

SMALL BUSINESS LINK

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TOPIC OF THE MONTH: Public Relations

Getting the most—and best—exposure for the least money and effort

Company Stands Out by Winning Awards

This year ePrize LLC took home 17 awards in contests from industry rankings to workplace culture. But that number doesn't tell the whole story.

The interactive-promotions company entered 55 contests in all in 2007.

The laurels are more than just an ego boost, though. They're a major part of ePrize's plan to help the 350-employee company stand out in a crowded field of flashy advertising and marketing companies.

"We always put ourselves out there," says Alesya Opelt, senior director of marketing at ePrize, based in Pleasant Ridge, Mich., outside Detroit. "We don't think, 'Oh, we're not in New York, we're not in L.A., we can't win the awards.'"

Recognition in a contest or other award program can lift a small company's credibility and generate positive press. Most industries offer their own awards. And small-business competitions abound. Better-known awards include Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year; the Inc. 500—and the expanded Inc. 5,000; and local and regional best-place-to-work honors. This year, The Wall Street Journal, in collaboration with Winning Workplaces, a nonprofit in Evanston, Ill., held its first annual Top Small Workplaces competition.

"We're seeing a growing trend in these awards, because there's a growing recognition that entrepreneurship is essential to society," says Judith Cone, vice president of emerging strategies for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo., which promotes entrepreneurship. Such contests also are a way for publishers to drum up interest and dollars. For a small company, that means more opportunities to shine.

First, a Finalist

ePrize entered its first award program in 2004, coming in as a finalist for a promotion the firm engineered for online retailer Bluefly Inc.—a Manolo Blahnik shoe giveaway. "In the beginning, [the finalist placement] was enough for

Eye on the Prize

- **What's Happening:** Interactive-promotions company ePrize enters a bevy of contests each year—and touts the awards it wins to set itself apart in the crowded marketing field.
- **The Details:** ePrize spends about \$10,000 yearly on contest entries. The firm sends out a press release each time it wins an award—and keeps track of which media outlets mention the news.
- **The Caveats:** Experts warn that contests shouldn't be the sole focus of a firm's PR efforts. Also, they say young companies should develop a track record with clients before throwing their hats in the ring.

us," says Ms. Opelt. "We weren't very well known, and that was a problem." The award, sponsored by Promo Magazine, got ePrize mentioned in the trade publication.

Executives quickly noticed the excitement that winning such contests created within ePrize's own walls, as well as with potential clients. "Now you can say you have an award-winning creative team," Ms. Opelt says. The accolades also have come in handy in recruiting, she adds, as people want to be associated with a winning company.

As much as a quarter of the company's public-relations efforts are now spent entering awards, Ms. Opelt says. In January, when many applications are due, about a half-dozen



Alesya Opelt, senior director of marketing at ePrize

people—split between ePrize and its outside PR agency—spend up to 75% of their time assembling applications.

Entry fees generally range from \$100 to \$500 per application—though when a fee crosses the \$250 mark, Ms. Opelt's team takes extra care to decide if it's worth the investment. ePrize spends around \$10,000 annually on contest entry fees.

The company's PR firm issues a news release when an award is won. ePrize tracks the number of media mentions it gets—and it sees the numbers go up when it wins an award. The firm also sees that visitors to its Web site click through from links in news stories where the awards are mentioned.

Develop a Track Record

A young company seeking to follow ePrize's approach may want to wait to develop a track record first. ePrize, founded in 1999, began entering contests only after executives were confident the firm's clients and promotional campaigns would impress judges.

Also, the programs shouldn't be the sole focus of a company's PR efforts, says Matt Batt, national media-relations manager at public-relations firm Tech Image Ltd. in Buffalo Grove, Ill. "Companies need to realize that receiving an award is an event," he says, and won't necessarily help develop relationships with reporters that engender continued positive press.

In addition to striving to win awards, a small firm can seek continuing exposure by promoting its uniqueness and positioning executives as industry leaders, through speaking engagements and expert commentary in articles, he says.

The recognition from the awards helps ePrize gain exposure in other ways. ePrize has cultivated relationships with the media. "There's always a backdrop of, 'This company is legitimate. Look how many awards they've won.' It gives us name-brand recognition," Ms. Opelt says.

Not all of the coverage comes out the way executives would like to see it, however, she says. A blog post on technology-news site ClickZ.com, for instance, criticized ePrize's new technology for small-business promotional campaigns when it was introduced last year, saying that despite its claims, the product didn't contain any new ideas.

"Not everyone will be pleased with every business move," Ms. Opelt says, "and with the proliferation of online reviews and reporters editorializing on blogs, companies need to expect and to handle both positive and negative feedback and be able to learn from both."

—Simona Covei