

# Everyone's a winner

**Chris Robinson** examines the benefits of entering the *TJ Awards* and why it's time well spent for any organisation

If I was to ask "Who benefits the most from the *TJ Awards*?" you would be justified in answering: "The winners of course, what a stupid question".

Is it a stupid question though? Writing award submissions is my bread and butter and I often hear the line "I only want to enter if I'm going to win". It's a frustrating sentiment for me, because it is based on one flawed assumption: that the only people who benefit are the winners.

Whilst chatting to *TJ* Editor Debbie Carter, I found that we were both of the opinion that there are more benefits to be gained from entering awards than simply winning. So she has kindly allowed me to research the views of this year's *TJ Awards*' entrants and table the motion that you don't have to win an award to benefit from the process.

However, the simple over-riding truth behind everything you are about to read is this: at every level of award entry, from putting together your submission to winning the award, there are benefits to reap, but only if you take entering awards and communicating success equally seriously.

## WHY BOTHER ENTERING?

Before we look at the benefits, let's look at the objectives.

Writing a good award submission takes time and planning. So what is the justification for the hours spent researching, writing, trimming, polishing, illustrating and proofing a submission?

A recent survey of those who entered the *TJ Awards* (before the winners were announced) demonstrated that the most common reasons were:

- Training vendors generally want awards to improve their credibility as providers.
- Internal training departments enter to motivate their teams and demonstrate their commitment to staff development.

*Figure 1* shows a summary of their objectives:

As you can see, the one objective that unifies both camps is the desire to demonstrate value to budget holders. This is probably true at any time, but it is proving particularly important now, when just about every department in every company needs to justify each penny of its budget. After all, it is much harder to kill the budget of an award nominated or award winning programme than one where it cannot be proven to be outstanding.

We ran the survey after the short-list had been announced so people could reflect on the benefits they had already reaped. So what are these benefits and when and how are they realised?

Both internal training departments and training vendors agreed that they could see more benefits in being short-listed

than actually winning. In fact, they said they could identify nearly as many benefits in entering as winning!

Now, time for some statistics:

- 70 per cent could name benefits they experienced simply by entering the *TJ Awards*.
- 76 per cent said they also found benefits of being short-listed.
- 59 per cent of the 46 organisations that took part in the survey agreed that a key benefit of entering awards is that "We improve evaluation practices".

This last statistic was the most frequently cited business benefit from entry alone. This is no small matter. We all believe in the value of training, but awards encourage us to prove that value, both qualitative and quantitative; which in the current climate of increased budgetary pressures has to be a good thing.

*Figure 2* shows how people benefited on an ongoing basis.

So, bearing this in mind, in what other ways have people benefited simply from taking part?

- 'I think entering this award made me think about every aspect of the programme. I had to justify the benefits of the programme to the board

