



Awards

AWARDS BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH FINDINGS REPORT - 2026

The awards landscape is changing. The number of awards is increasing, the macroeconomic landscape makes applicants more budget-conscious, and awards entrants and organisers alike are considering how best to use AI. With this and so many other factors in mind, Boost surveyed a representative sample of those interested in entering business awards (see Methodology and Demographics at the end of the document). We will combine their input with our own recommendations as the world's largest and most experienced consultancy in this space.



Executive summary

Our survey received 100 responses from people across a representative sample of companies of differing sizes from various industries, all with an active interest in business awards. The headline findings were as follows:

- The most voted for element of the business case for awards is 'attracting/retaining customers' (84%) with 'attracting/retaining talent' being the second most voted for element (48%). 39% also used awards to impress investors.
- The appetite for awards seems to be increasing, with far more respondents planning on increasing the number of awards they enter vs. those planning on decreasing the number (54% vs. 9%).
- The most popular awards are sector-specific ones (87%), with general business awards ranking second in popularity (54%).
- Among those surveyed, the main writers of award entries last year were 'various in-house people' (44%), with 'central in-house team' coming second (33%) and external agencies hardly used at all. This, however, appears likely to change: intent to use external help is on the increase across all areas (planning, story assessment, human writing, AI writing, evidence gathering, and planning technology).
- A proliferation of AI-generated entries was reported in our separate survey of awards organisers and judges, and roughly half of the surveyed judges said they would mark these down. However, this survey suggests that AI was primarily used for information processing (33% did this in 2025, with 52% planning on using it in 2026): deploying AI as the primary author of entries was not a popular choice (5%), although likely to increase.
- Ad-hoc decision-making regarding which awards to enter is the practice people most want to move away from (32% in 2025, and just 16% intending this in 2026), with a majority wishing to take a more thorough approach. A later question shows 38% of respondents want a single plan, and about half of these want external experts involved.
- There is something of an issue with vanity awards, with 36% of respondents declaring that these deter them from entering awards to some extent. You can rest assured that our Awards List site and monthly deadline reminders are vetted to exclude vanity awards.
- Across the entire survey, the single biggest shift from 2025 practice to desired 2026 practice was 'an online awards planning database/platform like awards-planner.co.uk' which saw a huge swing from 7% to 43%.

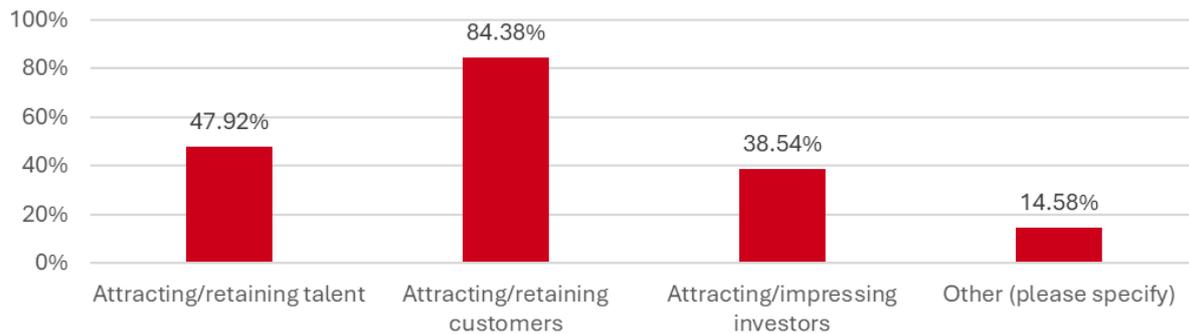
Detailed analysis of research findings

The business case for awards

Before diving into tactics, it's appropriate to consider the strategic rationale here. Long gone are the days when people entered awards 'for PR'. Today, the rationale is linked to mission-critical matters – most notably attracting and retaining customers (a massive 84%). Attracting/retaining talent and attracting/impressing investors fall some way behind, but are still a factor for approximately half of applicants. The lesson here, therefore, is to think about who you are trying to impress: and when picking which awards to enter, ask yourself 'will these people be impressed by these awards?'

Which of the following are factors in your decision to enter awards? (tick all)

Proportion of Responses:



A few respondents expressed this view on the business case in words, with a large majority of comments indicating a favourable view of the business case:

- 'It allows customers to see business succeeding and doing well.' – Hospitality, Sport & Leisure, Europe
- 'It's great for the public to see.' – Health & Social Care, Europe
- 'Participation in awards gives us a platform to showcase our work while simultaneously identifying areas for improvement. It also offers a clear indication of how we stand in comparison with our peers.' – Energy & Utilities, Middle East
- 'We feel it gives guests confidence in us if we win.' – Hospitality, Sport & Leisure, Europe
- 'Celebrating our growth within the community and creative sector.' – Education, Europe
- 'Awards are a means to motivate and reward the team.' – IT & Telecommunications, Americas

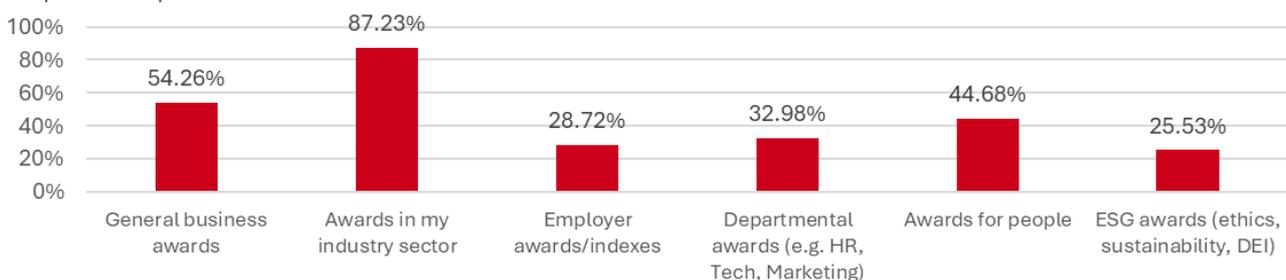
There was just one comment explicitly against entering awards:

- 'Independent agencies cannot enter easily anymore. It is too costly compared to what it gives back.' – Marketing Agency, Europe

With this in mind, we asked what sorts of awards companies favour. Unsurprisingly, businesses prioritise entering their sector-specific awards: e.g., insurance awards for insurers, marketing awards for marketing agencies, utilities awards for utilities, etc. General business awards come second, but a long way behind. This is what we find also: SMEs often go for general business awards, but larger companies tend to go for industry-specific awards.

