

TIPS FOR A WINNING SUBMISSION

This article was provided by the RBC Canadian Woman Entrepreneur Awards, an initiative of Women of Influence, for the Embracing Awards event hosted by the WEB Alliance in 2013.

The insights still ring true for women who are applying for awards today, and many of the women quoted in this resource have made even greater accomplishments since their win: being awarded the Order of Canada, becoming CEOs of national organizations, joining high-profile boards and more!

For more information about the RBC Canadian Woman Entrepreneur Awards, visit womenofinfluence.ca.

We asked past winners for their insights on how to submit a successful application. Here is what they shared with us:

1. Be professional in your presentation.
2. Follow the guidelines.
3. Engage your staff.
4. Provide proper background.
5. Find your story.
6. Tailor your submission to the category for which you are nominated.
7. Write in a friendly, upbeat style.
8. Include powerful collaterals and endorsements.
9. Be prepared to be audited if you are chosen as a finalist.
10. Don't be shy!

1. Be professional in your presentation

Your application reflects you and the professionalism of your company. That means no hand-written submissions, spelling mistakes or typos. Remember that these are premier awards and it takes time to submit the application properly. If you do not have the time, consider hiring a freelance writer or professional marketing firm to help you, especially if your expertise is not in marketing. You'll need to give good input and be sure that the final submission is a true reflection of you and your business.

- "The earlier you get started, the better. It's good to draft it, set it aside, and come back to it a few times as you will think of other things to add." *Suzanne Mick, Discover Wines Ltd. (Start-Up Award Winner)*
- "I asked both my husband and a close friend for help, mostly because I'm not very good at blowing my own horn. Like a lot of other women, I tend to downplay my accomplishments, so by getting input from males who cared about me, I probably

highlighted more positive things than I would have otherwise.” *Lola Rasminsky, Avenue Road Arts School, (Trailblazer Award Winner)*

- “Set aside enough time to prepare. I spent two days.” *Lynda Powless, Turtle Island News (Trailblazer Award Winner)*
- “I used the services of a marketing expert to go through my material and balance the accomplishments and the journey of the company and me. I could not have done it myself. And, being a technical person, I would never have included certain things, such as our patents, that I was told later weighed in my favour.” *Joanne Papari, Biochem Environmental Solutions Inc. (Innovation Award Winner)*

2. Follow the guidelines

Ensure you provide the length and style specified in the application rules—e.g. 10 pages, double-spaced, etc. If you can include references, good sources include your banker, accountant, suppliers who have helped you, and professionals in your industry who know you well and with whom you may have worked.

- “I packaged it professionally and included photos of myself and the business, copies of the newspaper, and photocopies of certificates and awards. I also included written external references from business owners, elders, council members and my RBC Royal Bank manager.” *Lynda Powless, Turtle Island News (Trailblazer)*
- “I am a very visual person and presentation means a lot to me and obviously meant a lot to the judges. Having said that, I also believe in keeping it simple and easy to read. Sometimes less is more.” *Lorraine Lush Mastropietro (Quality Plus Award Winner)*

3. Engage your staff

The application process is a terrific way to get your employees involved in helping you and boosting morale in your company.

- “I turned the application over to one of my key people. It’s hard for me to take credit for the work that I do and I probably would never have been able to state the case the way she did.” *Yvonne Tollens, ComputerAid Professional Services Ltd. (Innovation Winner)*
- “Involve your team. They have different insights and can add beneficial information to the package. Our Marketing Coordinator helped finesse it, our Controller provided the financial info, and our Operations Manager identified risks in business that we’ve overcome.” *Sherri Stevens, Stevens Resource Group (Momentum)*
- “Ask your bank manager what to highlight financially. Getting that financial advice was invaluable.” *Lynda Powless, Turtle Island News (Trailblazer)*
- “The marketer on my team asked both our staff and outsiders to talk about what they thought of me as a leader, which was included in the application as a sidebar, along with their photos. I never would have thought to do this. As a matter of fact, I was hesitant to apply in the first place, but now I understand that although an award like this has my name on it, it isn’t just about me. It’s about the group and the fact that we could really celebrate together.” *Andrea Feunekes, Remsoft Inc. (Innovation)*

- “I wrote the first draft and ran it by my staff for their input...and even sent it to my mother, who is one of my lenders and also a businessperson.” *Marianne Bertrand, Muttluks Inc. (Innovation)*

4. Provide proper background

Don't assume the judges will be fully familiar with you or your business. Be detailed in your personal profile and business description, outlining your business from a personal point of view. It's key to market yourself because it is the success of you as an entrepreneur that is more significant for these awards than the success of the company. And make sure you have a professional photograph on hand in case you are chosen as a finalist.

