

How to go about entering and winning a label print competition

By Tony White, AWA Consulting and Chairman of Judges, FINAT Label Competition

The advice offered in this article is based on many years experience of judging print competitions around the world. No matter in which country or which printing technology being used, the basic principles are roughly the same. Some of the information may be considered to be common sense, but at times it appears that the people selecting the samples for entry into a competition leave that particular facility behind.

I suppose the first question to ask is why enter the competition in the first place. There are many reasons put forward which include statements like, *"The company will benefit if we win"* or *"We want to measure ourselves against the competition (other printers)"* or *"This would be a useful marketing tool if we win an award"* or *"It would boost morale in our print works if we were to win"*. There are many other reasons depending on who is responsible for signing the entry form.



So the decision is made to enter a particular printing competition. I will use the FINAT competition as the example for this article. The next and probably the most important stage is to obtain a copy of the entry form and read it very carefully. It is surprising how many times an entry has to be disqualified or moved to another category because the rules have not been adhered to. The organisers go to a lot of trouble to ensure that the rules are clear and concise and are not ambiguous. An example is: if the entry form asks for 20 continuous samples uncut there will be a good reason. In this case the judges are probably looking for continuity of quality and to see if the repeat lengths are consistent.

Look more deeply at the entry form and decide which category you wish to enter. Putting two or more classes on the entry form and leaving the judges to decide is frowned on by every judge I know and it is unfair on the judge to make that decision. The next most important section is where the technical information is required as this helps the judges to decide on the degree of difficulty and can make the difference between success and failure. Even more important and the most neglected area on the entry form is where additional information is requested be it technical or a comment on the end use of the label. It is no good saying *"it was difficult to print"* or *"the printing is exceptional"* or *"this is used by xxxx (a well known supermarket or brand owner)"*. This tends to make the judging panel look more closely at the sample in question and wonder, in some cases, why it was so difficult to produce. If you do not wish the information to be published either on the display board or in an article then say so and the Chairman of judges will respect that confidentiality.



Before we discuss selecting a label the entrant should remember that the judging panel will be the most severe critic of the printed labels entered even more discerning than the company's Quality Control Department. Remember that each judge will take about 1-1½ minutes in examining each entry, not even the most discerning consumer will take that length of time. One more fact to remember; the judges want each label to succeed so they always start off with a very positive attitude to the judging task. Yes, they are looking for faults so be ahead of them and make sure that YOUR entry is the best of all the printing jobs you have completed. The other aspect recognised by every judge is that ALL entries, in general, are commercial i.e. someone has paid good money for them to represent their product. The judges know this and make allowances for the "commerciality" of a label.

So we have now overcome the first but the most important administrative hurdle. We move on to whom should you nominate to select the entry. Bear in mind that the judging panel will consist of technically or design competent experts in their particular field. This means that they will take a dim view of entries which do not even meet the basic criteria for the competition. More about this later. Make sure that the person selecting the label(s) to be entered is technically capable of ensuring that the basic technical criteria are met.

Now on to the technical part of this article. Over the many years that I have been involved with judging various print competitions the most frequent technical problem encountered in ALL competitions is mis-register. If the sample is out of register it will fall at the first hurdle and go no further. This has been true for many years and unfortunately is still the main reason that entries are rejected. Statistically more than 50% of entries will be rejected for poor register (sometimes as high as 70%!). So please, please make sure that the image is in register either from colour to colour or from print to embossing to hot or cold foiling and eventually to the die cutting pattern.

An important factor for judges to take into account relates to the printing/finishing processes used. They will be able to differentiate between good printing technique be it flexo, offset litho, letterpress, silk screen or gravure. Here they will be looking at several technical issues including: is the ink coverage good, are the vignettes smooth and progressive, are the keylines too thick for the particular design, have the two adjacent colours been chosen to compliment each other or clash where they overlap etc. depending on the process and the substrate the fineness of the lines, the size of the typeface and the fineness of the halftone screens used. Again depending on the process in flexo has the right anilox ruling been used. With screen has the right mesh size been chosen.

The judges will be aware of the main faults encountered in each of the techniques and processes used and will be able to decide if the fault is significant or can be accepted as part of the process.

An important consideration when judging any label are the ancillary processes:

- hot or cold foiling: are the edges clean and neat?
- embossing: is it in register with the printed image, is the relief well defined?
- die-cutting: has it only penetrated the facstock or has it cut into the liner (making stripping very difficult), are the cut edges clean and not burred over?

An essential part of the judging process is to consider the difficulty of the production process. How wide is the press, how fast was the job run, what type of substrate was used film (thin or thick) or paper. The ink regime being used: water-based, solvent, UV or EB and the drying or curing method used.

Design plays a very important part in the overall assessment of the label. What does the design say about the product branding. Is it suitable for the product it is referring to, e.g. cosmetic labels need to be delicate and appeal to the target consumer. Wine labels should evoke luxury. Industrial labels need to be resistant to abrasion, oils and solvents etc. Does gloss or matt varnishing add to the final result.

This has of necessity been a very brief summary of the procedures which judges will go through when serving on a judging panel. They might do this following a written specification or subconsciously go through the check list in their minds. In my experience it is very difficult to lay down a hard and fast set of quality standards to work to. This is because there are so many considerations to be taken into account as shown in this short article. Also quality levels tend to vary year on year with a definite overall upwards trend in quality.

What differentiates a winning label from an also ran?

1. The label entry should meet the requirements of the competition entry form.
2. It should meet as many of the technical criteria as possible.
3. The design should be suitable for the end-use and be entered in the correct category.
4. Ensure that as much background information has been submitted as possible to help the judges in their deliberations. A photograph of the label on a product (or even better an actual sample of the label on the product) is a great help. This can often sway the judge's opinion when the label can be seen in real life situation.

By following the advice in this article a label will be well on the way towards winning an award. The same basic principles can be applied to packaging printing except the degree of detail expected will alter depending on the size of the final package.

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