Which sorts of awards are most important to your business? (Tick all that apply)

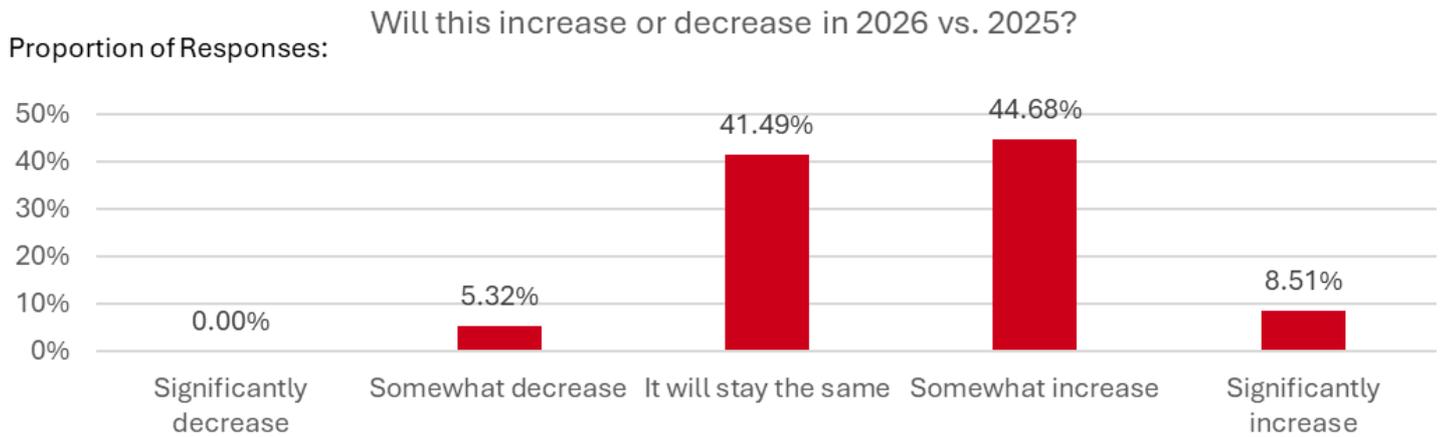
Proportion of Responses:



Appetite for awards

When we asked how many awards people entered their function/business into in 2025, the figure tallied with our own experience. 3-5 is the sweet spot (38% of respondents): enough to achieve economies of scale, without getting awards fatigue. 29% entered 5+ awards.

Importantly, how will this picture change in 2026? The good news (for the industry) is that there is a desire to increase the number of awards being entered. The downside for applicants is that this might in turn increase the level of competition. However, when we look at the AI questions later, it appears that AI-generated entries might account for the projected increase in awards applications.



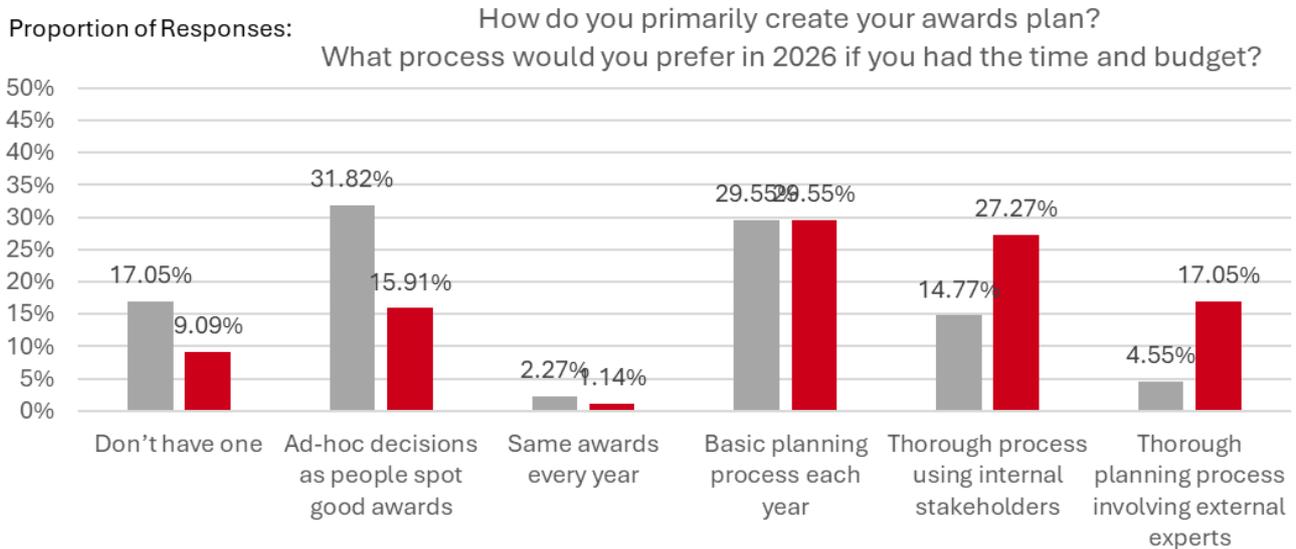
Those considering entering fewer awards most commonly cited money as the reason – i.e., the cost of entry and attendance fees. No clear theme emerged in other comments, which intimated a lack of time, a lack of stories, etc.



