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Are the Plain English Awards making a difference?

Results from a survey about the 2017 Awards

Last year saw us celebrate 12 years of Plain English Awards in New Zealand. That's 12 years of recognising and rewarding organisations that put the wellbeing of their readers first. These organisations strive to improve the lives of everyday New Zealanders through clear, accessible communication, and we think that's worth celebrating.

As organisers of the Plain English Awards, the WriteMark Trust follows the progress of entrants and sponsors with a keen eye — we're always eager to hear of continued post-Awards success. One of the ways we do this is by surveying past winners, finalists, entrants, and sponsors of the Awards. It's our way of checking that the Awards continue to have an impact on the New Zealand public and the organisations that serve them.

In our most recent survey, we asked people who had participated in the 2017 Awards:

- what had motivated them to enter
- what benefits they believed the Awards brought to New Zealand organisations
- what benefits they believed the Awards brought to the New Zealand public
- whether they had any suggestions to improve the Awards
- what motivated organisations to sponsor the Awards
- what the benefits were for organisations that had sponsored the Awards.

We're very grateful to all those people who completed the survey. Their feedback is valuable in many ways. It helps to reinforce why we run these Awards every year. And it will help us to make changes to the way we run the Awards in 2018.

This brief report summarises the feedback we received. We include actual survey responses at the end.

Praise brings kudos to individuals and organisations

Many of our survey participants commented on the value of how they were perceived when they'd become finalists in, or won, their category. People talked about how external recognition of their

plain English efforts reinforced the value of their work to people both inside and outside their organisations. They felt that becoming a finalist or a winner acted as validation that their document or website was of the highest national standard.

As one respondent said, one of the benefits to their organisation was ‘a sense of pride, especially for customer-facing staff who need to talk about our products with customers.’

Another said that winning an award gave ‘positive publicity for our organisation’. This person also praised the fact that the award was beneficial for the organisation internally. ‘New people here learn of our plain English culture, which encourages and reminds our writers.’

Recognition a key driver for entering

We like to say that the Awards are a ‘public pat on the back’ for individuals and organisations using plain language. In our survey, some respondents cited this praise as a driver for entering.

As one respondent said, ‘I was keen to get some national recognition for something that I was trying hard to push in my workplace, but didn’t feel that I was being taken seriously enough. I really wanted to see how I stack up against national competition.’

One respondent acknowledged the potential business benefits — another type of recognition — to be gained through association with the Awards. ‘[It] can mean more customers/users because they know they will get plain English and understand any information given to them.’

Benefits spread far and wide

In our survey, some organisations acknowledged how the Awards improve communications for everyday New Zealanders.

One respondent said, ‘As more organisations enter the Awards, everyone out there in the world gets information that’s easier to read and understand.’

Another respondent gave us similar feedback: ‘The Awards provide good comms opportunities and consequently good support for the importance of clear information that is accessible to all New Zealanders.’

Sharing the plain language message

Among our aims for running the Awards is our desire to raise public awareness of the need for, and benefits of, plain English. We were happy to see in our survey results that several respondents feel the same.

‘The message about plain language will take a long time to spread, and any initiatives need to be consistent and regular to gain long-term traction,’ said one respondent.

Another said, ‘We see the Plain English Awards and movement as an important part of making New Zealand a better place to live in.’

Full survey responses — 2017 Plain English Awards

Finalists

What motivated you to enter the Awards?

- Benchmark against other organisations, and celebrate our own progress.
- To celebrate our achievement and journey with plain English.
- Our history of involvement and that our previous awards were trashed in our old building!
- Because if I won, it would bring kudos to myself and my employer.
- A few reasons! I was keen to get some national recognition for something that I was trying hard to push in my workplace, but didn't feel that I was being taken seriously enough. I really wanted to see how I stack up against national competition. I had met a previous winner who talked to me about her experience and, after looking at my writing, encouraged me to enter!
- We'd done a lot of work on our documents and we wanted to test them against others who had also taken that journey. We also hoped to gain some publicity, and have independent validation that our documents were truly plain English.
- So the work we put into using plain language would be recognised — both within the organisation, and by Wellington residents. Internally, we wanted to raise awareness of the value of plain language, and externally we wanted people to see that we're putting real effort into being clear and concise in how we communicate.
- It was suggested to us by one of our users.

What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to your organisation?

- To show we are the best at what we do; to improve morale and confidence in ourselves.
- It provides us another confirmation that we are on the right track. It also helps us to motivate staff to continue to champion plain English.
- Positive publicity for our organisation. Internally, new people here learn of our plain English culture, which encourages and reminds our writers.
- The opportunity to celebrate the value of good, clear, easy-to-understand writing.
- Better awareness that plain English is a thing, and a thing that is being taken quite seriously at a national level.
- A sense of pride, especially for the customer-facing staff who are talking about our products with customers and prospective customers.
- It gave us a really great opportunity to talk about plain English — what it is, why it's important, and how it can improve our organisation.
- It raises the profile of the publication and of the organisation as a whole.

What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to the people you serve or communicate with?

- Keep us focusing on writing clearly. Helps our stakeholders to have confidence in us.
- Our customers gaining better understanding of our services, which will improve our engagement with them.
- External affirmation supports our writers in making their communications clear for our readers. As more organisations enter the Awards, everyone out there in the world gets information that's easier to read and understand.
- It shows that it is worth spending money on good technical communication, and that everyone can write but not everyone can communicate technical information clearly.
- I think we've got some official backing behind us now to work harder at making things as clear as possible for our customers. I see some great improvements coming to the way we communicate with them and let them know what they need to do — especially when legislation is involved!
- Validation for them that we are providing what we say — a simple and easy product that they can read and understand.
- Hopefully it reassures them that we're trying to be clear communicators — that we're user-focused and want to make things easy for them.