*Figure 1*

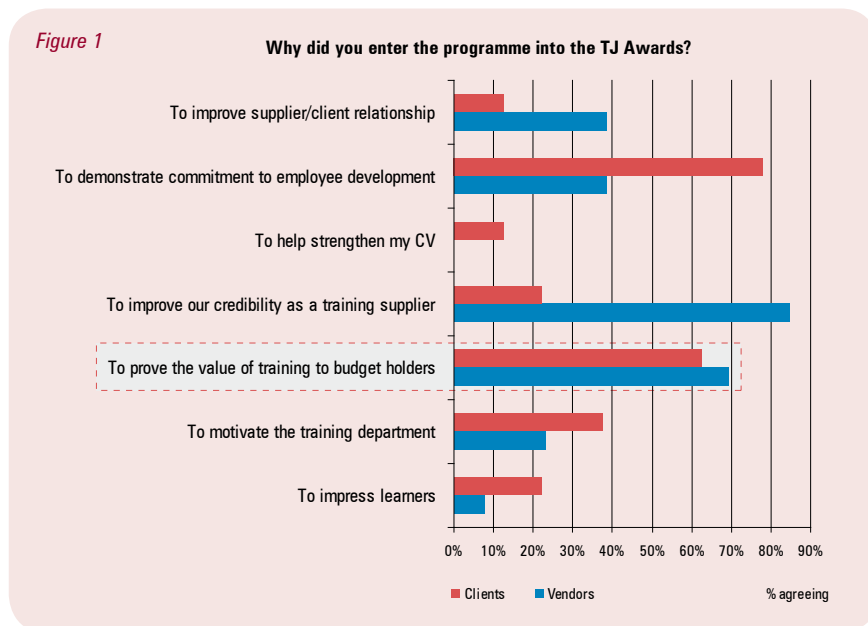
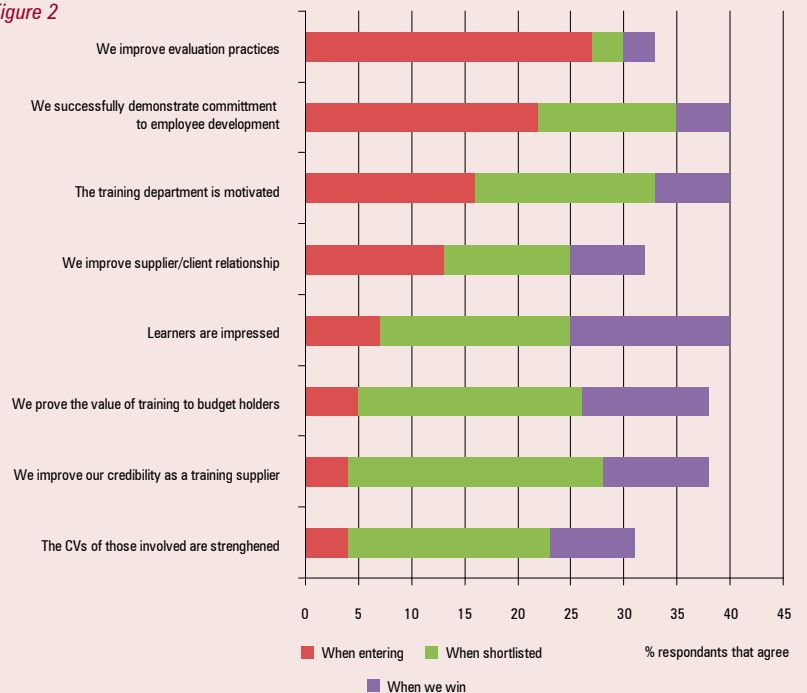




Figure 2



to receive the original funding and continued funding, but having to define the programme and its benefits for the award made me challenge if I had covered all aspects of evaluation and think about engaging more with employees.

It also made me very proud of what we have achieved as an organisation through the programme and the employees that had graduated.'

– *Suzanne Williams, Legal Services Commission*

- 'Going through the process of writing an award submission forced us to scrutinise our training design and evaluation processes and this was extremely beneficial.'

– *Karen Fleming, Hydratight*

- 'Entering for an award impresses our customers and increases our credibility within our organisation. It also boosts the confidence and morale of the training team involved.'

– *Frances Gray, Fife Council*

- 'By entering the *TJ* Awards we wanted to test how our own perception of quality training [and how we train] stands up to external objective analysis. Participating in this exercise has, in itself forced us to raise the bar and improve our services. A very worthwhile exercise!'

– *Mark Stables, Specsavers*

- 'With regards to entering Awards, the motivational benefits to the individual and immediate team are usually very clear and direct.'

– *Jonathan Adams, Unity*

### BENEFITS OF BEING SHORT-LISTED

The benefits of being short-listed are perhaps more obvious than those found from entering, but key themes have been: recognition of hard work; the team

knows they are on the right track; motivation to try harder and come back winners next time; a concrete seal-of-approval that can be used as evidence of quality when pitching for business and justification of expenditure and status to company board/head office.

These themes are reflected clearly in some of the testimonies collected from recently short-listed companies:

- 'Being short-listed for these prestigious awards demonstrates to our staff and budget holders that investment in our people continues to be at the forefront of our company policy despite the difficult economic situation we are facing.'

