

VIRTUOSO AWARDS REVIEW

REPORT



VIRTUOSO

AWARDS

PRESENTED BY IABC LONDON

SITUATION

Following a **50 per cent decline** in entries over the past five years and anecdotal feedback on frustrations with the Virtuoso Awards program, IABC London decided to take a **'purposeful pause'** on the Virtuoso Awards for 2019. The chapter focused resources on a **strategic review of the program** to assess stakeholders' appetite for local awards.

BACKGROUND

The Virtuoso Awards, **launched in 1995**, are based on the global [IABC Gold Quill Awards](#) and have been a celebrated part of IABC London for nearly 25 years. However, during the past five years, a steady and noticeable decline in award entries has occurred.

A **Virtuoso Awards Review Committee** was formed in fall 2018 to oversee a strategic review and input process which consisted of three pillars: i) stakeholder engagement and feedback, ii) a peer review and iii) a historical analysis.

- 1.** The **stakeholder engagement and feedback pillar** was the backbone of the strategy. IABC London members and non-members were provided with multiple opportunities to share their input on awards programming, including an online survey, a Think Tank event and one-on-one conversations. A total of 71 communications professionals provided feedback: 44 through the survey, 20 through the Think Tank event and four through one-on-one conversations.
- 2.** A simultaneous **peer review** was conducted to examine best practices, trends and challenges for project-based awards programs being offered by other IABC chapters. We engaged eight chapters through a peer survey and follow-up conversations, and also conducted additional research for an understanding of all chapter awards programs across Canada.
- 3.** A **historical analysis** of the program was also conducted to examine trends in the program over the past 25 years. Unfortunately, information was scarce but we were able to trace a rough history in award entry numbers.

Having completed this research, the committee met to discuss and endorse the following **recommendations on the future direction of awards** programming offered by IABC London.

ANALYSIS

Firstly, our research indicates that there is a strong **appetite for awards and recognition** among marketing communications professionals in London, Ontario. This is clear from the engagement we received in our review and particularly at our Think Tank event where we heard the importance of awards to local communications professionals.

“There’s personal satisfaction in winning awards by reflecting on professional growth.”

“Winning awards provides validation that you can share with your boss and peers.”

“Awards allow us to build our personal brand and network.”

From our peer review, we identified **three trends in awards programs** offered by IABC chapters across Canada: local **project-based awards** that reflect IABC International’s Gold Quill Awards, local **people-based awards** (awards presented to individual communications professionals that are not project-based), and focused promotion and support of **Gold Quill and Silver Leaf** in place of a local awards program.

At our Think Tank, focused promotion and support of the national and global programs, in lieu of a local program, received the least engagement. The majority of conversation focused on project-based and people-based awards. In the larger group discussion, it was suggested a **hybrid people and project-based program** be considered.

In our survey, it was never once proposed that we eliminate our local project-based awards program and 40 per cent of stakeholders responded that awards like our Outstanding Communicator Award are not of value to them.

The data suggests that **stakeholders want a local project-based awards program** but that they want to see **change to the program**. The following trends were identified as opportunities for improvements.

Awards Structure & Philosophy

Our research suggests that a number of stakeholders question the criteria and structure of the local project-based awards. This suggests a **lack of understanding about the larger IABC philosophy** of adherence to and promotion of the global standards of the profession. It’s this philosophy that the Gold Quill Awards are built around.

Interestingly, a few stakeholders identified this philosophy and how it’s important. They also identified the importance of awards staying prestigious and competitive. For example, we heard from some stakeholders that the **average success rate should be around or below 50 per cent**. Our research shows that the average success rate for other chapters is indeed 50 per cent. IABC London’s success rate has also averaged 50 per cent, suggesting that our success rate is not at odds with other chapters.

“Keep standards high so the awards are credible and desirable. I’m sometimes shocked to hear that over half of entries receive awards. It’s not about getting a participation award (I think). Maintain alignment with International processes, standards, etc.”

