

How to be an award-winning business

A young entrepreneur enlists ASK FSB to find the path to getting recognized.

By [Herman Wong](#)

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(FORTUNE Small Business) -- *Dear FSB:* Our company has been recognized as among the top contingency and retainer search firms, but would like to go beyond that. We are a small business with a young owner. What kind of recognition or lists can we be considered for?

- *Linda Lopez, Los Angeles, Calif.*

Dear Linda: This country loves nothing more than conferring recognition for achievement, whether it be a gold star for perfect class attendance or your picture on a plaque above the restaurant fryer.

What awards to pursue depends on a variety of factors, including the message a business wants to convey.

"There are all different kinds of branding opportunities associated with these awards," says Alfred E. Osborne, Jr., who founded the entrepreneurial studies center at [UCLA's Anderson business school](#). "Each of these [awards] gives different signals to different audiences, and they affect your brand and your reputation."

Prize-winning pizza sparks sales boom

Trophies, ribbons and photo ops can come from the local community, nonprofit groups, nearly every industry, various branches of the government, and the media. The distinction can be for anything from technological innovation in your industry to being a leading minority entrepreneur or having a good environmental record.

Osborne puts awards into different groups, each with its own benefits. Recognition by peers in the industry reflects on technical ability and competence. Broader recognition comes from external business observers and customers - whom Osborne says are key. "I think that's recognition you want to go for. That takes you a little further outside your immediate space," Osborne says.

But where to begin? Googling will get you started. [SCORE](#), a nonprofit that provides information to small business, has links to national awards and co-sponsors events with the [Small Business Administration](#). Look into industry awards and those granted by your clients. Local chambers of commerce or trade associations are also a good bet. The SBA celebrates individuals and companies in multiple categories, such as for "young entrepreneurs" or for "service excellence and innovation." Every SBA district hands out an annual Small Business Awards recognition, said Sandra Buck, an economic development specialist at the [SBA's Los Angeles District Office](#), which teams up with the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce for their annual awards. Information on how to be nominated for SBA awards can be found at [sba.gov](#) under "National Small Business Week."

Iron Chef Symon gets back to business

Be sure not to get ahead of yourself. Osborne warns against stepping on the pedestal before winning the race.

"The thing you don't want to do is to get that broader recognition too soon, cause then it's the old 'sizzle versus the steak' problem: Got a lot of sizzle but no steak here," Osborne said. "Well, build a steak first then go get the sizzle. And then the sizzle will only enhance the steak."

That is what [My Chef Catering](#) did. Founded in 1989, the Naperville, Ill. company won the 2007 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Small Business of the Year award. The company, which has 23 full time employees and about \$3 million in revenue, had long been actively involved in its community, including selling off dinner parties for \$1,200 to \$4,000, with the proceeds going to charities, said Bill Garlough, co-founder of the catering business. A nomination for the local Chamber of Commerce small business of the year award last year led to the national level competition, where 60 companies were eventually whittled down to seven. Flown to Washington, Garlough met Senators Barack Obama and Richard Durbin, a memorable experience. "

It was really great for a small business to have a chance to sit down in their office and talk," Garlough said.

The prize has since led to other honors. National catering publications have told My Chef's story, and Garlough has been named to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce board of directors and small-business council, he said. In February, Ford Motor Company (F, [Fortune 500](#)) chose My Chef Catering to model a new van that was showcased in Chicago. Winning the award has also affected the employees.

"I think the feeling we have here is that the company won a huge award, so there's a lot of personal pride within the employees. And they all feel like they're working with a winner," Garlough said. "So there's a real positive benefit with that." ■