

Technical factsheet

Guidance on winning business and accountancy awards

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INTRODUCTION

In this factsheet and the accompanying video, you can find guidance on the attributes of a good awards entry, how to maximise the impact of entering an award and some of the awards firms may wish to enter. Practitioners may also wish to help clients enter awards.

It explains the wider benefits that can follow from entering awards, as well as how to counter the naysayers in your firm. You will also see how firms may qualify to enter a wider range of awards than you may have previously considered and, to assist and to support you, we have included explanations, insider tips and common mistakes to avoid.

The number of accountants who enter national accountancy-focused awards and national, or even local, business awards is relatively low. Yet the benefits of entering, winning or at least being short-listed are far greater than you might imagine. The process of entering such competitions can be a great catalyst for developing and improving your practice, with those who win going on to proudly proclaim their status as 'award-winning' accountants.

If you enjoy the process and benefits entering brings you may wish to use the guidance to help your clients or suppliers enter awards. Practitioners may wish to add to the services they offer to clients.

We cannot guarantee you or your client will win but if you follow our advice you can be sure of submitting a worthy entry and increasing your prospect of being shortlisted and possibly even winning.

OBJECTIVES

As already indicated, you might simply be planning to use the process of preparing an entry to help you identify how you could develop and improve your practice. Beyond this, what other factors are considered important to award-winning accountancy practices?

The next most valuable objectives of winning awards are probably the raising of your profile among the local business community and evidencing your credibility with prospective clients. This exists from the time you decide to enter, if you are shortlisted and beyond the awards event.

Other objectives may be associated with the various benefits of entering award competitions, such as:

- boosting team morale
- looking at your practice objectively – what are you doing differently from your competitors?
- attracting new team members
- the prizes and awards available to winners of specific awards
- personal prestige following endorsement of your credibility
- reflecting on your success and achievements
- the associated available PR – locally and/or nationally
- added credibility with business associates and networking contacts
- raising your profile with judges and awards audiences.

WHY NOT?

Accountants typically identify with one of these common reasons for not entering competitions:

- unwillingness to make the time to prepare a worthy entry
- doubt as to the credibility of the award promoters/organisers
- mistaken belief that their marketing budget and team are not big enough
- lack of self-confidence: 'What's the point in entering? We don't deserve to win.'

In truth, the upsides of entering will typically outweigh the downsides and will invariably justify the time commitment. If you lack confidence, then maybe that's a very good reason to enter. You may surprise yourself.

No, you don't need a big marketing budget or staff to create a winning entry.

Yes, it is worth checking the credibility of the promoters and organisers, especially of new local awards and those you have to pay to enter.

***Insider's tip:* Many entries fail to satisfy the entry criteria, meaning that they cannot be shortlisted. Check the criteria and commit to the entry.**

TYPES OF AWARDS

Business awards will often include celebrations of good employment practices, innovations, growth, impact on local business environment and so on. There are a number of different types of awards that you or your practice could enter including:

- national business-related awards (You are in business, are you not?), for example, the Queen's Awards for Enterprise (covering innovation, international trade, sustainable development and promoting opportunity through social mobility), the British Small Business Awards, the CICM British Credit Awards and Barclays Entrepreneur Awards
- national accountancy-specific awards, for example, the Accounting Excellence Awards, the British Accountancy Awards and Tolley's Taxation Awards
- local business-related awards
- Supplier and professional organisation sponsored awards, for example, the IRIS Customer Awards, the Xero Awards and the CIPP Annual Excellence Awards.

When you start looking there is a surprising range of awards that accountants can and do win. Search online either for awards you have heard or use a more generic approach, such as for 'business awards' and include your local area. Searching online for national business awards may also prove valuable as they will often include awards by reference to specific areas, types of business or other distinct elements for which you may qualify. You could also set up a Google Alert to notify you regularly of new awards. This is particularly important if you are too late for this year and want to ensure you are ready for next time.

A number of awards are highlighted in Appendix 4 and are also highlighted within ACCA publications and social media.

***Insider's tip:* Be clear as to your objectives. Why do you want to enter, be shortlisted and win?**

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Before deciding whether to prepare an entry, you should check what is required. What will you need to show to demonstrate how you stand?

