

Entertainment Solutions for Awards Programs

By
Nancy Hays

Almost every corporation, association, and charitable group has an annual award gala, recognizing special employees or members for outstanding performance or service. Most recognition programs have the same basic elements: a presenter or company executive describing the award category and providing background on the award winners, a long line of recipients making their way to the stage to accept their awards, acceptance remarks, custom videos or slides, and photographs with the head of the organization. Some companies who recognize the importance of awards to provide incentives for deserving workers have even expanded ceremonies to include many categories and prizes. Steeped in tradition, most of these programs become lengthy, predictable, and less than entertaining and engaging for the majority of the audience who may or may not be receiving awards themselves. Oftentimes recognition programs can become so lengthy and attention challenging that audience members can be seen leaving the ballroom in droves to make restroom stops or phone calls in nearby corridors until their category or favorite co-worker's award is announced.

Award galas present great challenges to planners because of their painfully repetitive formats and lack of creative energy. In recent years, clients have been seeking new and innovative ways to liven up these programs and looking to entertainment producers to provide suggestions and enhancements. Two general solutions from the corporate entertainment world have emerged: either

incorporate a Master of Ceremonies, entertainment and music in a TV style awards presentation (Oscar, Tony, Grammy approach), or present awards in the usual fashion after dinner and follow them with a headline banquet entertainer or dance band. While both solutions can bring about positive results, it takes the right entertainment combination to execute either format effectively.

After eighteen years of observing, producing and working with clients on their award programs and experiencing pitfalls with both formats, I have compiled a list of warnings and suggestions for my colleagues in the business.

TV Style Award Programs

- 1) Select and Master of Ceremonies or host who truly understands the audience and has done his or her homework. Keep in mind that just because an artist is a good comedian does not make him or her a great awards program Master of Ceremonies. Get references on how well an act has customized for other clients and discuss the project with the talent and talent management in detail before making the offer.
- 2) Select entertainment that performs well for short intervals and can divide their performance between award categories. Many entertainers (particularly comedians) build momentum over the course of their typical 45-minute corporate act. Splitting up their performance may not work well and may disrupt their timing as well as the effectiveness of their presentation. The most effective awards program entertainers are ones who work well for trade shows or for short segments, and are what we like to call "entertainment sprinters." These artists provide entertainment bursts full of short term energy.
- 3) Stick to a theme if you can. Viewers every year at the Oscars complain that the awards ceremony lasts forever and has no real continuity. Sticking with a theme for the entertainment makes for a more cohesive program with a beginning, middle and end.
- 4) Provide music for recipients that is engaging and not just a litany of jazz riffs from un-

engaged musicians who are counting the minutes until their next break. Use live music for top award winners and taped music for others depending on the length of the program. Ask musicians to provide alternative music selections or attempt to customize fanfares to the recipients being honored.

- 5) Find other ways to keep attendees engaged who are not receiving awards. Include unexpected categories or "wild card" prizes that could be awarded to any non-winning participant in the audience. Involve non-winning co-workers in award presentation (one of my clients had a region carry the award winner to the stage on their shoulders!) or ask regular attendees to speak a few words about the winner instead of the company executive. Usually these types of presentations are much more compelling, entertaining and personal, provided that they are limited in time and well monitored.

Awards Programs Utilizing Name Entertainment or Dance Music

With the intention of great reward and recognition (after all that's what this is all about, isn't it?), clients often make the mistake of allocating lots of dollars to booking a celebrity to perform after the awards are over and sometimes follow the celebrity with an expensive dance band. This is an attempt to end the celebration on a real high note. Oftentimes after all this expense and great planning, an exceptional national talent is secured and the client becomes perplexed and troubled as they see attendees walking out on the celebrity or ditching the dance band altogether in favor of the hotel bar or suite party upstairs. Celebrities find this upsetting and distressing because they have been forced to endure an endless wait backstage during "prime time" audience attention (watching from the rear projection monitor backstage). By the time they finally hit the stage, the audience has endured an exhausting day, several drinks, a four course dinner and award presentation and is frankly, tired. Unless the audience member is a real fan of the

artist, chances are that he or she might stay for a few moments or not at all. Combine all of this with an early flight the next day and you have all the ingredients for a disappointing climax to what could have been the highlight of the convention or meeting.

