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# You, Too, May Be a Winner!

*Looking to jump  
start your  
business? You  
might try entering  
a contest.*

By [DALE BUSS](#)

A growing number of corporations, nonprofits and universities are giving small companies a chance at a big break—by holding contests.

Covering a broad range of categories, from the most promising women entrepreneurs to the strongest tech ideas, these competitions offer a number of powerful lures. Some offer cash prizes that can range into the six figures. Then there are longer-term rewards, such as increased exposure and grist for future marketing campaigns. Even if they don't win, entrepreneurs often come away with valuable critiques from expert panels of judges.

But there's an art to deciding which contests to enter and making the best case for your company. Here are some keys to finding, entering and winning these competitions.

The best place to start looking for contests is [AwardSync.com](#), a site that helps groups publicize their awards. Once you've focused in on

some competitions, the groups' own sites can be valuable. For instance, you could scour their sites for more information about what they do—which might give you ideas about what to highlight in your presentation.

At the outset, start small with awards from, say, local chapters of national organizations. This has a number of benefits. You can refine your case and practice your presentation without as much at stake. You also stand a better chance of winning a smaller contest—and judges of larger events like to see that you have some victories under your belt.



Madcapz LLC

Carrie Bell used contests to win credibility for her headwear business in new markets

Once you've homed in on some contests, network like crazy. Call previous winners to see what worked for them; more than anyone else, they'll understand why you're in the hunt—and typically they have nothing to lose because they're ineligible to win again. If you can get into the audience for an award's oral presentations, go do it one year,

see what makes the finalists stand out, and then apply the next year.

And don't be discouraged if you find a good contest but don't meet all the criteria. Sometimes sponsors will bend the rules.

"There's often more flexibility than people appreciate, especially in the early stages," says Nell Merlino, founder of Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence Inc., a nonprofit that co-sponsors the Make Mine a Million \$ Business Award with American Express Co.

In her competition, for instance, she says that the judges like would-be contestants who believe in themselves and their companies. The judges might let a contestant enter who didn't meet one of the criteria, such as the minimum annual revenue, but had the initiative to ask if the rule were important, and if it could be bent.

"You're trying to encourage people to really go for it and grow their business," Ms. Merlino says. "If there are 10 criteria and they're missing or short on two, and they know those probably aren't the deciding factors, I would say try it."

### *Nail the Application*

A typical competition starts with a written application, sometimes along with a business plan. It's important to make this as detailed and compelling as possible. Clearly present your product, service or idea. Underscore facts that set you apart from others in your field. Highlight the capabilities of your management team. Demonstrate a thorough understanding of your customers. Be specific. Experts say it's surprising how many entrants don't simply and thoroughly answer the questions.

"Show measurable, quantitative achievements such as percent growth, number of employees, new-client wins, new-product launches, growth in the customer base," says Kirsten Osolind, founder of Re:Invention Marketing, in Coronado, Calif. "Even mention endorsements that you've gotten from folks such as customers or bloggers."

It can also help to leave the job of writing to one person instead of turning to a committee. For one thing, it can be simpler for one person to gather all the data and do other legwork. Then there's style. At Adaptive Imaging Technologies Ltd., an Israel-based start-up that makes security cameras, the chief executive wrote a submission that helped the company win the Global Security Challenge sponsored by the London Business School last year. Having one author instead of a committee made for a more "coherent and lucid story" in the document, says the founding director, Max Robinson.

One caveat. In your written application, you're turning over sensitive company information, so entrust it only to highly reliable parties. Research the organizations or companies offering the prizes; if they aren't well known, make sure they can be trusted. Talk to previous applicants if possible.

"Don't give out a whole lot of precious information to someone who might be able to scam you or use information other than how you intended it," says Jade Boneff-Walsh, global vice president of the Entrepreneurs' Organization, an Alexandria, Va., advocacy and networking group that sponsors contests for its members.

In many contests, the finalists must make at least one oral presentation. This provides the chance to make a different sort of impression on judges. Instead of winning them over with data and reasoned arguments, you can go for the gut—such as letting them know how passionate you are about your ideas or how much you care about customers. "There's a certain amount of theater involved," says Jonathan Rosen, executive director of the entrepreneurship program at Boston University, which stages contests for student-run companies and others. "How well can you get people excited about whether this is an idea worth pursuing?"

But even in showmanship, humility is a good vibe. "You need some confidence and swagger and to believe in your ideas, but most judges

will know if you're blowing smoke," says Tim Haynes, vice president of TechColumbus, an Ohio outfit that sponsors an award for tech entrepreneurs.

## *Proceed Strategically*

After you have a victory under your belt, think about the next contest you enter and how it can serve your broader goals.

For instance, Carrie Bell's award-application strategy followed her company's diversification into new markets. In 2006, she launched Madcapz LLC to retail headwear as gifts for cancer patients who'd lost their hair. When Ms. Bell targeted golf accessories as an expansion market, she sought out contests that would give her some credibility with retailers. She found, applied for and won a contest for sports and health products, the Gear Award for Excellence from [ShapeYou.com](http://ShapeYou.com), a health and fitness Web site. "There was no monetary award, but it has given me lots of visibility in the golf market," says the entrepreneur in Larchmont, N.Y. "Now I'm researching awards in the tennis market and the children's market, because I'm moving into those segments also."

And even if you take home a big prize, don't be afraid to enter smaller contests if you think you have a good shot at winning them and garnering greater visibility. Consider Amanda Puppo. Ms. Puppo, owner of MarketReach LLC in Hightstown, N.J., was named the area's Young Entrepreneur of the Year in 2004 by the U.S. Small Business Administration and has been a finalist for two other high-profile prizes.

Now, Ms. Puppo is pivoting to smaller contests where her odds improve. "I'm not going to join another general business competition where there are 5,000 other entrepreneurs," says the 35-year-old entrepreneur. "Next year I'll probably enter the local '40 under 40' competition, where I'm more likely to win because there's a smaller pool."

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**Corrections & Amplifications** Max Robinson, founder director of Kromek, a U.K.-based digital color-imaging technology company, says that having one author for a business-contest submission last year made for a more "coherent and lucid story" in the document. A previous version of this article attributed the quote to Gideon Miller, chief executive of Adaptive Imaging Technologies Ltd.