***Insider's tip:* Be willing to talk positively in your entry about what you have achieved – and to be able to back up your assertions.**

You don't need a big professional set up or marketing budget to do this. But don't be naive either. You are unlikely to win awards if you are simply playing 'catch up'. For example, moving your practice into the cloud may be new for you, but many other firms have already done this. However, if you have adapted to solve a specific demand and introduced a change solving a problem it could make you stand out.

BUDGETING

Check whether any payment is required to accompany your submission. This doesn't tend to happen with most national business and accountancy-related awards but it isn't unheard of. However, it then becomes even more important to assess the credibility of such awards. You also need to be comfortable with the other costs of entering, such as practice development time.

Beyond this, you might choose to invest in a professional copywriter to help ensure your entry has maximum impact. Many prospective award winners have been let down by poor grammar or having missed key points from their entry.

Then there is the cost of attending the awards ceremony. Occasionally this becomes a prerequisite of being shortlisted (again, not so with the major accountancy awards). More usually, though, even if you are shortlisted, there is generally still no obligation to attend.

These events are always a good opportunity to network and to secure valuable professional photos of you on stage (if you win). From a budgeting perspective, would you plan to go alone or with a colleague or partner? Would you take a table (either for your team, clients or a mix)? In addition to the cost of the seats you should budget for drinks and possibly the hire of suitable eveningwear, overnight accommodation etc.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. These costs will only be necessary if you are shortlisted and want to attend the ceremony.

CHOOSE YOUR CATEGORY

To stand any chance of winning an award you will need to satisfy some basic criteria.

Most organisers encourage entrants for a range of awards. These might be distinguished simply by reference to different locations and/or specify certain qualities that the winner will need to evidence. For example, you'll want to ensure you enter the right category by reference to the size and location of your practice.

PLEASING THE JUDGES

Entering awards can be likened to sitting an exam. Back then you made every effort to make it easy for the markers of your paper to give you the marks you sought.

It's the same with judges. By the time they see your entry they may have seen dozens of others. Can you ensure that yours highlights your firm's personality, makes them sit up and pay attention? Think about how you can capture and hold their attention even if they are tired and bored.

***Insider's tip:* keep the main content of your entry quite high level and avoid going into too much detail (as this could bore the judges) unless this is specifically requested. You can often supply more detail in supplementary attachments but do not rely on these on being read as thoroughly; if your entry has failed to engage or impress the judges they may not even look at your supplementary information.**

This isn't easy, especially as you will also need to ensure that your entry satisfies the rules. One way to do this is to identify and list out the adjectives and competencies that appear in the overall explanation of what entrants will need to evidence.

You will then need to supplement this list with the further adjectives and competencies that will be required of the specific category you are entering. This will ensure that your entry satisfies all of these criteria. In effect, you are making it easy for the judges to like your entry and consider you a worthy winner.

***Insider's tip:* for many (not all) awards, the judges will be scoring your entry by reference to fixed criteria. Make sure your entry contains enough relevant content to justify high scores across the board.**

Occasionally you may feel qualified to enter more than one category. In each case ensure you make separate lists for each award and tailor your entries to match the criteria.

***Common mistake:* preparing one entry for two separate awards. It is likely it will never be good enough to win either of them.**

***Insider's tip:* search online to see which firms or accountants have won 'your' award in previous years. You can also see what the judges said about those entries and use this insight to inform your entry.**

The judges will typically be able to recognise when an entry has been through a firm's marketing department. This rarely impresses as it can mean a triumph of style and spin over substance. By all means make your entry look good, but not at the expense of key data.

Common mistake: *Allowing a marketing consultant to draft your entry and include images and marketing gloss that overshadow the key elements of the entry that will contribute to the judges' scores.*

PLANNING YOUR ENTRY

Once you have decided to enter an award and are confident you satisfy the basic criteria for the category you have chosen, you need to start planning.

Insider's tip: **consider involving your team and giving one of them responsibility for planning your entry and collating the relevant data.**

Start by checking on the word counts, permitted/encouraged attachments and whether you need to type everything directly into online forms.

You'll need a time plan – or you can risk it and rush to do everything at the last minute. Guess which approach is most likely to result in a winning entry?

Whatever is the absolute deadline for submission, aim for it to be complete and ready seven days ahead of time. Give yourself at least half a day to start preparing a worthy entry. The full process will take at least as long as this again – if you want to submit a serious entry.

Depending on the nature of the award you will want to allow plenty of time to check what's required and then to collate supporting materials, draft your entry, refine it and review everything before you enter text into the online form and press 'submit'.