Awards best practice

We will now examine the various elements of a good awards strategy, one at a time, comparing what people did in 2025 against what they would prefer to do in 2026. We will also add our comments.

Awards planning



As you can see, this list of approaches moves from a lack of planning on the left to a thorough plan on the right. We believe there is a strong argument for thorough planning to maximise value for more by entering the right awards for your business and your stories (projects, initiatives, people, strategies, etc). It is great to see a pronounced desire to adopt more thorough approaches in the coming year.

Other tips from Boost on planning best practice include:

- Entering multiple categories of key awards to maximise chances of a win when you attend the event.
- Minimising the number of discrete stories, as each story requires a great deal of preparation (e.g. each campaign, initiative, person...)
- Timing the entry of stories right, so they don't risk being branded 'too old' or 'too new'.
- Striking a balance between the most credible awards and some more winnable ones, so you don't risk going away empty-handed at the end of the year.
- Creating a lucid, transparent budget and resource plan without surprise costs or unwelcome bursts of work.
- Using a thorough awards database of vetted awards (e.g. the Boost list).
- Using a SaaS planning tool which keeps the plan up to date (like awards-planner.co.uk).
- Getting external experts to vet the list and contribute towards the thinking. (This is not expensive, and can in fact save a substantial amount of money.)

'We participate to win the award, and put all our effort into the selected category. As of now, our strategy has never failed.'

Products & Manufacturing, APAC

Governance

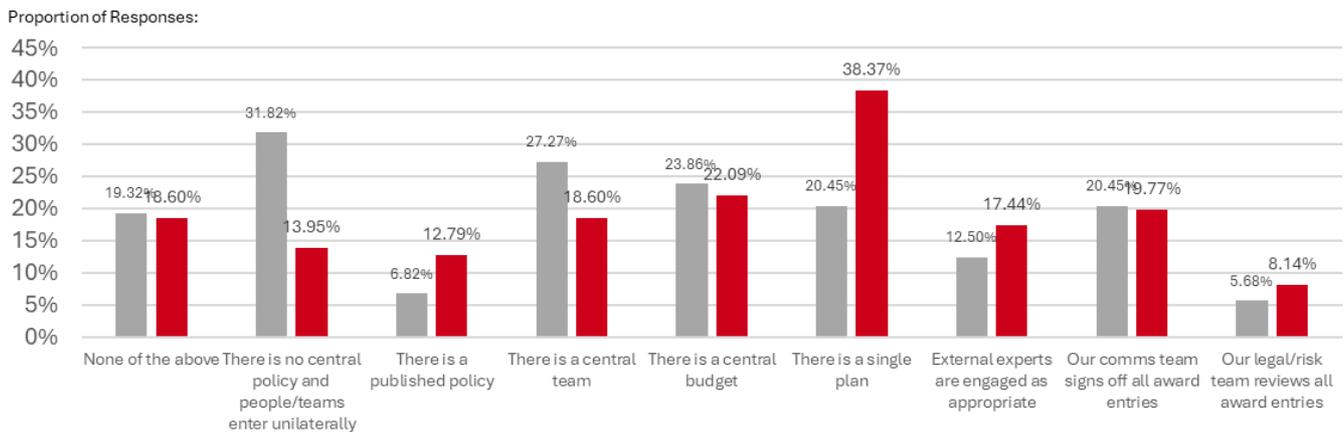
This is a topic we think is worth bringing to the fore. For most businesses, entering awards is seen as an ad-hoc activity with minimal governance. However, a few companies – typically the largest businesses in regulated sectors – have robust governance, although these are, as mentioned, in the minority. Of all the awards governance practices listed, none received more than a third of votes. The shift in 2026 appears to be in favour of having a central plan (as per the previous topic) and enlisting external help more (see later). As well as having a plan, another rarely-considered element is having a policy.

This is nevertheless important so that people know:

- i. Which awards are already approved, so these can be prioritised.
- ii. Which sorts of awards that aren't in the plan might be supported.
- iii. How to obtain budget.
- iv. Who needs to be engaged internally and externally.
- v. Which privacy policies apply, and how.

One little-used practice – and we'd encourage companies to keep it that way – is getting legal and risk teams to approve entries. If a policy is written and the organisation is regulated and/or listed, this might be appropriate under those circumstances: but always ensure you clarify the confidentiality policy of any award you enter. If any submitted content is strictly confidential and for judges' eyes only, make sure your legal/risk teams are aware of this before getting out the red pen.

Q17. Which of the following governance practices do you have in place in 2025?
 Q18. Which of the following governance practices would you prefer to have in 2026? (Please tick all that apply)



'We are generating a new strategy internally which encompasses a holistic, whole-college approach to inform robust entries.'

Technology in planning

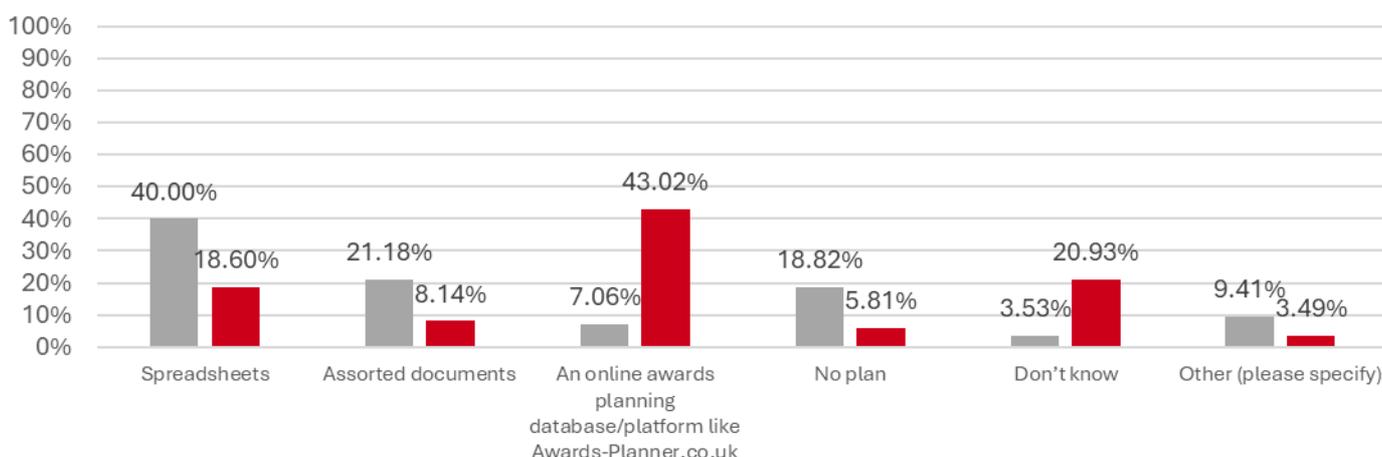
This is a topic where we saw the most substantial swing between 2025 practice and intended 2026 practice. To caveat this, we suspect that those filling in the survey – like most people – aren't aware that technology even exists to help people manage their awards strategy.

