



Design award with a difference

This briefing tells the story of Merseyside Civic Society's new civic pride award scheme which involved a public vote and added thousands of people to its mailing list.

Background

In April 2010 Merseyside Civic Society (MCS) made the decision at to re-launch the MCS Awards after a gap of many years. The new awards were to recognise the very best in architecture, design, planning, landscape and public art for new projects throughout Merseyside.

However, in addition to the standard "Design Awards", Merseyside Civic Society created a new "Civic Pride Award". The "Civic Pride Award" was to be presented to "anything" that had made an outstanding contribution to Merseyside and made people proud about Merseyside.

MCS went further and used a public vote to decide the winner. It was decided this would be the best way to engage with all sections of the community and reach out beyond the planners, architects and others it was usually in touch with. A public vote would help "*tap into the mindset of the X-Factor generation*" and so help raise the profile of and connections with communities and age groups that may not have been aware of MCS.

Method

Once the Committee agreed that developing the Civic Pride Award was a good idea a sub-committee (with an agreed budget) was set up to manage the project. The sub-committee had four people who were each passionate about taking the idea forward – this was essential for the success of the Awards. The sub-committee fed back regularly to the full Committee for decisions on important issues such as the awards criteria but were essentially given carte blanche to develop the awards.

The Civic Pride Award was set up in two stages:

Stage 1 - Public nominate entries

Stage 2 - Public vote on entries submitted

It was decided a decision on whether to shortlist entries for the public vote would be made after all the entries had been received.

MCS identified a need to promote the awards far and wide if they were to engage the public on a large scale. This was achieved by approaching Roger Phillips at BBC Radio Merseyside and asking him to participate as a judge. By having such a well known broadcaster involved in the MCS knew it would get a regular mention on his daily BBC radio show encouraging people to get involved. This proved to be the case. Roger regularly mentioned the dedicated website (www.mcsawards.org.uk) that had been created and encouraged people to vote.

People could nominate/vote by submitting an email to info@mcsawards.org.uk listing their three favourite items. Email was the strong preference for votes but the Society did make provision to allow people to post entries/nominations. Everyone who voted needed to include their name

and full contact details. People also had the option to opt in/out from receiving future MCS communications.

The decision to launch the awards was made in April with the final winner's ceremony being in October. MCS was fortunate that it was able to negotiate a venue at much reduced price as sponsorship and also benefited from some free wine from a local hotel. This meant it delivered the awards in budget.

The Results

The winning project was Dream, St Helens www.dreamsthelens.com a landmark sculpture on the former Sutton Manor Colliery that attracted over two thousand votes.

The awards were a success on several levels:

1. Gaining media coverage for the civic society and raising its profile
2. Strengthening links with local architects
3. Showing people MCS takes a positive approach
4. Reaching out to thousands of people who took time to vote

The best aspect of the project was how it tapped into the public consciousness and engaged with a large audience that would not normally engage with civic society activities. This was helped by the media profile, the voting format and the use of social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook. MCS's mailing list has gone from around 100 people to 1000s. Time will only tell how long big a long term impact it has had on the society.

Peter Brown, Merseyside Civic Society, said *"when we asked people to vote on the Civic Pride Award we were hoping it would generate a bit of civic pride in the residents of Merseyside. The response was huge. Everything about the awards makes Merseyside the great place it is"*

The future

MCS has decided that this project was so successful that it will be getting repeated again in 2011 and are exploring how to tie it in with Civic Day. The Society is also mindful that Twitter and Facebook were valuable tools in making this project a success so will be developing both of these in the future to ensure it benefits from getting even more people involved in the Awards. It will also be investigating ways that it can link in with other local civic societies to see if we can develop something in partnership.

MCS Chair, Dr Peter Brown said *"we hope that these awards become an established means of celebrating the best features of Merseyside. It is our chance to be positive and reach out to the community - to find out what they really think about something, and in doing so help inform our own work and ideas"*

Wider civic movement

Merseyside Civic Society is not the only society who organises a public vote. Sheffield Civic Trust and the Ealing Society are among others who also use this method as a way to engage with a wider community and find out their views on what is happening locally.

There is plenty of scope for other civic societies picking up on the idea and finding out what people think about their area and engaging them in its future. The key is to allow people to nominate what they want – it may surprise you – and then to make it easy and fun for them to get involved. Merseyside Civic Society would be happy to share thoughts with other groups and can be contacted and followed using the links below:

info@mcsawards.org.uk www.merseysidecivicsociety.org.uk www.twitter.com/merseycivicsoc