What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to the New Zealand public?

- Putting a spotlight on the importance of clear writing.
- Overall efficiency, save time and resources in communication.
- It spreads the message that plain English is a 'thing' and that it's important because it reduces frustrating, costly misunderstanding.
- I think they give the public a promise that there are people out there who do care about making things easier for them and helping them find out what they need to know, and do what they need to do.
- Publicity about the plain English movement and proof that some industries are making an effort.
- They raise awareness of plain English, and celebrate the people who use it most effectively.
- In our case, it gives confidence that an impenetrable subject can be made understandable — generally it reminds people that writing with clarity for your audience is actually what it's all about.

Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

- Entering the Awards (for best organisation) is a huge task, and difficult for a small organisation to do in-house. Perhaps make this category easier to enter?
- Don't charge people to enter. It's good to have a humorous category for it gathers much media attention!
- Keep up the good work! Possibly have the Awards in Christchurch or Auckland one year so that it's not so Wellington-centric?

- Again I just want to really thank the organisers and the judges for all of their efforts in making such a fantastic Awards night!
- It'd be great to have something more useful to share via social media before and after the Awards, eg a short video featuring award-winners giving their top tips or saying their most hated jargon word, or a listicle on the top five benefits of using plain English...

Judges

When we asked you to be a judge, what motivated you to say yes?

- The chance to encourage people championing plain English.
- The reputation of Write and the ability to promote better communication.
- A long history of interest and involvement in clear communication, and a keen interest in the progress of the Awards.
- Flattered to be asked! This Award scheme is so well organised that I have confidence in its integrity.
- Working with the other judges — always a pleasure. And seeing the good work being done out there.
- I've been a plain English advocate and practitioner for many years and felt I could contribute.

Do you have any feedback about the judging process and administration?

- I think you do a fantastic job of letting judges know when deadlines are looming and such. The only suggestion I have is to introduce yourselves to judges at the Awards, because it's nice to 'put a face' to people you've communicated with for a while. 😊
- We had a bit of confusion with the entries. The information for them was mixed up. I think the instructions could have been simplified, and the way that feedback was provided.
- For our group, all went well. Instructions, criteria, and procedures have been much simplified since the Awards began, and that's great.
- There was a little confusion about the process in our category — how many were required for the long list, short list, etc. Perhaps a diagram next time?

Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

- I think the Awards are a great initiative and thanks for putting all the time into them.
- Just keep up the good work: New Zealand needs you. The Awards event hit a sweet spot this year: I hope not TOO much pressure on the organisers, while still bringing pleasure and satisfaction to the judges and finalists. Thank you for the opportunity.
- Great job!
- A very worthwhile initiative. [Plain English] is now more broadly accepted but I sense that eternal vigilance is required, otherwise things slip back.
- Thank you for this great opportunity! I'm honoured to have been a judge!
- Thank you for the opportunity to be involved again!

- Keep up the good work!
- I really enjoyed my experience and would love to do it again.

Sponsors

When we asked you to be a sponsor, what motivated you to say yes?

- Sponsorship was in existence before I joined the organisation, but reasons for continuing include alignment with our business objectives.
- As design sponsor, we like to think of the Plain English Awards as one of our babies — so saying yes is an easy decision.
- We actually approached the Plain English Awards organisers to become involved.
- I think the Awards are very important. The message about plain language will take a long time to spread, and any initiatives need to be consistent and regular to gain long-term traction.
- I love the Awards and it's a great chance to show I'm part of this movement.

What are the benefits to your organisation of sponsoring the Awards?

- Support specific business objectives around promoting best-practice annual reports in NZ.
- We get exposure to businesses and organisations that we wouldn't normally cross paths with. And as a communication-focused business, the Plain English Awards fit well with our brand.
- We were able to highlight our support for the use of plain English, particularly for people new to the country who come from other language backgrounds. This was a good comms opportunity to illustrate some of the work we do in this space and to recognise the work of others.
- We want to make technical communicators aware of the importance of plain language, and we want to make the Awards participants aware of TechCommNZ. And we always want more members.
- We want to inspire our staff to learn and practise plain language; we want to spread the word that we employ full-time writers (for recruitment purposes); we want to associate our brand with excellence in writing; and we want to support the Awards.
- Exposure and positioning.
- Alignment with well-regarded organisation with similar values/goals.

What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to the people you serve or communicate with?

- Reward good practice and assist in providing recognition to communication leaders within organisations.
- We work with mostly small private sector companies. Unfortunately this group, for the most part, do not get involved with the Awards.
- The Awards provide good comms opportunities and consequently good support for the importance of clear information that is accessible to all New Zealanders.

- They are a chance for talented technical communicators to shine and be recognised. TechCommNZ doesn't have sufficient resources at the moment to run a competition, and the Awards are an excellent proxy.
- Just generally more motivation, excitement, and inspiration to be clear.
- Recognition of their efforts.

What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to the New Zealand public?

- Ongoing reminder to government and companies to communicate well.
- We see the Plain English Awards and movement as an important part of making New Zealand a better place to live in.
- The Awards encourage NZ writers to do better writing and information design, making information more accessible for more people. Also, the Awards celebrate the achievements of people who have a humanities/arts background and are using their skills to enhance daily life for their audiences.

Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

- Looking forward to the 2018 Awards!
- I would remove the submission fee that you introduced this year for the first time. It is a large deterrent for potential applicants as the administration required for approval for Awards entries often requires the highest level of sign-off (DCE level), and many people will simply not be bothered to apply.
- Love it! Keep up the amazing work!