The largest swing in the entire survey is in terms of people moving from historically managing their plans on spreadsheets to considering using awards planning technology such as our Awards Planner tool to manage them.

Q19. What technology do you currently primarily use for the ongoing management of your awards plan/strategy?

Q20. What technology would you prefer in 2026 if you had the time and budget?

Proportion of Responses:

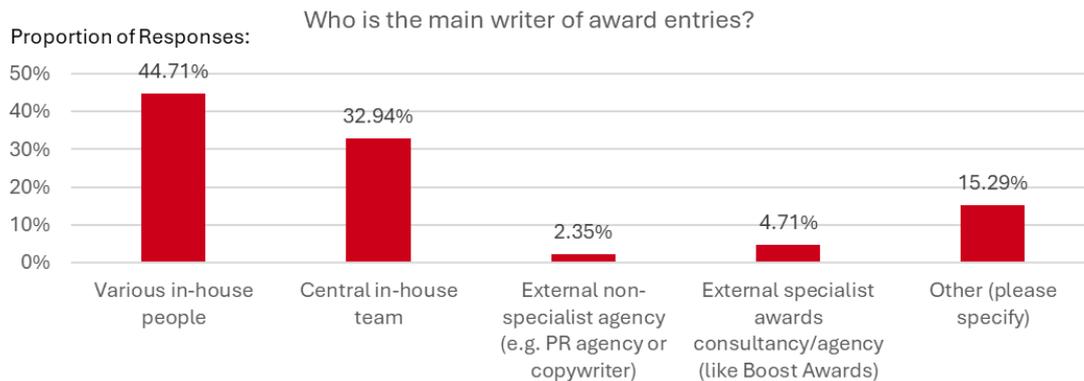


But what features will people want? We asked respondents to list the aspects of online awards planning tech they would be likeliest to use, and the most popular were searching for awards to enter (73%), selecting categories (66%), and managing timelines (60%), all features already supported by the tool. Others considered by many respondents are, we are pleased to share, due to be included in the next iteration of the tool, such as storing historic entries.



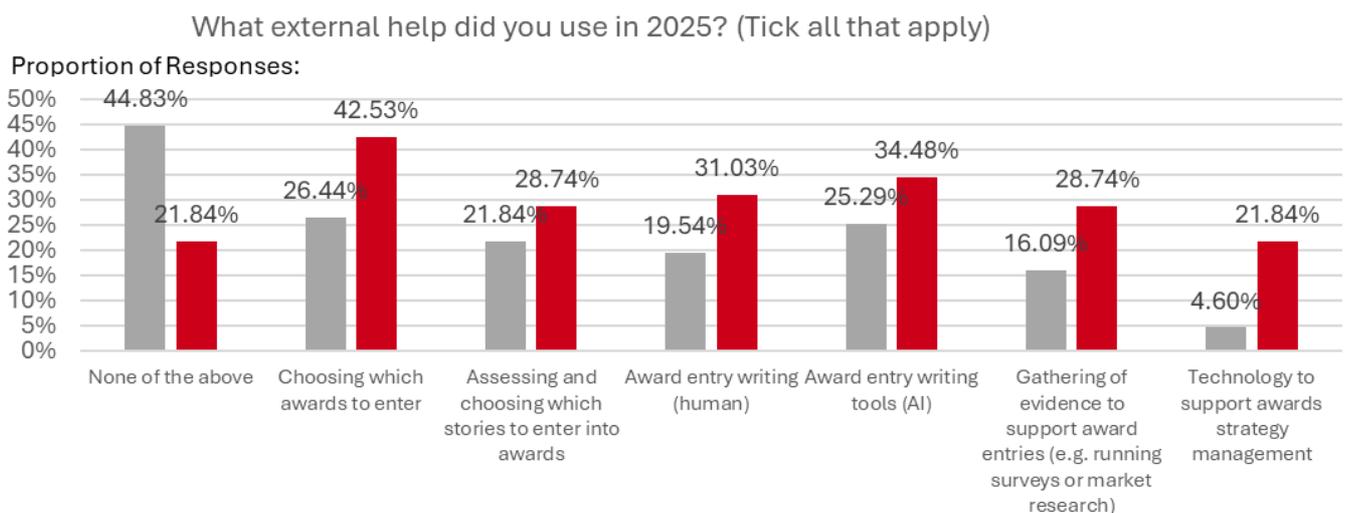
In-house or external help?

We asked respondents to reveal who is mainly responsible for writing their award entries; and, sure enough, the vast majority are written internally. What was slightly surprising, though, is just how many entries are written by a scattered selection of people around the business. Yes, using a central team is fairly common, but getting an indeterminate assortment of staffers to write such entries doesn't lend itself to success. As we at Boost know first-hand, award entry writing is something that improves with experience. Clearly, best practice is to use someone with well-honed expertise, which can be achieved via an internal comms team or external agency. As award entry consultancy is still very niche, outsourcing the writing to any agency is not yet widespread.



