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OSS Awards – "Brochureware" or Useful Guidance?
By Barbara Lancaster, President, LTC International

When the new crop of cars appears each year, the car journalists all respond with "Best of" awards that skeptics sometimes think are closely related to how many free days each writer gets to keep driving each car. Or how much advertising the car manufacturer buys in the magazine, or perhaps some other incentive that is not quite so obvious. Nevertheless, "Best of" helps sell specific models of cars. With far less fan fare, consumers can figure out just how well those "best of" models really are performing, two, three or four years later.

An investment in an OSS application has far more impact on a service provider's future than buying a car does for the typical consumer. Get a lemon? There are laws on the books that even make it possible to turn in that "bad" car for a "good" one. Just try that with an OSS purchase.

Yet, each year, we have more "Best of" OSS awards. Just how much credibility should accrue to an award winner? Just how much should winning an award displace a service provider's own due diligence? The answers to these questions are not nearly as clear cut as they are for cars. At least with cars, every person with some driving experience has a good checklist of things the car should, and should not, do. With the basics firmly in place, it becomes a question of style preferences, price, finish, handling and ride characteristics, etc. Things that can be assessed in a hands-on drive test, all without signing even so much as a Letter of Intent. So what weight should accrue to OSS award winners?

The answer in my experience is: not a whole lot. Having been a member of the jury for one prestigious award series for the past two years, I can tell you that it is very hard work. The judges put in a tremendous number of volunteer hours shifting through the nominations, checking facts, comparing notes, talking with other sources, etc. I can also tell you that the panel members try hard to be open-minded and to leave their allegiances at the door. I can definitely attest to the fact that the winner is not necessarily the vendor who buys the best lunch or dinner, or other such perquisite. On the other hand, the nominees are not subject to the type of deep due diligence and thorough fact checking that a service provider must do to select the right solution for their business problem. Winners get chosen based on their ability to present a good case, and the experience of each member of the panel to be able to determine the line between fact and brochureware.

Clearly, winning an award cannot be any substitute for customers or potential partners own leg work. So, what's wrong with the process?

First of all, it's self-nomination. That means that companies with good PR groups and some spare Marketing budget are typically the nominees. Many other vendors who also

have excellent products and excellent project delivery track records just don't bother to fill in the forms and start connecting with the jury.

Second, the ability of the jury to really dig into the justification for the nomination is limited. For the "Most Successful Implementation" category, for example, to really assess the success of an implementation, the jury should show up at the customer's premises, clip boards in hand, to look for solid evidence that the project is really delivering the benefits extolled and that the service provider's staff using the solution really are better off than they were before the project started.

Similarly, for the "Most Innovative" or "Best New Product" categories, the jury really needs to have some detailed requirements against which to compare nominees – and not just amongst the nominees, but against the other competitors in the market too.

Can the process be improved to be more useful and informative? Perhaps. In my opinion, it would begin to be a whole lot more like a formal evaluation conducted by experts paid to their work. Evaluations would be an on-going exercise, with new products and new releases tested against published criteria all through the year. "Best Project" nominees would be subject to the same kind of scrutiny – based on firm facts about the state of the service provider's capabilities before the project, and after.

Today's current approach to OSS awards does serve to add a bit of excitement to the OSS conference (at least for the nominated vendors…). But if the real point is to provide concrete facts that could help steer service providers, other vendors and implementation partners toward the real "Best" solutions, than my vote goes for a more robust, rigorous evaluation forum.

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