PRSA Spotlight Awards: Thoughts on Winning Entries  
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Paying it forward

In 2009, when I received the invitation to a PRSA Portland Metro Chapter workshop on “How to Create a Winning Spotlight Entry,” I didn’t plan to attend – let alone submit an entry. But I knew and respected two of the presenters – Dianne Danowski Smith and Tom Unger – and felt it would be a good opportunity to learn and, maybe, enter the next year. Both Dianne and Tom were then APRs. Today, they are members of the PRSA College of Fellows.

But, as I listened and read over the summaries that the panelists kindly shared, I thought about Clark College’s 75th anniversary celebration – a huge undertaking for the college where I was working at the time – and what a great opportunity this would be to showcase what everyone had done.

By the time I left the discussion, I thought I might be able to create and submit one entry – for our 75th anniversary celebration.

Then, as I worked on that entry, I began to believe that two other entries might be worthy.

One involved the commemorative book for the anniversary. The other was the annual State of the College address that the president of the college gave during the anniversary year.

In the end, we submitted all three, and we earned two Awards of Merit and one Spotlight Award. In short, Dianne and Tom taught me well. I’m delighted to have an opportunity to publicly thank them – and pay it forward.

Thinking about your entry

- Remember: Your entry will be standing on its own – not competing against others.
- The first question to ask is – was it great work? What elevates it? Why does it excite you? If you plan to submit it, you must believe – and demonstrate – that it is award-winning work.
- Think about all of the elements of your project (research, planning, execution and evaluation).
- Think about the challenges that you faced; there are challenges in every project and that’s something that judges are interested in knowing.
- Also, be sure to include budget information.
- To me, the summary is the most important part. Tell your story there. The background, the challenges, the aspirations, the accomplishments. Tell it well. We also provide one-page overviews introducing each section of the binders (research, planning, execution and evaluation).
- In terms of the research, I was fortunate in that the event itself – our 75th anniversary – required historic research. Going to the library and looking through microfiche. Looking through old college yearbooks, newsletters and photos. So that had been done before I started working on the entry.
- But I’d encourage you to think in broader terms. In our summary, we focused on some important challenges that the college had faced in the years leading up to the anniversary – many of them played out in a very public way through the media. I went back in time and found that media coverage to add that context.
We had formal research dating back to 2004, when we were preparing to establish a new brand. That research told us how we were perceived by students, business and the general public. Additional research was available. We do student satisfaction surveys every two years. We also do college climate surveys of our faculty and staff. All of that information provided a backdrop for where we started – and linked to our evaluation process.

Evaluation – We had asked each member of the anniversary planning committee to provide overviews on what went well and what they might recommend for the people planning the 100th anniversary, so those were available. We had copies of proclamations from the mayor and the governor, an item that our Congressman had read into the Congressional Record, and video clips from elected officials. We had collected and measured news articles. We are in a highly competitive market in terms of higher education, so we tracked enrollment. Looking to community involvement, we measured the attendance at anniversary events. We also measured giving to the Clark College Foundation.

And we did more. We used this as an opportunity to reach out – to the president of the college, the president of the Foundation, and the chair of the planning committee. We asked them to please share their thoughts, in writing, about the overall celebration.

To quote Mark Twain, there is no such thing as good writing – just good rewriting. I probably did five or six updates/rewrites on each section.

If you remember nothing else, please remember this. When your binder is ready to go, ask someone else to proof your two-page summary sheet and any overviews you have included in those sections. I served as a judge not long ago and was shocked by typos. It was especially sad because I could tell that someone had worked very hard on those binders. As we all know, when you write a document, especially if you’ve been working on it for a long time, your eyes may read what is supposed to be there – rather than what is there. Ask someone else to help you proof. They can also ensure that the items that you say are in your binder – are actually there. And they may help you think about something that you might have overlooked in telling your story.

I would also encourage you to start now. Particularly for a campaign, it takes time to do this thoughtfully and well. I probably spent a week working on the 75th anniversary campaign entry alone. Your timeframe will vary according to how accessible the materials and documentation items are.

You are showcasing your best work. Try to provide the best materials available – don’t include a bad copy if you can present a beautiful original version.

Please take time to read the judges’ comments. For our State of the College address, one judge loved it and gave it enough points to earn a Spotlight award. The other judged it lower. We earned an award of merit instead. But, for our 75th anniversary entry, there were two important pieces of feedback that I have utilized this year. One involved the use of tabs (ours were too small); one was the fact that we hadn’t referenced social media in our summary.

The meaning of a Spotlight Award

We used the award as an opportunity to put an exclamation point on the college’s 75th anniversary celebration. We publicized it internally and externally. It was deeply meaningful to the planning committee members – and our college president and trustees. It is also valuable for history.

We all know that, under pressure and with resources tight, the evaluation part of a process may be crunched as you move forward into the scores of other projects that await you. Submitting our entries took time – but I’m very grateful that I did it. It was an opportunity to pull together – in one binder – a comprehensive overview of the college’s 75th anniversary celebration. The binder is now in the college archives for future generations. To me, that is deeply meaningful.

And I’ve carried that thought throughout the years – as I work on new entries – with their beautiful, big tabs – working, not just for an award, but for history.