Panning out from just award entry writing, we examined which elements of an awards strategy were outsourced in 2025, and assessed whether there might be a shift in 2026. Interestingly, there is a palpable desire to outsource more across all areas of award practice, from planning to story assessment and entry writing.

This is the first instance in this survey of asking about AI, and the level of interest in outsourcing to human writers is on a par to the number looking for AI tools. We believe (naturally) that if budget allows, engaging external expertise will add real value, in the same way accountants can help write your annual reports and lawyers can write contracts. That said, you can mix and match – getting help with picking awards to enter or gathering the right evidence might complement a good internal writer.

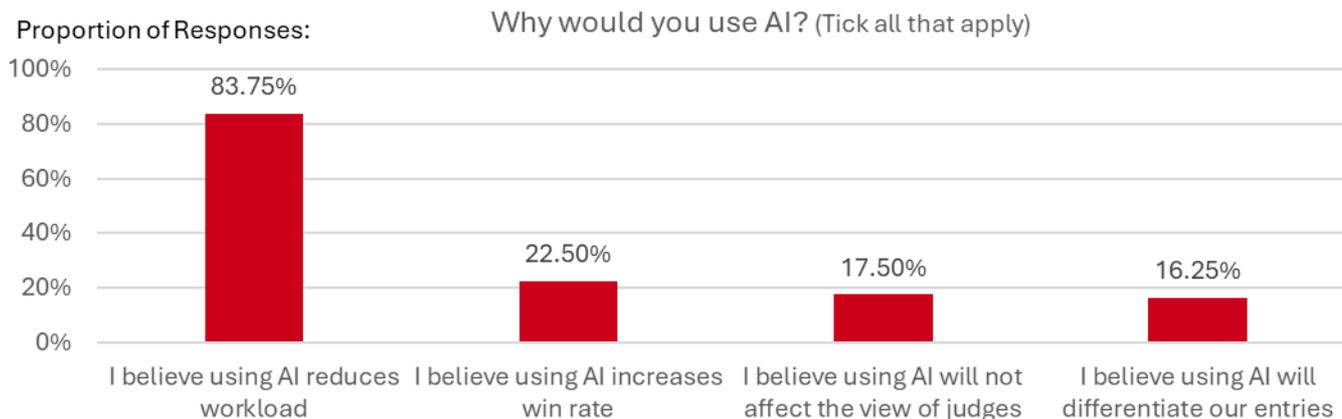


'Using an external agency helps to focus on which awards will have business impact and are credible, and which ones aren't. This saves a lot of time and money, results in better outcomes, and delivers an unrivalled ROI.' – IT & Telecommunications, Europe

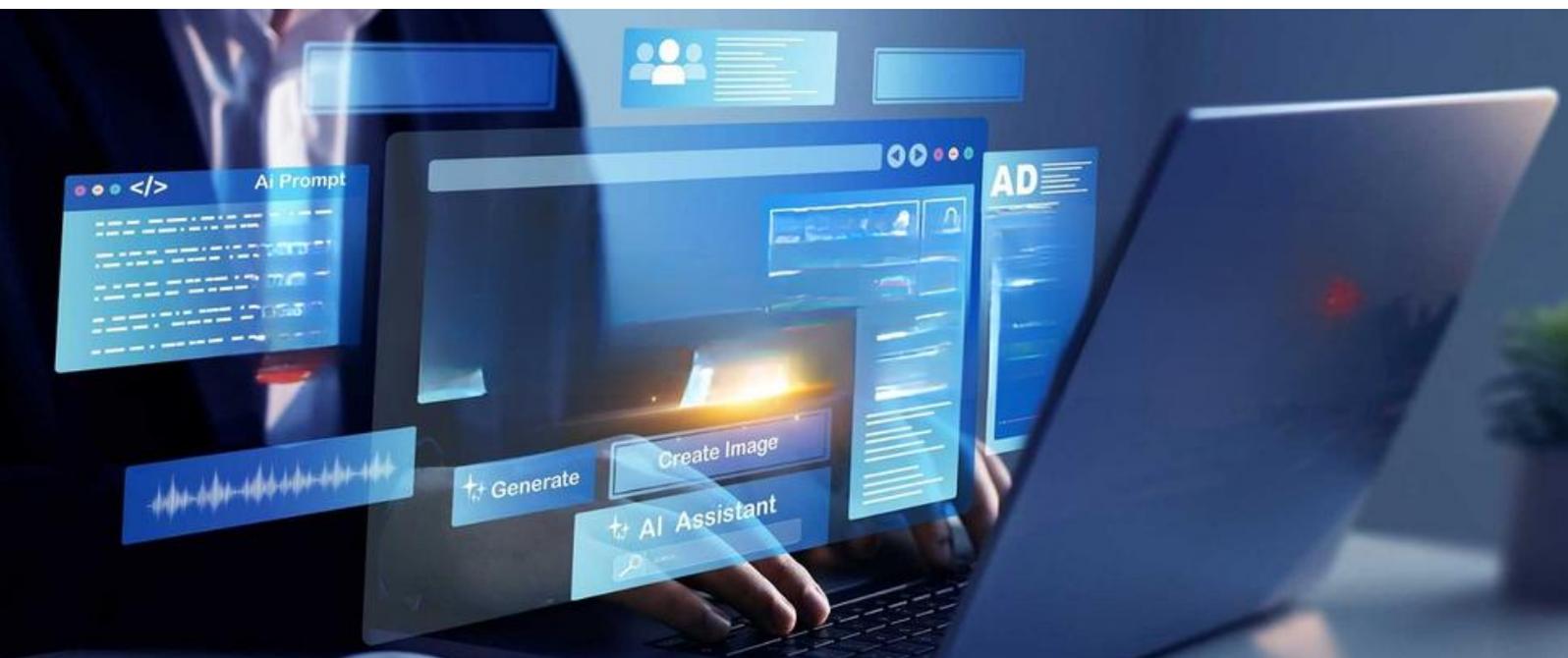
AI and awards

The use of AI is a hot topic in the awards arena, as it is everywhere, so we took a dive into the subject and asked respondents how they are deploying AI in this context. It is interesting, if not hugely surprising, that people are using it to search for awards; but as will be seen in questions later relating to vanity awards, people want help spotting which awards are credible and which might just be vanity award scams. We strongly recommend checking that any award you're considering is listed on www.awards-list.co.uk or www.awards-list.com as these listing sites are vetted.

