Sustainable Momentum Toolkit

🛠️ Power of Praise: Leverage Recognition for Downtown Engagement

Session Speaker: Andrea Tantillo, Principal Communication Coordinator, Houston-Galveston Area Council

📌 Core Premise: The "Halo Effect"

Traditional ad buys compete with **4,000 to 10,000 daily commercial messages** and are often tuned out by local residents and merchants. **Third-party validation** through awards creates an emotional connection, turning local business owners from passive tenants into active, unpaid brand ambassadors. This goodwill may extend to your downtown from the brand ambassadors' network too.

🗓️ Strategic Launch Roadmap: Year 1 vs. Year 2 Pivot

Avoid the bottleneck of building a complex application system in your first year. Phase your rollout to build early prestige and momentum:

Phase	Launch Model	Core Execution	Strategic Benefit
Year 1	**Pioneer / Founding Awards**	Direct committee selection of 3–5 flagship downtown projects or long-standing anchors. No open application process.	Establishes the visual standard and demonstrates to the community *what* winning looks like.
Year 2	**Open Public Competition**	Launch open public nominations using Year 1 winners in marketing: "*Who will join last year's champions?*"	Scales participation, builds local competition, and expands district buy-in.

📣 Year 2 Application Outreach & Submission Benchmarks

- **The "Tap on the Shoulder" Strategy:** Do not rely on passive web posts. Directly contact 10–15 target businesses or property owners with personal invitations to apply.
- **Realistic Year 1 Benchmarks:** Aim for **2 to 3 quality entries per category**. A total of **8 to 12 total entries** across 3–4 categories is a successful baseline for a local program.

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📅 Awards Program Blueprint: 10 Steps to Success

Scalable, customizable 10-step process for planning, implementing, and improving a downtown awards program.

Step	Key Action	Best Practice / Pro Tip
1. Define Clear Goals & Benchmarks	Establish award categories, recognition methods, and success metrics aligned with community goals.	Focus on quality over volume; obtaining 8–12 strong entries across 4 categories in Year 1 is a major success.
2. Form a Committee	Recruit staff, board members, partners, and volunteers to share the workload and refine goals.	Assign members specific tasks (e.g., brainstorming categories) while ensuring overall goals stay aligned with town priorities.
3. Determine Your Budget	Map out expenses for promotion, trophies, and the event, securing external support where needed.	Piggyback the event onto existing meetings to save money and look beyond traditional sponsors to corporate community-investment programs.
4. Design Your Application	Choose the application format (online vs. paper), set category questions, and outline timeline deadlines.	Keep forms concise and easy to score (e.g., ~10-15 questions per category) and adapt strong elements from existing award models.
5. Recruit Judges	Assemble an odd-numbered panel (5–7 people) representing varied downtown and preservation interests.	Start with committee members or peer directors in Year 1, transitioning to include past winners later; set explicit scoring expectations up front.
6. Solicit Entries	Launch a multi-channel outreach effort across web, email, social media, print, and news releases.	Direct-mail or personally invite top potential candidates, and hand out flyers at every local workshop or event.
7. Accept & Manage Submissions	Collect applications, automate or send quick confirmation receipts, and enforce submission deadlines.	Do not extend deadlines for low turnouts (it disadvantages punctual applicants)—only extend for major, legitimate emergencies.
8. Score & Select Winners	Distribute submissions to judges with clear instructions and an objective, standardized scoring system.	Use a simple rubric (e.g., a 0–5 scale per question), allow recusals for conflicts of interest, and circulate final averages for judge consensus.
9. Elevate & Celebrate	Host a dedicated recognition event and grant visible accolades (certificates, window clings, or digital badges).	Transition from a piggybacked board meeting to a standalone event as attendance grows to create a bigger community impact.
10. Amplify & Repeat	Provide winners with a turnkey press kit (draft releases, social graphics) and evaluate the process for next year.	Make it effortless for winners to cross-promote their achievement and allow 6 to 8 months of lead time to execute the next cycle.

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📋 Worksheet 1: The Recognition Audit

Use this exercise to map out your community's unsung champions and identify high-value marketing networks:

1. Identify ONE business, developer, or volunteer who invested private capital, updated a facade, or hosted a major downtown initiative in the past 12 months without official city recognition:

Target Name / Project: _____

2. Network Mapping: If you publicly honored them next month, whose attention would you grab through their personal, professional, and social networks?

Key Networks (e.g., suppliers, customer email lists, industry boards, social followers):

_____

_____

📋 Worksheet 2: Program & Category Design Lab

Draft two initial award categories that align directly with your city's current master plan or economic goals:

CATEGORY 1:

_____

Goal (e.g., Facade Refresh, Historic Preservation, Night-time Economy): _____

Target Applicant Profile: _____

CATEGORY 2:

_____

Goal (e.g., Placemaking Champion, Downtown Anchor, Adaptive Reuse): _____

Target Applicant Profile: _____

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🏆 Recognition Strategy: Winners vs. Certificates

Protect award exclusivity while maintaining broad merchant inclusion:

- **Category Winners (Top Scorers):** Receive physical awards (custom glass or wooden plaques), dedicated press releases, Mayor/Council spotlights, and storefront window decals.
- **Honorable Mentions:** Framed certificates for runner-up entries, scoring next below the top scorers in each category or within 5% of the top scorers in each category if scores are close.
- **All Applicants (Inclusive Base):** Receive an official **"Downtown Contributor" Certificate of Recognition** or window decal. *Never let an applicant walk away empty-handed.*

💡 4 Tips for Sustainable Year-Over-Year Momentum

1. **Keep Initial Categories Lean:** Limit your program to **3 to 5 categories** in your first open cycle.
2. **Piggyback on Existing Events:** Present awards during an established Mayor's State of the City, Annual Chamber Dinner, or downtown festival rather than hosting a standalone gala.
3. **Convert Winners to Judges:** Invite last year's top winners to serve on the next year's judging panel.
4. **Review and Adjust:** Check in with staff, committee members, and judges – what when well, what may need **to change for the next one**.

📬 Contact & Resource Sharing

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