- “This award is not about how much your gross sales are...it's about your story.” *Carol Denman, Atchison & Denman Court Reporting Services Ltd. (Turnaround Award Winner)*
- “Present the information in the same format as you would to raise funds. Assume that the reader knows nothing of your industry and product and describe it concisely and clearly. That will highlight your achievements, leadership and vision...and the success your business has achieved under your leadership.” *Lee McDonald, Southmedic Inc. (Lifetime Achievement and Competitiveness)*

5. Find your story

Everyone has an interesting story to tell, but sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees. If you think of significant learning experiences you've had along your path to growth, a story will inevitably emerge. It can be helpful to find someone to draw it out.

- “Be upfront and tell your story. I focused on the growth of Summerfresh, and the success of that growth.” *Susan Niczowski, Summer Fresh Salads Inc. (RBC Momentum Award)*
- “Try to make it an interesting narrative. You don't want the judges to fall asleep!” *Lola Rasminsky, Avenue Road Arts School (Trailblazer)*
- “Make the style very personal and compelling. Tell a story.” *Sharon McNamara, Kiln Art (Start-Up)*
- “Think about what is unique about you and the way you run your business. For me, it's following my own path and commitment to the environment. That's what I do and it works well. Be creative to really show who you are. It's not just about numbers and data.” *Andrea Feunekes, Remsoft Inc. (Innovation)*
- “I felt the judges focused on anecdotes that demonstrated why I felt I should win and how I overcame hurdles rather than on my background and resume. And I provided testimonials to back it up.” *Lynda Powless, Turtle Island News (Trailblazer)*
- “The application process was a very intense, soul-searching exercise and I learned a lot about myself and my business just by analyzing what I had written. What I did was take a tape recorder, sit with my general manager and tell her my story (now 20 years old). Then she did the written submission from what I had recorded and from answers to the questions she asked me during our talk.” *Carol Denman, Atchison & Denman Court Reporting Services Ltd. (Turnaround)*

- “Running your business may seem like nuts and bolts, but how you deal with your employees and how you deal with that piece of machinery that breaks down is actually what may help you win the award. Everybody has a product and there is only so much you can say about your product – what is more important is telling how you problem solve. People want to know what’s under the hood.” *Marianne Bertrand, Muttluks Inc. (Innovation)*

6. Tailor your submission to the category

Whatever the category for which you are nominated, study the definition carefully and ensure copy is written to justify why you should win – for example, in the Trailblazer category, ensure your application highlights how you are ahead of the game and set trends; and in the Momentum category, define an obstacle you have faced and how you overcame it.

- Yvonne Tollens, ComputerAid Professional Services Ltd., winner of the 2006 Innovation Award, started the process intending to submit the application in a different category. Realizing that “we are constantly innovating,” she applied for the Innovation Award, focusing on how the company solves the unsolved and makes its technology work in the field.
- In applying for the 2005 Innovation Award, Andrea Feunekes, President of Remsoft Inc.—a leading developer of software and services for sustainable forest management—tailored her application accordingly. “We really tried to portray that the company is innovative not just in the products that we produce, which are unique in the world, but in the way that we do everything—from non-traditional marketing to the way we license our software.”
- Likewise, Marianne Bertrand, owner of dog-boot manufacturer Muttluks Inc., ensured that her application for the 2002 Innovation Award reflected all the innovative things she had done. These included her donation of boots for canine units searching the rubble after 9/11. “I also talked about our innovations in financing, in customer contact, in production and even in human resources.”
- For her 2005 Start-Up Award submission, Sharon McNamara of Kiln Art focused on conveying how she grew the company quickly and outlined the government resources she tapped into, such as the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, to help accelerate that growth.
- When submitting her ‘Quality Plus’ application back in 1994, Lorraine Lush Mastropietro, who owned a career academy then, naturally focused on providing a quality submission. “I used testimonials and external references and also submitted the things I was most proud of in my business—for example, our marketing material, the curriculum in my colleges, the placement percentages of my students, our affiliations with other organizations and information on other awards and recognitions I had received in my province and in my community.”