In terms of using AI to create that all-important award entry:



In 2025 we ran a separate survey of awards organisers and judges in which they stated that about a third of entries they saw (on average) were visibly AI authored, with the expectation of this increasing with time. Roughly half of the surveyed judges said they would consciously mark these entries down. That said, judges and organisers are absolutely fine with AI being used for information processing to save time, which reflects the trend identified in this research: AI was primarily used for information processing (33% did this in 2025, with 52% planning on using it in 2026) and deploying AI as the primary author of entries was not a popular choice (5%), even if on the increase.

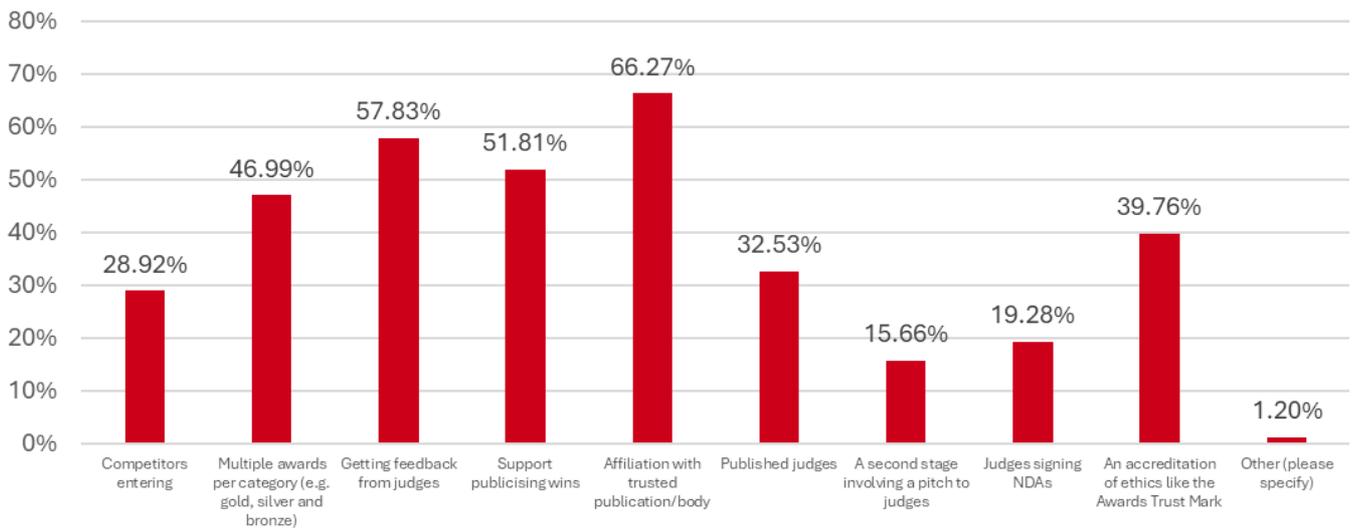


What makes people consider or avoid an award?

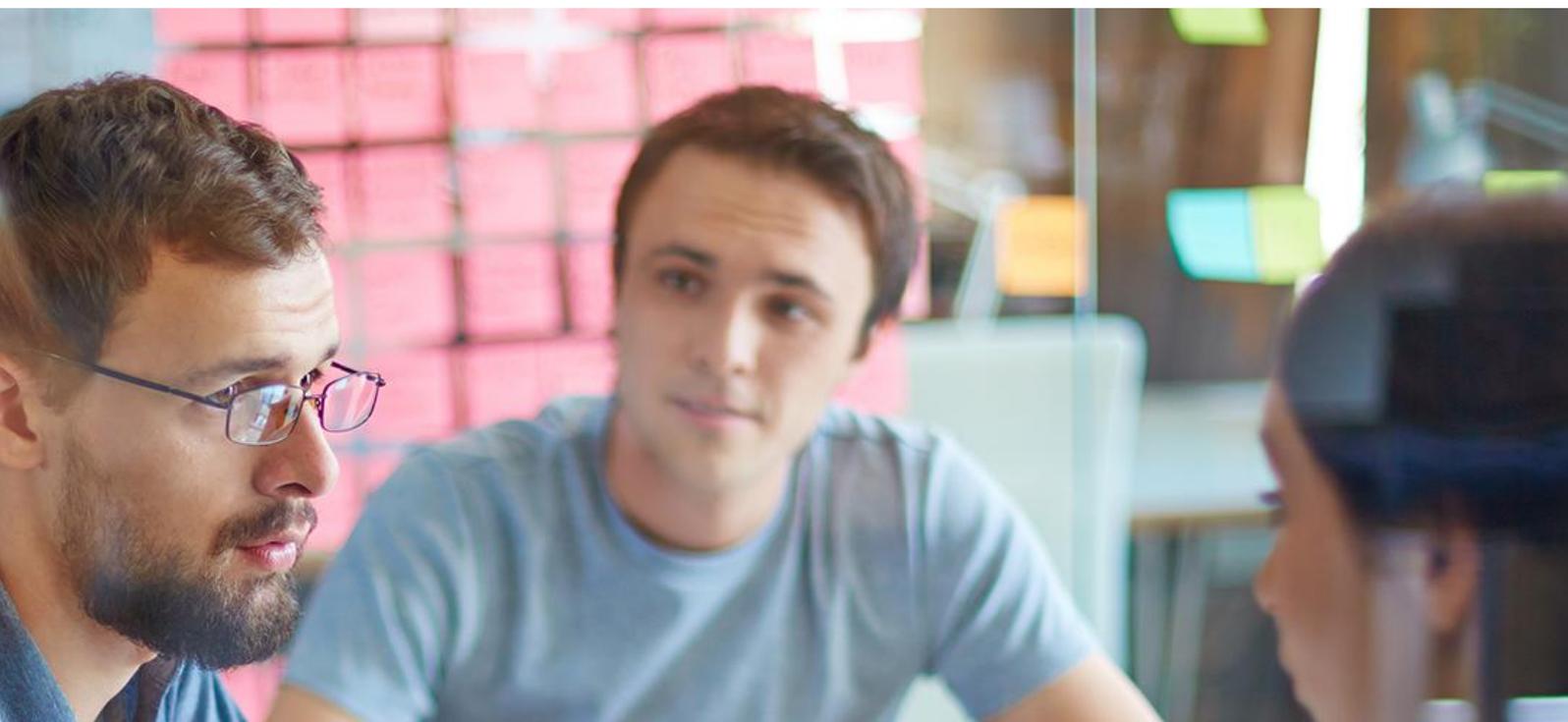
Boost is completely independent of awards, and recommends them to clients based on suitability. What constitutes suitability inevitably varies from company to company, but there are nevertheless some common factors which will identify an award as a 'yes' or a 'no'. Firstly, we explored the positive qualities.

