

How awards can motivate staff



by Trish Carroll

Recently, I was reflecting on the role of awards and recognition, and their place in the law firm landscape. Winning an award or achieving industry recognition is a fantastic achievement for a firm of any size. Whether that award is an Australian Law Award, a *BRW*-St George Client Choice Award, recognition through a raft of international surveys and guides ranking lawyers and law firms, the EOWA Business Achievement Awards or the Business Council of Australia National Work & Family Awards, or even an in-house award recognising achievement – all demonstrate that yours is a firm that embraces excellence.

So far, however, awards are mainly sought and won by national or larger firms. Is it the belief that only national or large firms can be winners that prevents smaller firms from throwing their hat in the ring? Or is it a mind-set I see permeating many smaller firms, a combination of “we’re not big enough to win that client, handle this volume of work, be attractive to that candidate, and achieve quality certification” and a distaste for self-promotion and a nomination process that has an uncertain outcome.

Clear goals

Firms of all sizes should take a proud stand about what the firm does, believes in and strives to achieve. Size and geographic spread is rarely what matters when it comes to winning awards. What counts is being clear about your goals, doing it better than, or as well as, the best and being prepared to test your firm against others.

Size is not what counts – successfully implemented strategy is what counts. If your firm has an absolute commitment to client service, then why not participate in the *BRW*-St George Client Choice awards and why not set a time frame for winning it? All goals need a time frame. It may be that your firm is passionate about equal opportunity, community and pro bono, sport or the

environment. The unifying force in your firm should be wholly embraced and pursued with a passion – an award-winning passion.

Remember at school how thrilling it was to receive an award on speech night? The awards were not limited to academic excellence – they were far-reaching and recognised the diversity of skills and behaviours that create a positive community. Often, it was about pitting your team against others. Success was always sweeter when it was against a serious rival – this was as true in debating, sport or community support.

Watching others achieve

The desire for achievement to be recognised doesn’t alter with age. There are few youthful Nobel laureates; few wrinkled *Big Brother* contestants. Each in their way strives to achieve their best. There is great motivation in watching others strive and succeed. If you haven’t watched *The Biggest Loser* and been moved by the vision of the contestants to achieve a goal (weighing less) and then witnessed the commitment, discipline and sacrifice involved in achieving the vision, then consider tuning in to the next series.

Law firms could learn a lot from shows like *The Biggest Loser*. Perhaps *The Biggest Loser*, with a strategy to gain the hearts and business of more existing clients, could become your firm’s reality-show equivalent.

If awards such as the Australian Law or *BRW*-St George Client Choice awards are beyond your resources, then create your own in-firm awards to recognise the most valued behaviours in your firm. These could be as diverse as awards for:

- client service
- thinking outside the square
- energy and enthusiasm
- extra mile
- community service
- environmental-impact reduction.

Engage your clients and suppliers and ensure a level of objective evaluation to validate the authenticity of the process.

Your awards can be a cause for

celebration with your clients, your staff and your suppliers. If you choose to enter the public awards, the experience gained from running your own will be useful.

Making a difference

What has this got to do with marketing, I hear you ask? Well, your clients are a lot like your staff – they need a reason to stay with you. Providing technically correct legal advice from people with a strong service ethic is a baseline requirement for clients. For your staff, providing reasonable working conditions, interesting work, feedback and recognition is also a baseline requirement. In Australia, clients and staff are spoiled for choice – there are literally hundreds of first-class firms of all sizes able to meet their needs. What can make a difference is a firm with people who are excited about what they do and have a consistent way of working, combined with a genuine enthusiasm for helping their clients and their staff achieve their goals.

Too often, law firm management doesn’t place enough value on recognition, praise and visible respect as powerful tools in empowering staff.

If awards are to be taken seriously, partners must exhibit the behaviours being recognised. For firms with rogue partners, this whole process can be a valuable one in aligning behaviours to those most valued by clients and the firm.

Finally, awards with objective evaluation criteria are credible evidence that firms can use to support statements about superior client service, results and value for money. The value to your firm in establishing its own awards will be just as powerful and will serve as a valuable point of difference – something clients are looking for in the crowded market for legal services in Australia. ■

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