

# Behind Closed Doors

## The John Cotton Dana Library PR Awards Committee on the Job

Marsha Iverson and Judith Gibbons

Every January a small, dedicated committee arrives early to the ALA Midwinter Meeting, and for three long days its members sequester themselves in dark, windowless rooms. Their challenge: thoroughly review all submissions for the John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Award, and select the winning entries. What are the keys to creating a winning campaign? What are the characteristics of a strong presentation? What criteria are used to evaluate the entries? What mysteries transpire inside the committee chambers? How are the final selection decisions made? This insiders' report will answer these questions.

This annual quest to recognize the best library public relations efforts began when the H. W. Wilson Company established the award in 1946. After sixty years of continuous sponsorship and support, this prestigious award is now the longest continuing award offered by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA). Although the judging takes place “behind closed doors,” a clearer understanding of the process, plus a few tips, can help lead to a successful entry.

### Keys to Creating a Winning Communications Campaign

The JCD Award showcases examples of successful strategic communications for libraries' most challenging issues. The entry guidelines ([www.hwwilson.com/jcdawards/nw\\_jcd.htm](http://www.hwwilson.com/jcdawards/nw_jcd.htm)) also form the foundations of developing a first-rate strategic public relations program. The first key to success is to use the JCD Award entry form as the model when you first consider the public relations project that will become the subject of your eventual entry. Libraries large and small have been successful by following these steps. The elements of the entry form are: Needs Assessment, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation.

---

**Marsha Iverson** ([miverson@kcls.org](mailto:miverson@kcls.org)) is Public Relations Specialist, King County (Wash.) Library System and 2002–2006 JCD Committee member. **Judith Gibbons** ([judith.gibbons@ky.gov](mailto:judith.gibbons@ky.gov)) is Field Services Director, Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, and 1998–2001, 2003–2006 JCD Committee member.

Begin with a **Needs Assessment** to identify why the campaign is necessary. What is the issue, challenge, or question the PR campaign will address? Why is it important? Without a demonstrated need to meet and a goal to achieve, it will be difficult to create a strategically effective campaign.

**INSIDER TIP: The Needs Assessment is the foundation for everything you do.**

The **Planning** stage begins when the need is clearly identified. Start planning the communications campaign, in this order:

- What is the goal?
- How will you get there?
- Who is involved?
- Can you involve key strategic partners?
- Who is your audience?
- What are the key strategic messages?
- What tools do you have available?
- How will you use them?

Throughout the Planning stage, keep the Needs Assessment firmly in mind. Everything in your plan should focus attention on the underlying need and move the target audience toward the desired result. If it doesn't, you are competing against yourself for your audience's time and attention, and weakening your potential effectiveness.

**INSIDER TIP: Don't start with the graphics—start with the strategic purpose!**

The **Implementation** phase is the time to carry out your plans, so the campaign will result in meeting the underlying need. This is when you can be creative: design the brochures, build the displays, write compelling copy, and create appealing visuals. The biggest mistake made in the implementation stage is to begin with a graphic (no matter how delightful it may be), and then wrap a campaign around it. The committee has seen too many examples of design-driven projects that lost sight of the underlying need . . . or even forgot to put the library's logo on the product. If the audience can't tell that the visuals are related to their library—and to your goal—the entire project misses the point.

**INSIDER TIP: Don't forget to put your identity and strategic message on everything you produce. High-energy entries have lost for want of putting their logo on key products.**

The **Evaluation** phase of a communication campaign is frequently overlooked, but it is incredibly important for two reasons:

- Evaluating the campaign upon completion gives essential feedback: Did the communication effort meet the need? What was effective? What wasn't? What did you learn along the way?
- A thorough Evaluation of one campaign can become the Needs Assessment for the next.

The Evaluation completes the process and provides a solid foundation for continuous strategic planning for public relations.

**INSIDER TIP: Evaluate! Assessing each campaign makes the next one even better.**

## Preparing the Entry

Some applicants wonder: What happens inside the committee rooms? Each year, the panel of judges has a slightly different composition and range of experience, including librarians, administrators and public relations professionals from a variety of libraries, positions, and backgrounds. While the judging process may seem inscrutably secretive from outside, most committee members are also previous recipients of JCD awards. As veterans of the submission process, they scrutinize each entry for strategic communication content, thoroughness, presentation, and the entrant's attention to the instructions.

**INSIDER TIP: Present your best case, in your most professional manner. Document your rationale and strategies, highlight the most important features. Be thorough, brief, brilliant, and done.**

The most important key to preparing a winning entry is to use the guidelines from "Day One" as you think about the project ahead. When it is time to prepare your submission, it will be easier to put it together. The committee's evaluation criteria mirror the entry guidelines. Each submission is closely evaluated on how well it meets the six stated submission criteria: Needs Assessment, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, Overall Creativity, and Presentation. Entries are disqualified if they are received after the entry deadline, if they lack the appropriate information, signatures, copyright permissions, or if the entry size and format doesn't meet the required specifications.