Which of the following would increase your chances of choosing an awards programme? (Tick all that apply)

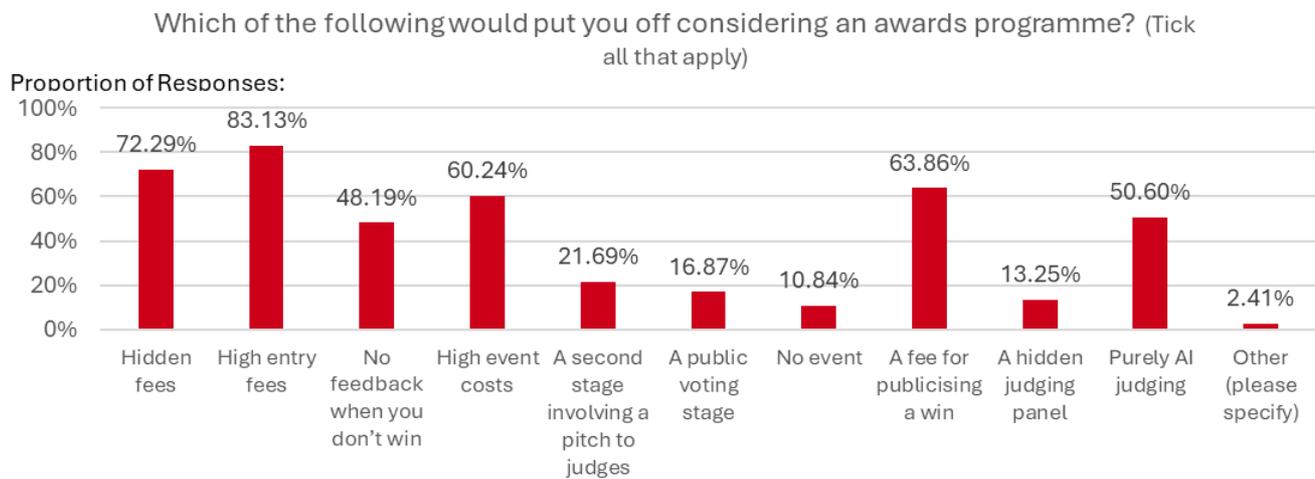
Proportion of Responses:



Most of these factors can be assessed at a glance on a website, but you typically need to contact the organisers to check whether applicants get feedback and support with publicising wins or not. In doing so, you will hopefully make it clear to organisers that they should do this to earn applications. It is worth noting that the Awards Trust Mark provides a mechanism for recognising awards that follow these practices – practices that awards entrants want.



Next we explored the turn-offs:

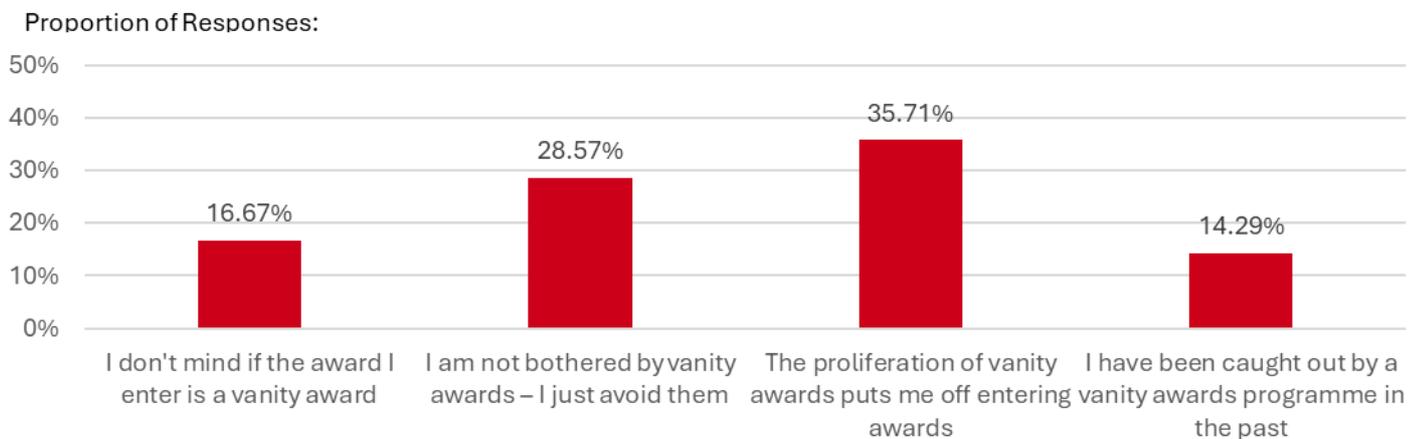


We asked a couple of questions about those awards that share many negative qualities – namely vanity awards, defined as a paid-for accolade where the primary criteria for winning is paying money to the organisers rather than a rigorous assessment process. Awards should be based on sharing best practice and recognising outstanding collective or individual stories/achievements, whereas vanity awards are typically driven by profit. They exist to sell trophies, certificates, or ‘winners packages’ to as many companies as possible.