IABC London follows the same scoring as Gold Quill Awards. To win an Award of Merit, a project must score 5.25-5.74 on the seven-point scale used to evaluate entries. To win an Award of Excellence, a project must score 5.75 and higher. This scoring is used across Canadian chapters with project-based awards with one exception: IABC Edmonton's Capital Awards. To win an award of Merit, a project must score 5.0 – 5.24. To win an Award of Excellence, the project must score 5.25 or higher.

IABC Edmonton's scoring aligns with recommendations from IABC International who suggest that **local chapter awards use a scoring threshold that is lower than Gold Quill**. Should winning local awards be easier than national and global awards, and do our stakeholders view local awards as a stepping stone to winning others? We built questions into our survey and Think Tank to see whether individuals were submitting to Silver Leaf and Gold Quill and how important those programs are to them. We found, not surprisingly, that **more people are submitting to Virtuoso** but there are some teams also submitting to the other programs (12 out of 44 to Silver Leaf and 7 out of 44 to Gold Quill).

Interestingly, **76% of survey responses indicated that IABC London should do more to support local communications professionals in submitting to Silver Leaf and Gold Quill**, indicating that our audience sees importance in these awards too.

"IABC London awards should be a stepping stone to the national and international awards and thus [have] slightly easier criteria."

Submission Process

When asked to rank their satisfaction with various elements of the Virtuoso Awards submission process on our survey, people were **overall more satisfied than dissatisfied with every element**. The two elements that received the highest number of negative responses were **submission criteria** and **length of time** required to complete a submission.

In reviewing feedback on the submission process from our survey, Think Tank and individual conversations, the following trends were identified:

- **Length of time to complete entry**
"The length of time to complete a submission is a major barrier."
- **Support provided by chapter**
"There is a gap in amount of support given to the community as a whole in preparing the submission..."
- **Cost to submit**
"Fees are too expensive."
- **Categories specific to agencies**
"Please continue but have separate categories for agencies, large departments and small departments"

Judging

Through our research, unhappiness with judging (both results and feedback) was identified as the **biggest threat** to the Virtuoso Awards. In the survey, we found that our stakeholders are **especially unhappy with the quality of feedback** from judges. We also identified that a number of stakeholders are unhappy about overall results and transparency around the judging process.

In reviewing feedback on judging from our survey (including feedback from those who have acted as a judge), Think Tank and individual conversations, the following trends were identified:

- **Feedback and results**

“Feedback was very poor – I did not feel my submission was properly reviewed or considered during the judging process.”

- **Consistency in how awards are evaluated**

“Sometimes the judging feels more subjective than objective and may depend on how many years the judge has been judging. Consistency in how awards are evaluated is important for the credibility of the award program.”

“Judging can be inconsistent. In one case, the entry did not win, but was suggested for a Gold Quill.”

- **Training of judges**

“Please keep standards high. Ensure judges are qualified and trained, and there is an oversight process using experienced judges. Ensure judges are using resources developed by IABC International. Judging should be positioned as an honour and a way to give back.”

“I found the training very poor.”

- **Transparency**

“What could use a lot of work is the messaging related to how judging is undertaken. The process should feel transparent... In addition to the awards being based on international standards and guidelines, we need to actively market the peer-review aspect as a strong asset of this program.”

“I almost feel like the judges should be selected in advance and people should clearly know who they are and what credentials they have.”

- **Judging as a valuable professional experience**

“Judging is a valuable experience in reviewing award submissions.”

“[Judging is] hard work, but rewarding and I consider it an honour.”

Recognition

Our research showed a split between those who think IABC London does enough to celebrate Virtuoso Award winners and those who believe we could do better. In the survey, 39% of people thought IABC should do more while 61% were happy with current recognition. At our Think Tank and in one-on-one conversations, we heard there are ways in which **we could do better**.

The following themes for improved recognition were identified:

- **Celebration event**

“The event has been wonderful over the years, but I found last year’s to be the most disappointing.”

