



## Are the Plain English Awards making a difference?

### Results from the May 2015 survey

This year marks the 10th annual Plain English Awards. That's 10 years of inspiring organisations throughout New Zealand, and the individuals in these organisations, to achieve excellence in plain English writing.

As organisers of the Plain English Awards, the WriteMark Trust follows the progress of entrants and sponsors with a keen eye — we're always eager to hear of continued post-award success. One of the ways we do this is by surveying past winners, finalists, and sponsors of the Awards. It's our way of checking that the Awards continue to have an impact on the New Zealand public and the organisations that serve them.

In the most recent survey we asked people who had participated in the 2014 and earlier Awards:

- What motivated you to enter the Awards?
- What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to New Zealand organisations?
- What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to the New Zealand public?
- Do you have any other comments and suggestions?
- When we asked you to be a sponsor, what motivated you to say yes?
- What are the benefits of sponsoring the Awards to your organisation?

Our thanks to all those who completed the survey. We were heartened by the feedback we received and the helpful suggestions for future Awards.

This brief report summarises the feedback and includes the actual survey responses at the end.

### **A premier industry benchmark that reflects high standards and benefits everyone**

The overwhelming message from the feedback we received in our most recent survey was 'YES' — the Awards are clearly continuing to make a difference to New Zealand organisations and to the public.

As one respondent said, 'The Awards are the premier industry benchmark for high standards and achievement in plain English. Success in the Awards shows we're not only doing it [plain English], but doing it well and our expertise is being recognised.'

Another reported: 'The Awards give us a standard of plain English excellence to aim for.'

Speaking of the impact on the public, another said, 'The New Zealand public benefit from organisations that improve the quality of their writing and information design because it makes it easier for people to access information. The Awards also act as a public watchdog, highlighting



examples of poor writing that are barriers to good communication and people achieving what they want to do.'

### **Good for your brand and reputation**

Many responses to the survey highlighted the positive impact on an organisation's brand through association with the Awards. Not only was entering the Awards 'good PR', but it was also a 'wake-up call for organisations to improve their performance'.

'We believe [the Awards] linked strongly to our brand values of providing excellent service to our customers, which includes them being able to clearly understand the materials we provide them with,' noted one respondent.

People reported seeing great value in the exposure their organisations had through the Awards. 'Organisations are proud to win in the Plain English Awards, because the Awards show that staff are producing high-quality work and money is being well spent.'

Another respondent said: 'Our clients/stakeholders have been able to see our name "in lights" against some other well-known major NZ organisations. This can't help but reinforce what we offer in the way of professional training and assessment materials tailored to meet the needs of different audiences with different learning needs. It's also good for us to be seen as a "leading light" by other ITOs in this competitive world!'

A further impression that emerged from the survey was that providing information in plain English becomes a matter of respect for colleagues and clients. 'Information has no value until it is used. When our information is in plain English, it makes it easier for our customers to find, understand, and use it.'

### **Recognition for hard work**

Recognition is the greatest of motivators. The Plain English Awards bring organisations (and individuals) from vastly different backgrounds out into the spotlight.

Several people reported in the survey that they appreciated the opportunity our Awards offered for recognition of their plain English skills — and of the time and passion involved in reaching plain English goals. They also saw that winning in the Awards led to greater engagement among staff and with external contacts.

'External recognition of our work in this area is of key importance to getting continued support from management and staff,' wrote one respondent. 'It's also good for us in the marketplace.'

Another wrote: 'It was great media exposure both in Taranaki and nationally. It was also nice to get some recognition that our efforts to use plain English are paying off.'

### **Plain English for the greater good**

When we asked past winners, finalists, and sponsors what benefits they believed the Awards brought to the general public, we were overwhelmed with positive responses.



'It brings about change in the way government departments and corporates deal with people — that is a tangible benefit for the whole country,' said one respondent.

Those who'd been involved with the Awards in the past appeared to have a great appreciation for the rights of the New Zealand public. They wrote of the public's right to understand any and all documents they receive from both private and government organisations.

'When more organisations use plain English, it is much easier to engage with the public. There is a public idea that many organisations are hard to work with, and waste a lot of their time. Plain English can help make interactions with the public quicker and more engaging.'

The following response offers the same sentiment of responsibility to the public: '[The Awards provide] an opportunity to recognise the organisations that are working hard to make their information easy to understand for the general public. They set the bar on what organisations should be doing when it comes to providing information to the public and customers.'

#### **Some suggestions for future Awards**

One respondent asked for better communication about who the winners and finalists were and another suggested a change to the submission process for the web category. There was also a request for more entry categories.

We're working on these!

#### **Survey responses**

Read the full set of responses on the following pages.



