

Awards: Why You Want Them and How to Get Them

Abstract

Awards are the most conventionally accepted method for proving to others that your work is necessary, complete, and effective. The key to winning awards is demonstrating that clients' needs, program objectives, and results are directly linked. Most awards require impact documentation, which is often challenging to generate. Yet impact documentation is necessary for others to be able to differentiate a poor program from a successful one. This article discusses the necessary elements of a quality Extension program and outlines a method of effectively crafting an associated award application.

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Why Awards Are Important

Awards are the easiest way to quickly prove the value of your work to others. Suppose someone approached you and proclaimed, "I'm the fastest sprinter in the world!" You likely would be skeptical of the declaration. Yet if the person were to make that claim while wearing a gold medal around his or her neck, the statement would be more believable. The runner would not need to run fast to prove the claim to you; he or she could just show you the medal. The same holds true for professional awards.

Garnering Program Support

Just as a gold medal is proof of athletic ability, awards are proof of success in Extension (O'Neill, 2008). On the surface, applying for awards may seem self-serving, or even pretentious. Winning awards, however, does much more than bring attention to you as an individual. Documented proof that programs are of the highest caliber facilitates recruitment of external support and resources for future programs (Bradley, Driscoll, & Bardon, 2012). Administration, funding agencies, local governments, and even potential future employers acknowledge the value of peer recognition. Agencies with funding and in-kind resources tend to divert their efforts toward projects with the greatest potential for success. They often base decisions about

who might be qualified to accomplish a task on prior successes of individuals or agencies under consideration.

"The Proof Is in the Pudding"

The reason awards are so powerful is that proof of program success must be included in an award application. To prove that your programs are successful, however, you must collect program impact data. Any quality Extension program is based on substantiation of clients' need for the education and involves measurable objectives and sound methods that teach and inform participants (Diem, 2003). Impact data are numbers you collect to show that people gained knowledge or changed their practices as a result of participation in a specific program. These impact data are the proof you need to support claims that your programs are of value.

How to Get Awards

Designing a Quality Program

The adage "good wine is made in the vineyard" is also true for professional awards. In the same way that a wine maker cannot make high-quality wine out of poor-quality grapes, an Extension professional cannot earn a quality award for a poor Extension program.

Planning

Developing Extension programs with evaluation procedures in mind from the start is the ideal method of design (Fetsch, MacPhee, & Boyer, 2012). Several program development models exist. One commonly accepted form is the logic model. What makes this model so effective is that it outlines a complete and customizable method of determining a process that leads to Extension's core mission of helping people improve their lives through education. It guides Extension professionals in determining their clients' needs, reveals the resources required to meet those needs, and leads logically to the development of programming that uses the identified resources to conduct activities that meet the identified needs (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

Starting with Smart Objectives

The acronym SMART indicates the five aspects of a complete objective: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound (Diehl & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2012). Writing SMART objectives can lead to greater likelihood for success because you establish the clear and concise parameters of your efforts at the start.

Documenting

Planning the activities of a program is not enough. The logic model, for example, commands you to think ahead about how you will know whether a program accomplished the predetermined objectives once it is over. This is where the impact data come in; you must collect data that confirm the necessity, completion, and achievement of the program (Cato, 2006).

Applying for Awards

People often assume that a great performance will lead automatically to recognition. Realistically, Extension professionals must be the ones to share their stories of success, as no one knows the value of a program better than its conductor. Therefore, you are the best person to nominate yourself for awards. Writing an award application becomes much easier when you have good impact data. Use positive quantitative and qualitative data rather than opinionated language. This approach removes the subjectivity of your statements. It also helps you find language that does not sound arrogant or self-promoting.

Set time aside well before an application deadline to write, review, and finalize your application materials. Consider taking the following steps to craft any award application:

1. Write a sentence describing the target audience and how you know the program was needed by that group—for example, "Twenty farm women from Cumberland County had requested agritourism marketing information and education to expand their markets and increase profits."
2. Identify one to three SMART objectives that were written to ensure that the program would meet the need or needs described in step 1.
3. Describe what you did to meet the objectives identified in step 2—for example, "We developed and conducted a series of five webinars designed to teach farm women how to implement agritourism activities."
4. Identify information you collected to prove that the objectives from step 2 were met through the educational activities described in step 3. An example of this would be a description of the numbers of participants who implemented one or more of the agritourism activities outlined in the webinars.
5. Construct the award application abstract. For this task, you can use the responses you wrote for the steps above. Be sure the abstract addresses the five Ws (who, what, where, when, and why) as well as "how" and "how much" related to the program and its success. As a bonus, an abstract in this format is also a great start to crafting a successful grant application.

Discussion

Awards are powerful tools that Extension professionals can use to propel Extension programs forward. They should not be just something you apply for in your "spare" time; they are part of the full program cycle. Thinking ahead leads to successful award applications. Follow a systematic process in program development and evaluation that is effective in both meeting the needs of the audience and providing information to substantiate claims that the programming was productive, valuable, and noteworthy—one might even say award winning!

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