deadline** and the chances of an extension – usually one or two weeks is offered and this can help you manage timescales.

**Top tip:**
Make a call to the awards organisers to ask what their policy is on deadline extensions. Most will tell you whether they tend to offer an extension even months in advance, even if they can’t confirm what it will be. About two weeks before the deadline make another call to request an extension: the more people who ask, the more likely it is that the deadline will be extended.
PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

We’ve included a handy check list on page three listing what information you need when thinking about your award entry.

There are two more stages you need to go through before you get started on writing anything:

- Getting clarity on your key messages.
- Creating a long-list of potential evidence.

KEY MESSAGES

Ensure you have key messages for your project/initiative. If they already exist but aren’t suitable, draft some that are relevant to the narrative for your entry. Don’t worry about the criteria at this stage, just make sure you’re clear what you want the judges to know.

SHARING IDEAS

This can work well with a whole project team to get the broadest possible view of what metrics might be available to support your entry. One proof point per key message would be ideal.

Make sure you have both quantitative and qualitative examples. Especially look for metrics that can be compared, either over time or to industry standards or your competitors. Also think about what is important to the category you want to enter.

Top tip:
Work really hard on putting numbers against your evidence metrics. Saying things have ‘increased’ or ‘decreased’ without qualification will not be enough.
TOP TIPS FOR WRITING AWARD ENTRIES

As communications professionals we all have our own process for writing, but based on our experience of writing award-winning entries in UK and international awards, our tried and tested process offers useful advice:

- **Map evidence against criteria** – as a final step before sitting down to write, make sure you can tick all of the boxes for the award category you’re entering.

- **Agree in advance who will be involved** – remember that too many cooks really can make your life difficult, so try to pin down one or two key team members who can read and comment on your entry, along with sourcing any additional information you need.

- **Write, then edit** – just get everything down without worrying about word count in the first instance. You can edit down or augment with more information where necessary.

- **Recruit a critical friend** – find someone who knows nothing about the project who can read through your draft entry and give you feedback on what they think the story is and what they’d be interested in hearing more about. Ask them to read the award criteria before reading your entry so they have all of the information a judge would. You want them to be cruel to be kind!

- **Build in at least a week for sign-off** – you’ll know who needs to sign off the entry and how long it’s likely to take to get them to look at it. We allow at least a week before the deadline to make that happen.
CREATING AN EXTRA ADVANTAGE – AND WHEN NOT TO WASTE YOUR TIME

THE EXTRA TEN POINTS

Once you’ve ticked all of the award criteria you should think about creating an extra edge for your entry. What will make it really stand out? In a tie, what will make the judges choose your entry over another? Here are some things to think about:

- Can your project be replicated/adopted across the sector? Does it contribute to the progress or reputation of the NHS? What have you done to share your great practice with others? For example, through conferences, working groups with peers or via your professional body.
- Does your project make things better for at-risk or vulnerable groups?
- Have you cracked a problem that everyone has, but no one else has solved?
- Is yours a no/low-budget solution?
- Is it an industry first? If it’s never been done before, you should be on to a winner (or a shortlisting at the very least).
- Have you tackled current issues in your industry? Think about the key trends the judges are going to be aware of. Has your project addressed any of them?
- Demonstrating what’s next – don’t rest on your laurels, show you have plans to move things forward.
- Testimonials – seek out influential figures in your industry, people who have been positively impacted by the project, clients, suppliers and other independent stakeholders to give their opinion on the project. Use one or two key ones in the main body of your entry and compile them all into an appendix if you’re able to supply additional information.
KNOWING WHEN TO SAY NO

Not entering an award is as important as entering one. You should say no when:

- There’s no evidence of impact – wait a year, gathering evidence during that time.
- Achievements are below expectations or worse than others have already achieved.
- There’s no clear benefit to the project.
- You get different stories from people involved – there’s no clear direction or narrative for the project.
- You’ve entered the project many times before, not been successful and nothing has changed. We talk about awards fatigue, when judges have an opinion about your entry before even reading it because you have entered so many times before. In this situation it’s best to take a break for a year or two while evaluating what’s driving the desire for an award.
NHS EMPLOYERS

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients. We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- Pay and negotiations.
- Recruitment and planning the workforce.
- Healthy and productive workplaces.
- Employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

CONTACT US

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This briefing was written by Wordsmiths Unlimited. Communications managers turned content creators, the Wordsmiths team delivers ‘glory through stories’ for their clients.

They have had particular success helping clients get up on stage to claim trophies, with 80 per cent of the entries written since 2012 being shortlisted and 40 per cent taking a prize.

Working for a wide variety of public and private sector clients, the team also:

- Writes websites, blogs, newsletters and brochures.
- Commissions and writes a wide range of articles.
- Advises on and creates internal and external communications strategies.

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