## Reponses from survey (June 2015)

### What motivated you to enter the Awards?

We asked entrants what prompted them to enter their own work or that of their organisation into the Plain English Awards.

- Recognition for a great deal of time and care taken to improve an important resource.
- To showcase the work we have done to ensure our information is written in plain English.
- The feedback we had received from our target audience about the improvement to our site area.
- To make my business unit more aware of the benefits of plain English, and to recognise all the hours I put into giving one of our documents a plain English makeover.
- To gain recognition, measure improvements, and get constructive feedback.
- Competition with colleagues! Also motivation to do the best work I can.
- One of our professional development trainers.
- A desire to lift our performance in the marketplace. An area where we were perceived as being 'weak' was around the quality of our documentation/written communications. The Awards served as a goal to motivate staff to do better and underpinned the development of our initial internal plain English campaign.
- Previous involvement and a desire to bring better practices to the new organisation I'm working for.
- We work in a complicated topic and the award was a great fit to highlight our efforts at making it as simple as possible for consumers to understand.
- I entered to nominate my colleague for the Awards. She's our plain English champion. The Awards are well-recognised in our organisation and among our peers, so it seemed a good way to acknowledge her work and show what she's been doing quietly, but tenaciously, behind the scenes.
- Our organisation is dedicated to improving the financial literacy of New Zealanders. We have spent a significant amount of time and effort on working on our internal culture to ensure everyone across the entire organisation thinks about our customers first and communicates in a simple and effective way. Last year was the first year we entered these Awards, because we felt we were ready.



- I wanted to keep plain English alive — if we do well at the Awards, it reminds people in our organisation that plain English is important and here to stay!
- We didn't actually enter them, our business was nominated for the People's Choice which was really exciting.
- I have always thought the Awards are a great thing and admire people who have won in the past. Also wanted to prove that clear and correct English does matter and helps people use the information we put out (training materials).
- Encouraged by a colleague. It was good for team morale for several of us to enter together, and on an individual level it was a good opportunity to revisit pages I'd written in the past year and hone them with a focus on plain language.
- We believe it linked strongly to our brand values of providing excellent service to our customers, which includes them being able to clearly understand the materials we provide them with.
- To see how our new policies measured up in plain English terms.
- To get feedback on my writing from plain English experts. And for self-improvement.

### **What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to New Zealand organisations?**

Over the last 10 years, we've heard time and again about the benefits to individuals and organisations who've been part of the Awards. Here are some of those benefits, straight from the people who've experienced them.

- Improved engagement from customers due to them actually being able to understand documents more easily.
- The Awards provide exposure for an organisation. Organisations are proud to win in the Plain English Awards because the Awards show that staff are producing high-quality work and money is being well spent. Executive staff are more willing to develop an area that's displaying excellence. Staff have an opportunity to reflect on their work in great detail when preparing their entries. They can use this reflection to inform their strategic plans and processes.
- The feedback provided and the reasoning behind it helps see things from a different perspective that you don't necessarily see for yourself when you work in your world.
- It's nice to see that other organisations are picking up plain English, and hearing success stories helps others know the benefits. When more organisations use plain English, their outputs/communication/etc. is much easier to read and understand, which everyone can appreciate.
- The Awards shine a spotlight on the importance of clear writing. They encourage organisations to tell their success stories — and cautionary tales!



- Awareness of the benefits of Plain English for users, acknowledgement that Plain English benefits organisations and is not ‘dumbing down’.
- Recognition of company effort in writing in plain English.
- External recognition of our work in this area is of key importance to getting continued support from management and staff. It’s also good for us in the marketplace.
- It raises awareness within the organisation of plain English and makes people want to try harder.
- Good PR.
- The Awards highlight the importance of plain English across the public sector and we can spread the good word within our own organisation by pointing to our involvement (and success) in the Awards.
- The Awards are the premier industry benchmark for high standards and achievement in plain English. Success in the Awards shows we’re not only doing it, but doing it well and our expertise is being recognised.
- We want to motivate everyone in our organisation to write well and write plainly.
- 1) Motivates the team 2) Recognises achievements 3) Supports industry efforts and encourages others to follow suit 4) Ensures we don't stop there and continue to improve in this area.
- The Awards give us a standard of plain English excellence to aim for.
- They help us know if we’re on the right track. Entering the Awards also reinforces our resolve to use plain English.
- When we see the calibre of the other organisations and businesses who enter, we feel we are in great company!
- It was great media exposure both in Taranaki and nationally. It was also nice to get some recognition that our efforts to use plain English are paying off.
- My award was really celebrated here and has done a lot to boost everyone’s faith in ourselves as an organisation that really helps people achieve their career aspirations. We were also able to use the media release in our stakeholder newsletters to help reinforce our reputation for being a professional organisation focusing on self-improvement.
- Good for team morale, public acknowledgement for our team and, to a lesser extent, some publicity for our company too.
- External recognition of the work we do.