This research demonstrated how significant the issue of vanity awards is:

- 14% of respondents have been caught out by a vanity awards programme in the past (a minority, but that percentage still equates to a LOT of businesses in the marketplace).
- 36% of respondents are put off entering awards by the proliferation of vanity awards.

There are a lot of awards out there which are described as “vanity awards” or “pay to win awards”. Which of the following is true? (Tick all that apply)



The situation with vanity awards is sadly so significant that 38% of those surveyed said they would value a database of vetted awards, and 46% wanted help in avoiding such awards (see above, as regards using an agency to assist with awards planning).

Tactics to win more awards

66% of respondents were satisfied with their shortlisting rate, but only half (54%) were satisfied with their win rates. Unsurprisingly, 80% of respondents stated that they hope to increase their win rates in 2026: a bit of a no-brainer unless people didn't enter to win or, conversely, won 100% of the time.

We therefore asked: 'What tactics are you considering/might you use to improve your win rate?' and invited the sharing of top tips, merging these aspects together to look for themes. This is what we found:

1. Increasing Evidence, Data, and Metrics

This theme appears **9 times**. Many respondents emphasise the importance of supporting award entries with robust evidence, data, and metrics to strengthen their case.

- *'More customer evidence and advocacy.'* – Financial Services, Europe
- *'To ensure that all narrative is backed up with stats and evidence [which] shows a robust and clearly defined entry.'* – Anon

2. Entering More Awards or Projects

This theme occurs **8 times**. Contributors often mention the intention to enter a broader range of awards, participate more regularly, or submit more significant projects.

- *'Increasing the number of awards I enter.'* – Health & Social Care, Europe
- *'Just entering more consistently.'* – Marketing Agency, Americas

3. Improving Application Quality and Presentation

This theme appears **7 times**. Several comments refer to enhancing the quality, clarity, and presentation of award submissions, including better storytelling and supporting materials.

- *'We need to look at ways of better presenting ourselves within the applications.'* – Education, Europe
- *'Training on writing compelling responses to really engage in storytelling.'* – Marketing Agency, Europe

4. Strategic Focus and Selectivity

This theme is found **6 times**. Contributors advocate for a more targeted approach, entering only relevant awards or categories, and avoiding vanity awards.

- *'Be more targeted, have a strategy, and not just enter everything going: because this year, 2025, we didn't even think we'd win anything at all. We'll also, I think, enter more of our departments too, such as customer service, IT, and the like.'* – Education, Europe
- *'Do thorough research; choose the most relevant/appropriate category; apply only if you have a 75% chance of winning'* – Management Consultancy, Middle East

5. Collaboration and Team Involvement

This theme is raised **4 times**. Comments highlight the value of involving more people in the award preparation process and encouraging collaboration.

- *'Have more people involved in preparing the applications.'* – Education, Europe
- *'A collaborative approach, encouraging staff to tell us the stories and [share] impacts which will help us win.'* – Health & Social Care, Europe

6. Storytelling and Narrative

This theme is mentioned **3 times**. Comments stress the power of storytelling and crafting compelling narratives for award entries.

- *'Storytelling is key: be engaging and compelling, take notes of all achievements beforehand, [and] find your USP.'* – Marketing Agency, Europe
- *'Training on writing compelling responses to really engage in storytelling.'* – Marketing Agency, Europe

Appendix

Methodology

The survey was sent by Boost Awards to its mailing list of opt-in subscribers to its monthly Awards Deadline Reminders email. This mailing list primarily consists of those who opt in from the www.awards-list.co.uk and www.awards-list.com sites.

When we asked them: 'In general, what is your business' view on awards?', 54% said 'significant interest' and 29% said 'a priority in our strategy'. This clearly isn't representative of businesses as a whole, but reflects the position of those who enter their businesses into awards, so we are happy with this.

Demographics of the respondents

The 100 people who contributed to this exercise were all actively involved in entering awards. This also which means that, although this isn't a cross-section of the business community as a whole, it is still a legitimate cross-section of those with an active interest in entering awards.

People exhibited a range of roles and interests:

- Interest: The vast majority (73%) were interested in terms of 'My business as a whole', with 31% entering 'my team', 25% 'My department', and 16% 'My business unit'.
- Role: We asked people to tick all the roles they play: 70% manage the awards process personally, 68% also choose the awards, and 63% also write the entries.

Respondents came from a broad cross-section of industries and company sizes: we believe this makes the survey a statistically sound representation of the marketplace:

- Business size: A real spread, with 15% 1-2 employees and 21% 1,000+ employees, and a fairly even spread in between.
- Sectors: Again, a real spread, with Education (12%), Marketing (11%), and Tech (9%) being the most popular sectors.
- Region: 66% Europe, 12% Americas, 6% APAC, and 15% Middle East.

We are therefore happy that those surveyed embody a random selection of those interested in selecting which awards to enter.

About the author

Chris Robinson is the founder and Managing Director of Boost Awards.



Founded in 2006 and employing a team of 25 around the world, Boost is the world's first and largest award entry consultancy. Boost has helped over 400 companies quantify and articulate their achievements, and win nearly 2,500 awards to-date.

For more information about Boost visit www.boost-awards.co.uk to browse their database of over 5,000 awards, or subscribe to receive free monthly 'Award Alerts', please visit www.awards-list.com