7. Write in a friendly, upbeat style

Be authentic and sincere as this will shine through in your application.

- “Try to be creative. Stand out from the rest by telling your story from your heart, how it happened to you. It works.” *Sherri Stevens, Stevens Resource Group (Momentum)*
- “Focus on describing your business from a personal perspective and do keep it positive. Many of us have had some obstacles to overcome and perhaps some nastiness with employees, competitors and, yes, even husbands. It’s fine to mention these things in passing, but do not dwell on them.” *Carol Denman, Atchison & Denman Court Reporting Service Ltd. (Turnaround)*

8. Include powerful collaterals and endorsements

Marketing materials, media clippings and third-party support such as client testimonials and reference letters are good to include. But be selective and careful not to clutter your application with too many.

- Media-savvy 2006 Start-Up winners Suzanne Mick and Tracy Gray enhanced their application with a press kit and customer testimonials.
- Because of the visual nature of her glass art business, Sharon McNamara of Kiln Art (2005 Start-Up winner) submitted her catalogue along with media articles about her and the company as well as testimonials from a range of customers.
- The inclusion of her patents was a good strategic move in Joanne Papari’s submission (2004 Innovation winner). “The judges seemed to be impressed by the fact that we had patents because women do not usually own patents.”
- Muttluks President Marianne Bertrand (2002 Innovation winner) included a paw sizing chart as well as a photo of herself on her motorcycle, along with her dogs in the sidecar – a strong visual image and reinforcement of what she is all about. “I think the judges look more at you as a person than at your company.”

9. Be prepared to be audited if you are chosen as a finalist

Ensure that your numbers are transparent and that you have audited financial statements.

- “This can be expensive but it is worth it to do it right from the beginning and to be ready for the auditors. I completed my application with the help of my CFO. It’s also important for the auditors to know you’re confident. During the audit, you can be open about any struggles—we all have these—but avoid sounding like ‘woe is me’.” *Kim McArthur, McArthur & Company Publishing Ltd. (Start-Up)*
- “When the auditors came in, they talked to my bookkeeper and then I referred them to my bank manager, whom they visited.” *Lynda Powless, Turtle Island News (Trailblazer)*
- “It’s important to understand what’s in your financials, so that you can answer any questions the auditors may have.” *Andrea Feunekes, Remsoft Inc. (Innovation)*

10. Don't be shy!

This is your opportunity to step back, take stock and applaud yourself for your hard work and achievements. It's a healthy exercise since women tend to undervalue their accomplishments.

- "Awards like this are so important for women. We do business differently. We're fearless! Sometimes the rewards are few in entrepreneurship, so I encourage others to apply. It's a great thing for you and your business!" *Suzanne Mick, Discover Wines Ltd. (Start-Up)*
- "When I finished reading my application, I realized that I have really accomplished something. If you've been in business long enough, you've done quite a few things and, without writing it all down, you don't think about what you've achieved." *Lola Rasminsky, Avenue Road Arts School (Trailblazer)*
- "This is one time you need to 'blow your own horn'." *Carol Denman, Atchison & Denman Court Reporting Service Ltd. (Turnaround)*
- "Getting a proper writer and editor is important because you may be too modest in putting forth all the areas in which you are great." *Barbara Mowat, Impact Communications Ltd. (Impact on Local Economy)*
- "I believe that all women entrepreneurs deserve recognition and that it is ok for us to pat ourselves on the back every now and then. By submitting my application, I felt I was doing just that. When you are proud of your accomplishments, why not tell the world about it!" *Lorraine Lush Mastropietro (Quality Plus)*

BONUS TIP

If at first you do not win, keep on trying!

That's the advice of Suzanne Bernard Leclair, Founder of Transit Inc. Truck Bodies, who joined the winners' circle with her 2004 Lifetime Achievement Award.

Two-time applicant Lola Rasminsky, Avenue Roads Art School, winner of the 2006 Trailblazer Award, echoes this.

"Even if you put considerable time and effort into applying and don't win the first time, you will get something out of completing the application that will surprise you. It will make you feel very good about yourself."

Likewise, Marianne Bertrand, President of Muttluks Inc., applied four times over several years before clinching the 2002 Innovation Award that she coveted. "I just kept fine-tuning my application and running it by my PR consultant for input ... and each time I learned to write a little better and more concisely." The moral: never give up. And if you apply the tips you've read here, you'll be a step ahead in your pursuit of victory!

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