All of these factors make producing successful award programs with name entertainment and dance bands a real challenge, but thankfully there are some solutions that can make the difference between a disappointing program and a outstanding one.

1) Contract the name entertainer or celebrity on another night during the convention when the star can perform concert style or immediately after dinner. You will get 100 times more "bang for the buck" and you will have a happy celebrity who delivers an excellent show. In a typical three or four day meeting, if the awards are planned for the final evening, contract the star performer for one of the middle nights. That way, the audience members have already had an opportunity to get re-acquainted and network on the opening night and first day of the meeting. In addition, by this time, they will be rested and accustomed to the time changes brought about by travel. Middle nights allow time for attendees to discuss and celebrate the success of an outstanding entertainment event, without fear of the stress of leaving to catch a plane the very next day.

2) If moving the name entertainment to another night is not an option, discuss with the client your concerns and ask if it is possible to combine award categories or ask certain recipients to stand in groups or alone (instead of making the long acceptance trip to the stage) reserving stage remarks and presentations for only the most important awards. Keep the program moving as swiftly as possible and try cutting unnecessary minutes out so as to get to the entertainment quickly. Begin the awards at dessert so that the celebrity begins performing immediately afterward. NEVER allow a break between awards and entertainment and try to minimize the waiting time backstage for the celebrity. When dealing with talent, be honest about their start time and always stay on top of communicating any last minute changes.

3) If a dance band is used after the awards or following a celebrity entertainer,

arrange to have them prepare on the stage before the last recipient is announced. That way they can kick into music immediately and retain the crowd for dancing. Any kind of break is deadly.

4) Arrange to pay the band a little bit extra (or make it part of your up-front contract) if they will play continuous music without a break until the party is over. Better to have a full dance floor for an hour and a half than an empty one for three.



Creative Awards Programs That Offer Solutions

The best awards programs are those that minimize the problems we discussed while at the same time enhance the client's goals for recognition and celebration. Our company has produced a theme and awards entertainment package that does exactly that. There are other creative themes out there that work equally well, so we offer this only as an idea of what can be done and why it works. Good luck!

James Bond Awards Program

Our James Bond Awards Program begins as soon as the audience enters the venue for the evening and allows for all the

entertainment elements a client needs between awards in short bursts with maximum impact. The entertainment segments do not compete with award presentations but rather provide entertainment enhancement for award winners, spotlighting them as the true stars of the evening. Songs from Bond films including "Nobody Does It Better," "Diamonds Are Forever" and "Goldfinger" are powerful production numbers that tie in perfectly to award categories. The Bond theme is classy and works beautifully for a black tie function and is a theme that appeals to all age groups. The fanfare and recipient award music is unique and upbeat and tied to the movie theme. Clients love this show because it can be totally customized without the great expense of customization because charts and arrangements have already been paid for. Almost all the entertainment elements can be contracted in the convention city (Bond girl award presenters, local orchestra members, dancers, comedian, James Bond Master of Ceremonies, or celebrity, etc.) keeping the production impressive but affordably priced. For more information and pricing options on the Nancy Hays Entertainment, Inc. James Bond Awards Program, please contact us at 7730-792-0688, or nhay-sent@aol.com.

Nancy Hays is the President and CEO of Nancy Hays Entertainment, Inc., a national entertainment firm committed to providing innovative ideas and quality entertainment programs for private events. Nancy received her Masters degree from Northwestern University in Communications in 1984 and worked for the Jack Morton Company from 1984-1993. She founded Nancy Hays Entertainment, Inc. in 1993 whose clients include Fortune 500 companies, associations, and charitable groups of all sizes. Nancy Hays Entertainment, Inc. manufactures, produces and promotes The Romance of Dance line of Video, DVD and CD products on dance available in retail outlets nationwide. The company also sells "packaged" corporate entertainment options including the James Bond Theme Awards Program, All the Jazz Chicago Program, Nancy Hays Country Music Program and The Romance of Dance Program. Nancy Hays also serves as a personal manager for David Crowe, a rising comedian.