**INSIDER TIP: Start early! Creating a strong entry is a major task, requiring significant time and attention to detail. Be sure to follow all instructions carefully.**

## Judging: Day One

By the time the full panel of eleven judges enters the committee room on the first day, LAMA staff already have logged many hours preparing the entries for review by examining each submission for eligibility, logging in each entry, and placing the entire collection on long tables to await review. After new member introductions, committee members review the ground rules and evaluation criteria. Jurors disqualify themselves from reviewing entries from their own states, entries submitted by colleagues, friends or acquaintances, or by anyone who has sought advice from them prior to submitting entries.

Each judge independently reviews one entry at a time, evaluating how well the entry meets the six stated submission criteria. Each reviewer then completes an evaluation form with comments, assigns a numerical score for each entry, folds the comment form and puts it in an envelope. Each section of an entry has a strategic value, and a maximum possible number of points can be assigned to each section. The highest possible overall score is a perfect 100 points. The next reviewer doesn't see the first reviewer's comments or score, so each evaluation is completely independent.

At least two judges evaluate each entry during the first day. It can take well over an hour to review a large or complex entry. Depending on the number of entries, completing the first round of evaluations may take the entire first day. If there are significant differences between the two first-round scores, a third juror reviews the entry without reading the other evaluations, and all three evaluations are considered. The first-round scores are averaged, and the highest-scoring entries are set aside for a second round of reviews.

What makes the difference at the end of Day One? According to the current JCD Committee chair, Sherrill Smith: "For me, the emphasis the JCD structure puts on Needs Assessment and Planning is key. Clear goals, consideration of target audiences, and a well thought out plan really do make a huge difference. Entries without evidence of planning get weeded out pretty quickly. I found the scoring sheet to be an effective tool in keeping judges mindful of the criteria. As a new committee member, it took me a couple of entries to really hit my stride, but it was easy to give consistent ratings."

**INSIDER TIP: When preparing an entry, edit! Make it easy for the reviewers to see the most important aspects of your communications campaign.**

## Judging: Day Two

The second round of reviews begins, and different judges review each entry still in the running. As the number of remaining entries gets smaller, the evaluations become more stringent, and the gap between the highest and lowest scores narrows, too. By the end of the second round of evaluations, the competition is stronger and attention to detail counts even more. Committee veteran Anne Prusha recalls a tough case: “One entry succeeded in getting substantial coverage, but did not win because they did not start with a Needs Assessment. This was an example of an exceptionally successful campaign, but it did not meet the criteria of the application process.”

**INSIDER TIP: Read the directions carefully, and follow them meticulously.**

## Judging: Day Three

Throughout the evaluation process, from the first to the last day, each review remains confidential, so every review is based strictly on each individual committee member’s evaluation. Entries with a total average score below a specified average—usually 80 to 85 percent—are removed, and only the top contenders remain for the final round. By the third day, fully two-thirds of the entries have been packed for shipment back to their senders, with the committee’s regrets. The remaining entries are scrutinized by a different set of reviewers, and if there are significant discrepancies between third-round review scores for any entry, another committee member who has not already seen that entry will review it. The maximum allowable number of winners is 15 percent of the total number of entries, as established by the sponsors, the H. W. Wilson Company, and the H. W. Wilson Foundation.

Final selection decisions are made by committee consensus after thorough discussion and deliberation. Prusha reports that there is a strong degree of uniformity between evaluation scores, despite the individual experience and perspectives each committee member brings to the evaluation process: “I expected to find greater variation between the quantitative scores from such a broad range of indi-

vidual evaluators. For the most part, the scores for each finalist have been remarkably close, even down to tie-breaking extra reviews.”

Committee member Pat Marvel speaks to the sometimes heartbreaking final choices: “I recall specifically an entry that did a spectacular campaign. Their visuals were tremendous. Fabulous art—the problem was, they didn’t do a meaningful Needs Assessment, and had few measurable goals. The project had lots of bling but not much data. At the end of the day, they didn’t fulfill the criteria for a winning submission, namely having a finely-tuned Needs Assessment, measurable goals, and a report on how those goals were met.”

Committee veteran Peter Deekle sums up the underlying purpose of the awards, which have guided deliberations for sixty years: “We’re about celebrating excellent public relations and encouraging more of it . . . in this sense JCD is not a contest pitting one entry *against* another.” Sherrill Smith captures the essence of the remaining contenders for this prestigious award: “The winning entries each have an extra edge—passion, enthusiasm, wit, graphic excellence, originality—some quality that makes them unique.”

After the final selection is made, the winning entries are announced at a press conference during the ALA Midwinter Meeting. Representatives of the winning libraries receive the award and a generous cash development grant during a special reception hosted by the H. W. Wilson Company during the ALA Annual Conference.

For sixty years, the John Cotton Dana Award has been the highest honor for outstanding library public relations. Libraries of all kinds have received recognition and support for their outstanding efforts to effectively demonstrate the importance and value of libraries in their communities. The award is a community effort involving generations of library professionals who have painstakingly prepared their entries; LAMA staff, who have managed the many details of arranging for the reviewing process; committee members who have reviewed the entries; and award recipients, who continue to improve the professional practices and raise the standards for library public relations. All are deeply grateful to the H. W. Wilson Company and the H. W. Wilson Foundation for establishing the award and for their continuing financial and tactical support.