Common mistake: *Submitting a last-minute entry that hasn't been fully planned or checked.*

It is common for awards entries to be submitted online. This approach tempts the inexperienced to submit entries directly on to the awards platform without proper planning or proofreading. It's much better to complete your entry in a form that can be checked,

noting down all of the fields available for you to enter data and commentary. Then draft your responses and ensure that you can reference all key data within the available word counts.

***Insider's tip:* before you cut and paste your drafts into the online form, PLEASE have someone else proofread and sense check your entry.**

***Common mistake:* failing to correct typos, misspellings and grammatical errors. Some judges may overlook these but others will be real sticklers. Make it easy for them to like your entry.**

COLLATING MATERIAL

Before you start drafting your entry, consider what you could cite and assert as evidence that you satisfy each of the necessary criteria in turn.

***Insider's tip:* some of your activities, actions and outcomes may evidence more than one of the criteria.**

Some awards require you to submit evidence of testimonials, statistics, accounts or other collateral. Most awards do allow those entering to submit additional information.

***Insider's tip:* current and recent testimonials are more compelling than those that are dated a year or more earlier.**

Would your entry benefit from the inclusion of simple charts, lists or numerical evidence? Some of this may need to be submitted as supplementary material, especially if the online form only accepts simple blocks of text.

***Common mistake:* thinking that 'more is better' and supplying too much unfocused supporting data. Many judges will make an initial assessment by reference to the main entry document.**

Insider's tip: signpost the content of your supplementary material by referencing key elements or summarising what it shows so that the judges know what it contains.

Common mistake: referencing percentage increases in your financial data without including current and comparative figures. Judges like to see absolute figures.

The award rules will typically reference the need to show or evidence why your firm should win. This means that you need to do more than simply assert you have done or achieved this.

Insider's tip: how you evidence your claims will depend on what you are looking to prove. You could reference survey results, statistics, third-party confirmation, client feedback or your own financial data. Where appropriate you could include full details in an attachment.

Common mistake: including popular but meaningless clichés and phrases or making bland assertions that you do something, then failing to include adequate evidence to support your claim.

Insider's tip: your entry will generally benefit from you showcasing the drive, energy and passion that has helped build a firm that deserves to win the award.

VIDEO

You may be required, encouraged or allowed to include a video as part of your entry. In most cases the video should amplify and support your entry. If there is a time limit, respect this and ensure yours is not too long.

If you create a video especially for the awards, you can get additional value from this by adding it to your firm's YouTube channel. When you upload, it ensures that you include

relevant tags such as your firm's name, your local area, accountants, the awards you are entering and any specialisms or topics addressed in the video.

Common mistake: *supplying a professionally produced promotional video for your firm that doesn't highlight what really makes you different from other accountants.*

Even if you're not sure how to create a video yourself, perhaps one of your team could interview you, other team members or clients, about a relevant topic specific to the awards, using their smartphone and then uploading this to YouTube. Perhaps you have a client who could create the video for you?

Insider's tip: **keep in mind what element of your entry the video needs to support and consider including short shots of your staff and/or clients endorsing this claim.**

YOUR SUMMARY

Plan the opening of your entry to ensure that it gives a positive first impression that would be worthy of a winner. You want to enthuse the judges to want to read the rest of your entry in full with anticipation.

Common mistake: *describing your firm with meaningless popular and overused phrases, clichés and assertions. These will rarely persuade the judges your entry is worth reading properly, let alone winning an award.*

Insider's tip: **focus on what makes your firm stand out positively from others and address this in the first paragraph of your entry. Hook the judges' interest with your opening lines.**

FINAL CHECK

Double check the submission instructions and your checklist to ensure that your entry is fully compliant (eg email address, contact details, recorded delivery, timing, size of entry and limitations as to attachments)

***Insider's tip:* Do not upload or finalise your entry until you have double checked that everything is as it should be. And then wait until the system has confirmed receipt of your entry.**

SHORTLISTED?

Awards celebrate your business's hard work and success so can present great PR opportunities. You might be satisfied with simply telling everyone that you have entered or have been shortlisted for an award. That's worth doing as a starting point.

It's fantastic to be recognised, so it's important to make sure that everyone knows what you have achieved. Being shortlisted and winning awards can open doors to winning new clients, attracting new staff, finding new suppliers and breaking into new markets.

The checklists in Appendices 1 and 2 contain ways in which you can exploit your entry and also your success at being shortlisted.

