

Strong Awards Program Built on Fun, Flexibility, Competition

by Linda Baun and Kyle Geissler

Radio and television stations from around Wisconsin submitted 1,784 entries to the most recent Wisconsin Broadcasters Association (WBA)'s Awards for Excellence. Nearly 400 broadcasters attended the Awards Gala on May 5.

The awards program wasn't always the largest state broadcast awards program. In 2006, the awards were handed out over a lunch with 586 entries. A new program launched in 2007 with numerous changes, but the key difference was that a committee was formed that would continually reassess the awards program to address fast-moving changes in the broadcasting business.

Veteran broadcasters Lindsay Wood Davis, Broadcast Management Strategies, and Tom Bier, retired general manager of WISC-TV in Madison, spearheaded this new program. It generated more than 800 entries in its first year, an increase of more than 200 in just one year. It's grown every year since then.

The other key change, made to the program in 2007, was the introduction of Station of the Year awards. These awards are given to newsrooms and stations based on a point system. The point system encourages stations to enter as many categories as they can, although there is a limit to the number of submissions allowed in each category.

The Station of the Year award comes with tremendous promotional value and is a source of great pride for stations and employees.

The WBA Awards Committee has 12 members that provide their expertise in the categories of music radio, news and talk radio, television and social media. The guiding principle for the committee is to encourage broadcasters to be the best broadcasters they can be. This often means a focus on community engagement and staying relevant with new technology.

The committee meets after every awards program to review statistics from the most recent program and make changes to keep it fresh and dynamic. The committee is dedicated, hard-working and committed to providing the best of the best in awards programs.

The WBA works very hard to make participation in the awards program as easy as possible. All submissions happen online, using a vendor, BetterBNC, to manage the award submissions and judging. The submission deadline is at midnight and we always have staff available until after midnight to answer any questions.

The WBA partners with other state broadcast associations to help judge the submissions, which has been one of the challenges of an ever-expanding awards program. We are now working with numerous states to help complete the job.

Once the results come back, stations are informed which entries have won a first, second or third place award, but not where they placed. They also don't know which stations also placed in each category, and the Station of the Year awards are also a surprise to all members on the night of the gala. Those awards are handed out at the end of the night.



The Awards Gala itself has become a huge event. The event has been at the Madison Marriott West for many years and draws broadcasters from all over the state. Managers use the gala as a way to reward their teams for a job well done. It's a cost-effective team-building activity. Many people come to the gala who don't attend other WBA events.

And it's fun! A theme is chosen for each gala. Last year was the *Great Gatsby*. This year was the *Kentucky Derby*, playing off the timing of the gala being held on the same afternoon as the famous horse race. Members leapt on the opportunity to find derby-worthy hats and bow ties. A jockey, bugler and rubber horse head mask were also spotted.

A heavy focus is placed on quality video and audio production, décor, food and even the quality of the actual awards given to members. When someone wins an award, they go home with something they're proud to display. Visit most WBA member stations, and you'll very likely notice the WBA awards they proudly display in their lobby.

The #wbagala hashtag gets a lot of activity on gala day and the days that follow. This year, the hashtag reached more than 830,000 people. In recent years, we've also added a Snapchat filter and a Facebook livestream of the Station of the Year awards to further expand our reach.

While awards season comes only once a year, we're talking about it year-round. It's important for promotion, but it's also important for stations to be thinking about it throughout the year so they can identify their award-winning work during the course of the year.

Promotion, relevance and hard work will certainly do a lot to strengthen an award program, but much of the WBA's success comes down to quality: quality member services, quality event planning and inspiring members to produce their own quality work that everyone in the association can celebrate.

"The awards show how broadcasters support each other in their public service mission and take pride in their important work," said WBA President and CEO Michelle Vetterkind. "The friendly competition at the awards gala is a great way to celebrate the best in Wisconsin broadcasting. When broadcasters are doing their best work, we all win." ■



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