– *Lynette McKinney, Qadi*

- 'Being short-listed for three *TJ* awards has been incredibly motivating for the teams involved in the creation of these training programmes, helping to demonstrate our commitment to the development of our staff to encourage them to never stop learning.'

– *Olivia Loughnan, BBC*

- 'Being short-listed strengthens our position when tendering for new work.'

– *Julia Benbow, Morgan Est*

- 'The publicity, marketing opportunity and increased credibility that comes from entering and being short-listed has been invaluable.'

– *Lee Martin, Toojays*

- To have our Successful Supervisory Management Programme short-listed for the *TJ* Awards is the real 'cherry on the cake' that gives the programme additional endorsement of its value, and will hopefully help us encourage employers to invest in their staff.

– *Pippa Doran, Skills for Care*

continues overleaf >

- 'The discipline of focusing on what we did and the difference it has made, acted as a great motivator and we walked tall for a number of days following submission. Being short-listed was the icing on the cake and a few more inches have been added ever since – you don't forget the buzz of being told that what you have developed and rolled out has been valued by others.'

– Des Bishop, Hiscox

### BENEFITS OF WINNING

While the benefits of winning awards may seem obvious, I want to focus on the fact that the companies that often win these awards are those that understand that winning is in fact the final benefit, not the only one. Perhaps it is this more holistic approach, and greater understanding and appreciation of the whole awards system, that gives them the competitive edge that leads to their success.

Before going into this in greater detail, here is an important fact about the effect of winning awards: If you are a vendor, awards' wins influence 81 per cent of training buyers. I also think it would be safe to assume that this applies to internal sponsors and budget allocators as well.

Beyond this hard hitting stat, what are these more subtle benefits I keep referring to? Why not ask the award winners themselves?

In both cases 1 and 2, whilst winning the award was a huge bonus, the processes they had to undertake in order to prove themselves eligible for the award in the first place have had as positive an effect on their overall business!

### HINTS AND TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ENTRIES

So what can you do to improve your chances of benefiting next year?

The first thing is simple: the moment the entry forms are published, read through the questions the judges are asking and then start accumulating information to address what the judges are asking for, NOT what you want them to be asking for.

Secondly, start early. If you think you are developing a great programme, make sure you take steps at the planning stage that will help you prove your success once the scheme is rolled out. Most of my Top Tips below are focused on early planning.

Thirdly, when time comes to put together your submission, the following sentence should be your mantra: do not answer with unsubstantiated waffle; always try and answer with evidenced assertions.

One bold assertion (e.g we train more people in XX than anyone else), with a statistic or fact to back it up, is worth a thousand words on your 'policy' or 'vision'. Remember, it is all about proof, no-one is going to take your word for it.

#### CASE 1

Birmingham City Council

Winners of the *Best Public Sector training initiative*

The council were convinced that their Advancing Women in the Workplace training was making a real difference to the careers of women in their council, but awards required them to quantify this. They therefore conducted an evaluation and were thrilled to find that the course increased promotion rates by 50 per cent, and peers testified that the business benefited from more productive, inspiring and innovative employees. This has helped promote the course internally, and secure future funding, which was endorsed by being short listed for the award. Then winning the award was the final clincher and the team are thrilled. In the words of Richard Billingham, Head of OD & Learning "we have benefited at every stage, we have become more results orientated, demonstrated the value of our training to stake holders, and the short-listing and award have energised the team in a way that is simply impossible through any other means."

#### CASE 2

Specsavers

Winners of the *'Commercial Training for more than 1000 Employees' category*

Sheila Price of Specsavers comments "Our optical assistant training had just had a major overhaul to replace half the classroom training with WebEx. This was a brave decision that was clearly working, so we chose to evaluate it properly to see whether it was of award winning calibre. Sure enough the evaluation results show a profound difference in individual competence and store performance. So our wanting to be award winning actually made us realise that we were a contender, and being short-listed proved this point and the team felt that they were definitely part of something outstanding. We did not expect to win, but having a board member at the *TJ* awards ceremony showed just how important this short-listing was to the business. The energy generated from actually winning was felt throughout the business, but rather than being the only benefit, we see this as just the final of many benefits."

