

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Viewpoint

Think Strategically About Prize Hosting

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VIEWPOINT

INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

Think Strategically About Prize Hosting

Social media has made it easy for organizations to launch competitions, but too few consider how such efforts best align with their goals.

BY CHARLIE BROWN & ROBERT Q. BENEDICT

For many in the social sector, hosting a prize has become practically compulsory. But prizes have also proved divisive, sparking debates about their intended use, the value they provide, and the costs they incur. With so many conflicting perspectives, are there any guidelines to help decide whether a prize is worth pursuing?

We have spent more than a decade working with foundations, corporations, government agencies, and NGOs to design and host prizes; we've also observed dozens more competitions hosted by others and made our fair share of missteps along the way. The motivations behind prizes vary but generally cluster into one of two groups: *awareness*, an aim to raise the profile of an organization or issue area to generate momentum; and *disruption*, which incentivizes innovation, surfaces new solutions, or fundamentally changes an entrenched system.

Some organizations already have a solution in mind and use a prize to find the best partners for implementing it—more like an open request for proposals (open RFP) than an innovation search. We would categorize this sort of effort under the awareness rubric. Another large share of prizes, also overtly about awareness, are essentially marketing efforts, and lay the groundwork for future brand positioning and programmatic grants and activities. By contrast, disruption prizes seek the attention of highly focused experts to address a long-standing, difficult problem by drawing innovative solutions from the fringes of the field.

These motivations are legitimate and meaningful. But nearly all prizes use the language of innovation and disruption in their

communications, to spark excitement and lend weight to the challenge being posed. This tendency can create potential problems by treating disparate goals—awareness versus disruption or even innovation—as equivalent and can lead organizations to use a counterproductive strategy for their needs. An awareness campaign that is marketed as an innovation prize, for example, risks alienating participants, who often invest enormous effort with the expectation of seeing their ideas, or those of a worthy competitor, implemented in a significant way.

Matching a host's goal with the right kind of prize strategy is perhaps the most important, most ignored task that prize hosts face. A mismatch of intention and strategy can result in not only lackluster results but, more important, damaged trust with entrants and weakened credibility for the host.

THE NEW EASE OF COMPETITIONS

In the early 2000s, prizes were a high-cost, high-effort endeavor. Major competitions were logistical nightmares, often requiring staff to identify and recruit entrants, who then needed one-on-one support to navigate a complex application process, and, in the case of global challenges, all of this occurred in multiple languages. This high burden on hosts made prizes relatively rare, mostly limiting use to intractable problems that the host organization was at a loss to solve on its own.

It was social media, more than anything else, that changed this situation. By 2010, with Facebook open in millions of browsers and smartphones, the cost of gathering a critical mass of like-minded supporters for almost any cause had fallen to nearly zero. In limited cases, social media groups could even replace certain prize efforts, if the main goal was to motivate and appeal rather than develop solutions.

This was the environment in which we founded Context Partners, a consultancy focused on engaging a brand or cause's most important supporters. The logistics of prize design were still largely bespoke at this point: Using digital platforms for prizes required sophisticated coding expertise and fluency in user-experience and communications

design. But the sourcing of entrants had been dramatically simplified.

The second boon to prize administration came around 2013, when the tech industry brought high-quality, ready-made software solutions to prize design. Prize-hosting services such as Common Pool and data-science platforms such as Kaggle have dramatically streamlined the technical setup of prize design, communication, and hosting, while still enabling a certain amount of customization.

For many aspiring prize hosts, these tools represent



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a radical leap forward. For example, say your organization wants to host a prize that raises awareness or attracts donors, already has access to your target participants, and has the internal staff to recruit and evaluate several hundred entries. Then a prize may well be achievable with little to no outside help. Modern digital services have taken what was once a highly customized \$500,000 task and turned it into one that costs a tenth of the price and can be run with just two or three part-time staff. Within the right context, such competitions aimed at raising awareness or finding collaborators can offer excellent value, delivering more visibility than a traditional marketing campaign at similar levels of investment.