AWARDS CEREMONY

If you are shortlisted, you will probably want to attend the awards ceremony to reap the related benefits – especially in the event that you are announced as the winner!

Tickets are often not cheap and dress suit/evening wear is often encouraged. You could go alone, take a partner or invest in multiple seats for staff and/or favoured clients. Remember to plan for who will cover the office, answer the phone and respond to emails while you're away.

***Insider's tip:* you will want to book your tickets to attend, travel and for overnight accommodation (if required) in good time. You may also want to cover the cost of hiring dress suits etc for staff you invite who do not have their own.**

If someone else wins, well, you'll know you gave it your best shot. You may decide to try even harder next time. Make sure you continue to enjoy the rest of the event and maximise the benefits of being there.

And finally, if you are announced as the winners – well done! Your hard work has more than paid off. Once you have finished celebrating, review the checklist in Appendix 1 and focus on how to maximise the benefits!

APPENDIX 1 - How to benefit from being shortlisted and winning

This checklist summarises more than 20 ways you can take action to benefit from being shortlisted (and even more so if you win):

1. Inform ACCA through your local contact. We have helped support many members, linking them with media and celebrating their success.
2. Add the awards 'shortlisted' logo and, later, if appropriate, evidence of your win, to your website, email footer, office window, business cards and other promotional materials.
3. Add photos of you receiving the award and celebrating your success to your website.
4. Include the best photos in an email to your clients and contacts (if they have opted in to receive marketing information from your practice)
5. Post video footage of you receiving the award or celebrating your success (modestly!) to YouTube, your website and your page on other social media).
6. Add reference to the awards to your LinkedIn and Twitter profiles.
7. Blog about your experience as an entrant in the awards, what you have learned and how you feel about the outcome.
8. Display your awards where visitors will see them, for example, in the reception area or inside the office.
9. Weave a reference to the awards and the outcome of your entry into the stories you tell at networking events.
10. Contact local papers and radio stations to offer interviews from 'award-winning local accountant'. Do not just issue a press release.
11. Contact regional and sector-specific media to offer interviews from 'award-winning' specialist accountants.
12. Engage a specialist PR agent to help you maximise the PR opportunities that should follow your success.
13. Search for online references to learn what previous winners have done and how they have benefited from the awards.

14. If you are looking to recruit staff, ensure that relevant consultants are aware of your new status.
15. Network and collect business cards from other guests at the awards ceremony, then follow up over the coming week.
16. Take the opportunity to network with the judges, who are likely to be well connected.
17. Contact the key people from whoever is sponsoring your award (and/or the awards generally) to explore opportunities to mutual benefit.
18. (If shortlisted but not a winner) Explore the differences between you and the winners so as to improve your chances next time.
19. Don't sit on your laurels. Consider what more you could do to win (again) next year and/or to win other awards.
20. Build on the added confidence you inevitably gain – without becoming arrogant about it.
21. Celebrate with your staff, contractors, suppliers and supporters.
22. Arrange an evening reception/party to celebrate your success and invite clients, suppliers, introducers, influencers and prospects.

APPENDIX 2: how to benefit from entering awards

This appendix summarises 10 ways you could look to benefit simply from deciding to enter your practice, a colleague or even yourself for an award.

1. Evidence your pride in the practice by announcing your intention to enter the awards.
2. Impress and flatter clients by approaching them for quotes and testimonials to support your entry.
3. Impress and motivate staff and colleagues by involving them in the collation of data for the entry. This can also lead to improved efficiency.
4. Further motivate some colleagues or staff by allowing them to draft the entry for your review/input.
5. Identify gaps and opportunities to improve things as you check the way your practice operates as compared with the judging/award criteria.
6. Reflect on your successes and achievements – and how you could build on these in the future.
7. Establish plans to do even better in the coming year and to be even better placed to be shortlisted next time.
8. Take the opportunity to create a new corporate video for your website and to share on your YouTube channel, LinkedIn and other social media.
9. As you prepare your entry, consider how you could use the data to improve your marketing messages and how you position yourself compared with other accountants.
10. Improved financial performance in the current period as a result of you aiming to ensure you can reference solid growth in your awards entry.

APPENDIX 3: preparing and finalising your awards entry

This checklist summarises the 12 elements to check when preparing your awards entry and before you submit it.