#### CASE 3

Criterion Partnership

Winners of the *'Best Externally Developed and Delivered Programme' category*

"Having developed and delivered a major leadership development programme for Dstl, everyone involved wanted to make known what a major impact this was having. Writing the submission for *Training Journal* encouraged us to look at key evaluation statistics, and allowed us to quantify the value for money that we as a consultancy had provided. This was the first time we had entered an award with Dstl and so we were all thrilled to make the finals, against so many other submissions - this in itself confirmed the high standard of the programme. To come away with the trophy was a major achievement we are very proud of. We are not a massive organisation, and taking part in awards such as these has really helped to get our name out there so that people have now not only heard about us but know that we are an award winning company - what more could we ask for!" *Judy Bennett, Director, Criterion Partnership*



### TOP TIPS

There are some things that regularly seem to be overlooked by companies entering awards and including them would make their applications easier and more effective. Most companies do the following things to some extent, but very rarely to the standard necessary to win an award!

1. Include evaluation in your plan, budget and any tendering processes.
2. Set clear high level objectives at the earliest possible moment. By this I don't mean learning objectives like 'improve understanding of, or deliverables like 'put in place ... By March 2010'; I mean business level specific, measurable and time-bound objectives like 'improve productivity', 'increase average appraisal scores by xx per cent' or 'increase retention', 'increase staff engagement scores by...'
3. Take baseline measurements! The great thing about SMART objectives is that they are specific and measurable; so measure specifically the thing it is you want to improve so you can quantify the improvement.
4. Do a dress rehearsal. The more times you enter a story into awards, the more you will be required to examine what you have done and what you have achieved; therefore the more you will reflect, learn and improve your practices.
5. Embrace continuous improvement. The strategy when it comes to winning awards is firstly to ensure you do yourself justice in the award entry process and secondly, if you do not win, learn from the process, improve your operation and try again next year. The most lasting benefit will be your own performance improvement.

If you are unsure about how to hit the nail on the head here do seek advice, any good training vendor should have an evaluation expert in their team, the trouble is training vendors who do not will sometimes say they do. *TJ* also have some good articles on the subject.

### MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR SUCCESS

The standard post-win procedure of partying, parading the award around your department and posting a press release does not maximise the benefits of winning an award.

Examples of maximising benefits:

- Morrisons have dedicated adverts and in store posters celebrating their wins.
- NS&I have their wins on the 'contact us' page of their website.

I love it when I see this although I get a little frustrated when people stick their award on their desk and CV and get on with business as usual. This may sound crazy but it happens all too often.

It does not end there; awards are more than just great PR. The public are just one of many stakeholders who you can inspire with success.

Our survey showed that entering awards also has a significant positive impact on:

- Your team
- Job applicants
- Shareholders
- Customers
- Peer organisations
- The company board/head office
- Investors

Make sure your internal and external communications target all these groups; whether spreading the word of your success or extending the congratulations after a win.

### CONCLUSION

The point that I hope has been made by this article is that while winning an award is enormously beneficial, the process that you have to go through just to put together an entry will focus and sharpen your processes, and provide motivation and reward for your staff.

You can shout "WE ARE THE BEST" until you are blue in the face, but being short-listed or winning an award will allow you to say "don't just take our word for it", which means so much more.

Even if you are not short-listed, ask yourself what comes first; is it the hunger to be the best or is it actually being the best?

Therefore, I would urge you to propose to your stakeholders that you have set a goal of delivering outstanding training, and that a measure of success will be a place in the 2010 *TJ* Awards finals. **TJ**

Chris Robinson is MD of Boost Marketing, specialists in award entry writing to find out more visit [www.boost-marketing.co.uk](http://www.boost-marketing.co.uk)