But the ease with which prize competitions can be produced and the resulting increase in popularity have generated a perverse incentive: Too many organizations jump at the opportunity to host a prize without thinking carefully through the expectations that extend beyond the award. Since many prizes are billed as seeking “world changing ideas” but are resourced as one-time campaigns, there is a significant misalignment of needs and offers between entrants and hosts about the value of participating in the prize.

FOUR RULES FOR HOSTING PRIZES

With some intentional planning before setting out, however, hosts can embrace the full value of a prize at any level of customization. Four rules specifically come to mind.

First, *clearly define what problem you think needs solving or what issue requires more attention*. Ready-made prize-hosting tools excel in situations where the problem to be solved is very clearly defined. Go to Kaggle's website and review the list of recent competitions, and you'll see challenges such as “improve lung cancer detection,” “help satellites differentiate between ships and icebergs,” and “predict hourly rainfall from polarimetric weather data”—problems so concrete, they could be used to direct a project team. And Kaggle already has an active community of statisticians and data scientists ready to enter contests of this type. But if your area

of concern is more general or needs further refinement (such as “rethink the world's cities” or “improve education in Africa”), or if you don't already have a community of potential entrants, our experience suggests that it will take plenty of community management on your part to elicit useful entries.

Second, *listen before you launch*. Listening is a critical yet often-overlooked step, because it's tempting to go directly into setting up your prize mechanics. What you learn from potential entrants can reveal new needs about which you were unaware, mechanisms to fuel participation, and pitfalls of those who've tried similar efforts before you.

For example, the Knight Foundation sought a prize to tap into the unrealized potential of black men as catalysts for positive community engagement. Through in-person conversations with informal leaders in Detroit and Philadelphia, the Foundation learned that their target entrants faced enough high-stakes competitive dynamics in their day-to-day lives. Instead of more challenges, they wanted a greater sense of connectedness to share the innovative work they were already doing. Knight then pivoted from a prize awarding “the best” to a peer-nomination prize grounded in storytelling. The new prize initiative became so successful that it eventually transformed into its own membership organization—the BMe Community—a network of community-builders focused on empowering people by sharing and inspiring positive contributions to society.

Third, *play to your strengths, or be an enthusiastic newbie*. A prize in a particular sector will gain the attention of influencers if it addresses the needs of the field, and the host often engenders trust as the convener, even in the absence of a track record. For example, The Roddenberry Foundation, established by the son of Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry, sets as its mission “To Boldly Go,” which provides an optimistic, inclusive, but nebulous mind-set rather than a particular problem statement. The Roddenberry Prize, launched in 2016 on the 50th anniversary of the television show, was still able to attract exceptional entries for its wide

call for “game-changing, innovative solutions” and raise awareness beyond its base of *Star Trek* fans, by sharing their enthusiasm with tech incubators and academic institutions receptive to its ambitious mission. Such efforts helped boost the Foundation's profile and effectiveness, and led to it being named one of *Fast Company*'s “Most Innovative” organizations.

Fourth, *get value after the awards are doled out*. If an organization's goal depends on creating a network of long-term relationships—which nearly all do—a ready-made prize approach unto itself is not likely to advance that aim. Digital services can help you target online communities, create a website, publicize your prize, and manage entries, but they can't grow and maintain the human connections that are needed for lasting impact. In our opinion, the most valuable outcome of the Indonesian Peat Prize—an innovation prize rewarding improvements in resource-mapping technology—wasn't a particular technology innovation, but the creation of a robust network of researchers, technologists, NGOs, and government agencies who continue to collaborate on solving Indonesia's natural resource problems.

Similarly, the Rockefeller Foundation's “100 Resilient Cities” prize—a multiyear, global prize to gather the world's leaders in urban resilience and centralize best practices—was less about seeking specific ideas than finding cross-sector partners to build long-term urban resilience, forming a community of practice that includes more than 14,500 people, a network well beyond the 100 initial winners.

If your mission needs hearts and hands—not just eyeballs—you need to engage entrants as long-term collaborators. This requirement affects everything from the name of the prize, to the kinds of events used to announce the contest or name the winners, to the level of personal engagement with all entrants after the prize is awarded. Realize that you are building a community, not just hosting a prize; no stand-alone software has ever proved more adept at this than a living, breathing human. ■