

GLOBAL VIEW notes



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Developing an Awards Program to Boost International Attendance

By Michelle Bruno



Awards programs are a popular way to draw attention to an organization and its customers. When H+A International, a Chicago-based marketing and public relations firm, was tasked by the International Housewares Association (IHA) to devise a creative approach for increasing international attendance at their exhibition, they turned to the awards model. The Gia Awards were born in 2001 and thirteen years later the competition attracts several hundred international buyers to IHA's International Home + Housewares Show, in addition to some regular 5,000 international buyers who attend annually. Here's how they did it.

Tapping into a network of partners

Global awards programs are difficult and costly to maintain without a network of partners to manage the in-country logistics. "We had excellent relationships with tier-one trade publications in many countries. They were such good relationships that we could ask the editors and publishers to sponsor the Gia in each participating

country," explains Beate Halligan, H+A's president. Partnering with the magazines meant guaranteed publicity, and the program would have a greater likelihood of success once they attached their names and reputation to it.

Understanding the buyer environment

Most industries have some type of distribution model. In the global housewares industry, retail storeowners are one of the most important attendee segments. In most western nations, the retail sector is even further divided between big box retailers (Wal-Mart or Target, for example) and independent retailers. "For example," says Halligan, "in Turkey, manufacturers often have their own retail outlets. The housewares [industry] in China is still developing, but for now some furniture stores take on this role." In order to develop a program that appealed to all potential participating countries, the team had to understand the structure of the retail environment in every region and create guidelines that encompassed all these nuances.

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Establishing clear award criteria

Developing guidelines that every participant can address yet challenging enough to maintain the integrity and prestige of the competition is difficult. H+A worked with the editors and IHA to establish submission requirements that would highlight the top retail achievers in each participating country:

- Description of their innovations and uniqueness
- Details on how they do promotions at the customer level
- Diagram of the store layout
- List of their product categories
- Explanation of their innovative business practices
- Discussion of a turning point (disruptive) event, such as new competition or technology
- Examples of innovative visual merchandising displays and in-store promotional techniques
- Description of their external marketing and promotion program
- Evidence of the quality of employee training and customer service
- Photos of window displays and the science they apply to attract customers

Displaying cultural sensitivity

It is important for any organization based in the U.S. (IHA is based in Chicago) to be sensitive to the reputation that Americans have for wanting to be in control. To avoid the “bull in the china shop” impression, the team took a number of important steps:

- Convening a jury. A small group of editors of the 25 Gia Award countries rotate on-and-off the jury every few years and there is a four-person, permanent retail expert jury representing the Americas, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

- Developing guidelines that reflect the cultural nuances and retail environment of each of the 25 participating countries. While rules of the competition are consistent across the world, the sponsors can further tailor to country-specific needs.
- Recognizing winners as honorees. Because retail sophistication and visual merchandising tastes vary in different countries, there can be no single “winner” for the entire world. Therefore, those selected as the top representatives from each country are referred to as honorees with equal status at the global level. In fact, up to five Global Honorees are chosen at the International Home + Housewares Show where the global program culminates each year.

Developing the benefits of recognition

Earning the “honoree” designation is only one aspect of any competition. To attract quality participants to the Gia Awards, the IHA developed an entire benefit package that includes a seminar for honorees by visual merchandising guru, Martin Pegler, during which he evaluates each entry and highlights what was done well and what could be improved. IHA offers award recipients a comprehensive educational program on retail excellence and they are honored during the show with displays and an awards dinner. In addition, honorees receive significant media exposure in their own countries and internationally.

An international awards competition is a compelling way to boost international attendance at a U.S.-based exhibition and may be one of the most overlooked. “Every show has one or two awards that focus on exhibitors. If [an organization] wants to build a lasting relationship and extensive [brand] awareness, they should try to reach out to buyers,” Beate Halligan says. There is a significant degree of difficulty and cost associated with executing a successful global program, however, show organizers can tap into existing networks for support and advice.

Global View Notes is published by:

Rogers Worldwide

1550 E. Higgins Road, Suite 106
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

Contact:

Jeanette Mucha, LCB
Director National Sales
Tel: (847) 806-9200
Mobile: (847) 970-8017
jmucha@rerogers.com

Editor:

Michelle Bruno,
CMP, CEM

Tel: (801) 520-0797

michelle@brunogroup.com

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