1. Identify and list out all the adjectives and competencies etc used to explain what entrants will need to evidence to win the awards generally.
2. Add to your list those adjectives and competencies etc required for winners of the specific category you are entering.
3. Consider what you could assert as evidence that you satisfy each of the listed criteria in turn.
4. Ensure that all references to your financial data include comparatives and absolute numbers rather than only referencing percentage increases/changes.
5. Does the opening of your entry give a positive first impression that will enthuse the judges to want to read your entry in full with anticipation?
6. Is there anything else you can do to ensure your entry STANDS OUT positively from others?
7. Check you have not exceeded maximum word counts for any element of the entry.
8. Ensure your attachments and supplementary materials satisfy the entry criteria (eg maximum length for a video).
9. Ensure that at least one person, not involved previously, reviews your entry and checks it for good use of English, grammar and spelling.
10. A further check would have someone, previously uninvolved, compare your entry with the awards and judging criteria to ensure all points have been adequately addressed.
11. Aim to have your entry ready for checking and proofing a week before the deadline.
12. Do not leave it to the last minute. Submit your entry at least 48 hours beforehand to leave time for submission-related issues.

APPENDIX 4: awards

BUSINESS AWARDS

Queen's Awards for Enterprise

The awards open in the spring until 1 September each year and entries are encouraged from businesses of all sizes, especially SMEs. Awards are valid for five years with materials being available to use during the period. The awards are for outstanding achievement by UK businesses in the categories of:

- innovation
- international trade
- sustainable development
- promoting opportunity through social mobility.

Basic requirements

Your organisation must:

- be based in the UK (including the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man)
- file its company tax returns with HMRC
- be a self-contained enterprise that markets its own products or services and is under its own management
- have at least two full-time UK employees or part-time equivalents
- demonstrate strong corporate social responsibility.

Your organisation can be business or non-profit.

www.gov.uk/queens-awards-for-enterprise

British Small Business Awards

The FSB Small Business Awards are open to all small businesses. They aim to recognise the best small businesses and the self-employed from across the UK and cover every sector and industry.

Entries close between December and March depending on the region.

fsbawards.co.uk

Barclays Entrepreneur Awards

These are open to entrepreneurs who are self-nominated or nominated by other entrepreneurs. They are focused on innovation and creating social change and growth that moves the UK forward. Categories include those for start up, scale up and growth businesses.

Entries close between April and October depending on the region, with regional events with winners from seven regions entered into the national award.

barclays.co.uk/business-banking/sectors/entrepreneurs/awards

Chamber Business Awards

These are open to all businesses and feature a wide range of categories, including family businesses, employer and businesses exporting. Entries close in June.

britishchambers.org.uk/events/chamber-awards

NATIONAL ACCOUNTANCY-SPECIFIC AWARDS

Accounting Excellence Awards

For firms, individuals, finance and software. Categories generally include practice excellence, firms of the year, individual 'pioneers', finance excellence and software awards. Entries close towards the end of March.

accountingexcellence.co.uk/awards

British Accountancy Awards

For individuals, firms and companies. Categories generally include practice excellence, regional practice excellence, team of the year, excellence in accounting and finance, and individual excellence. Entries close towards the end of June.

britishaccountancyawards.co.uk

Tolley's Taxation Awards

For individuals, firms and companies. Categories generally include best regional tax practice, tax teams and individual rising star awards. Entries close towards the end of February.

taxationawards.co.uk

SUPPLIER AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION-SPONSORED AWARDS

CICM British Credit Awards

For teams and individuals working in the credit and collections industry. Entries close in October

cicmbritishcreditawards.com

CIPP Annual Excellence Awards

For individuals, firms and companies working as payroll and pension professionals. Entries close in August.

<https://www.cipp.org.uk/events-main/annual-excellence-awards.html>

IRIS Customer Awards

For IRIS customers. Categories generally focus on practice excellence, regional practice excellence and team of the year. Entries close in September.

iris.co.uk/about-iris/awards

Xero Awards

For Xero customers. Categories generally focus on practice excellence and software. Entries close in October.

<https://www.xero.com/uk/events/xerocon/london-2018/xero-awards/>

LOCAL BUSINESS-RELATED AWARDS

These are organised by councils and regional newspapers as well as local chambers of commerce and other businesses and organisations. Growth hubs can often be useful reference – for example, the Hertfordshire growth hub lists its local awards:

<https://www.hertsgrowthhub.com/hertfordshire-business-awards>