“Walking across the stage at the celebration event still remains one of the key ways that people need to be recognized – meaning, they get to receive an award in front of a room of their peers.”

- **Media coverage**

“...perhaps more media coverage.”

- **Leverage all channels**

“Leverage all of your channels to recognize winners – email, website, social, newsletter, etc.”

“...it would be great to have an official icon we could put on our social media profiles, like the IABC logo with ‘I’m a Virtuoso Winner.’”

- **Showcasing the work behind the awards**

“Bring in more elements where you can actually feature the work that was done to win the award.”

“PD events showcasing as case studies.”

- **Recognition from organizational leaders**

“Encouraging people to bring leaders from their organization and make it a valuable evening for them as well.”

“I think a letter from the local IABC Awards Director to the winner’s supervisor would be a nice touch.”

Marketing

Overall, there were indications through our research that **marketing needs to be improved**. The marketing communications plan has largely been recycled over the past few years with

many elements not implemented. Stakeholders identified needing to better market the program (from the call for submissions to the judging process) and the event.

“I’d recommend taking more of a marketing approach to promote and increase award submissions, which then directly impact the number of ticket sales for the celebration event. Strengthening support for those submitting, the messaging related to how the program works (and why the system is a credible one), support for judges and recognition for the awards all help increase submissions.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research, the Virtuoso Awards Review Committee is recommending the following:

Award Structure & Philosophy

1. Virtuoso Awards continues as a project-based awards program that upholds the philosophy and professional framework of IABC International.
2. The scoring for Virtuoso Awards is lowered slightly to align with recommendations from IABC International. A score of 5.0 to 5.24 would be needed for an Award of Merit and a score of 5.25 or more would be needed for an Award of Excellence.

Submission Process

1. IABC London keeps the current Virtuoso Awards timeline with a call for entries in winter, deadline in early March, results by May and a celebration in June.
2. IABC London offers and promotes an early bird submission deadline at a reduced cost.
3. IABC London allows submissions for projects implemented within the past two calendar years.

Evaluation

1. IABC London oversees the selection, training and facilitation of award evaluators, ensuring the chapter has oversight of a quality evaluation process.
2. IABC London develops and implements a thorough training protocol for evaluators.

Marketing

General

1. IABC London develops a comprehensive marketing plan for Virtuoso Awards with clear key messaging around the program.
2. IABC London conducts targeted outreach to communications professionals in London and area, ensuring members, non-members, past winners, past non-winners and communications professionals from surrounding regions are targeted.

3. IABC London continues using a case letter from the current president that can be provided to a communications professional's leader, highlighting the benefits of participating in the awards program.
4. IABC London develops a strategy with comprehensive resources to support stakeholders in developing their submissions.

Evaluation

1. IABC London changes the terminology from 'judging' to 'evaluation' to better represent the awards philosophy and peer review process.
2. IABC London increases transparency about the evaluation process, sharing the criteria an evaluator must meet, the training evaluators are provided and the names of that year's evaluators.
3. IABC London provides more recognition to evaluators.

Recognition

1. IABC London continues the Virtuoso Awards Celebration as a high-caliber event reflective of the intended prestige of the awards.
2. IABC London prepares a letter from the chapter president to invite award winners' leaders to the Virtuoso Awards Celebration.
3. IABC London creates a media strategy for Virtuoso Awards.
4. IABC London offers a professional development event to showcase award winning entries.
5. IABC London leverages its channels for cross-channel promotion of winners, including a more comprehensive social media strategy to recognize winners.

Other

1. IABC London ensures proper volunteer resources are in place for this program by creating at least one liaison position beneath the Awards Director portfolio and ensuring succession planning year-to-year.
2. IABC London completes a thorough analysis of the 2019/2020 awards year to further enhance and augment the program.

Full survey results and summaries are available to IABC London members upon request. To request copies, please email iabclondonawards@gmail.com.