- Setting an example with our externally facing documents to get people thinking about clear writing and lead change from within.
- Company exposure, feedback on how we can improve our writing, positive comments on how well we are doing now.

### **What benefits do you believe the Awards bring to the New Zealand public?**

One of the main aims of the Plain English Awards is to raise public awareness of the need for, and benefits of, plain English. So we asked the survey group what benefits they believe plain English has brought to the general public.

- Time back, reduced effort, easier to make decisions.
- The New Zealand public benefit from organisations that improve the quality of their writing and information design because it makes it easier for people to access information. The Awards also act as a public watchdog, highlighting examples of poor writing that are barriers to good communication and people achieving what they want to do.
- Helps make difficult information easy for non-specialists to understand by providing feedback on what can be further improved in the writing and layout of the website.
- When more organisations use plain English, it is much easier to engage with the public. There is a public idea that many organisations are hard to work with, and waste a lot of their time. Plain English can help make interactions with the public quicker and more engaging.
- The Awards improve the standard of public documents.
- Increased quality of documentation for users.
- Can be a wake-up call for organisations to improve their performance.
- Rewards good performance.
- The people I work with are generally able to discern difficult documents, but that doesn't mean they should have to. We work to help others who are less able to help themselves.
- The Awards act as a reminder of the importance of clear communication.
- Improve the quality of public communications.
- If it brings about change in the way govt departments and corporates deal with people, that is a tangible benefit for the whole country.



- They raise the profile of clear communication.
- Highlighting the importance of plain language is of great benefit to New Zealand — it's a no-brainer!
- Greater understanding of what organisations do, what they want from us etc. Hopefully less ambiguous language means fewer snafus.
- Reassurance for consumers that this company understands their topic really well.
- Since our information is targeted at the New Zealand public, we want to make it easy for our customers to know what to do and how to do it right. We want to save them time and make it easy for them to comply with our requirements. Putting our information into plain English goes a long way to achieving this.
- 1) It supports transparency goals 2) Improves financial and non-financial literacy 3) Helps the public evaluate different organisations.
- The Awards call attention to plain English. When people understand the benefits of plain English, they realise they can demand it from organisations and businesses they deal with in their work and lives.
- It helps the NZ public because businesses strive to use plain English in their written communications, which means the NZ public have a better understanding of goods and services they are buying.
- Just raising the profile of a range of organisations that believe in the value of plain English in helping their clients/audience to access the information they need. It's great to be able to show that many people are working in the public and private sectors to ensure the information gets to where it needs to go and can actually be used!
- An opportunity to be exposed to the idea of plain language, if you're not already aware of it (through publicity around the Awards, and knowing people who've entered). An opportunity to vote on the 'Brainstrain' award. The good results from the turnaround entries.
- Gives an opportunity to recognise the organisations that are working hard to make their information easy to understand for the general public. They set the bar on what organisations should be doing when it comes to providing information to the public and customers.
- Rewarding communication that the general population can understand levels the playing field and promotes fairness in accessibility to business and government.
- Company exposure — we know which organisations care about communicating in plain English, and those that don't.





- A focus on clear, concise communications is of great benefit (we hope!) to our clients in particular. Particularly as we are often communicating complex ideas to people who do not necessarily have the same level of expertise.
- Hopefully they are starting to see better communication from us! I am constantly nagging on about making it easier for our stakeholders to understand us.
- Reassurance and trust that we know what we are doing.
- Our team produces externally focused material. For us, the Awards show the public, our intended audience, that the public sector is trying hard to make its information clear and easy to understand by applying plain English standards.
- 1) Creates better lives for our customers 2) Engages them 3) Makes them feel more confident 4) Ensures they can make sound decisions.
- Information has no value until it is used. When our information is in plain English, it makes it easier for our customers to find, understand, and use it.
- Feedback from the judges helps us improve our writing and serve our customers even better.
- It gives our clients comfort that we explain everything clearly without using confusing legal jargon.
- Our clients/stakeholders have been able to see our name 'in lights' against some other well-known major NZ organisations. This can't help but reinforce what we offer in the way of professional training and assessment materials tailored to meet the needs of different audiences with different learning needs. It's also good for us to be seen as a 'leading light' by other ITOs in this competitive world!
- It focuses our attention on making our online user guide clearer and easier for customers to use.
- Shows we are committed to providing the public with information in ways that are clear and easy to understand.
- Trust from our clients that their policies are straightforward and nothing is hidden in jargon or fine print.
- Achieving Awards of Distinction means we are communicating clearly to our customers. We blog about the Awards and receive feedback from our customers that they appreciate how we communicate.



### **Do you have any other comments or suggestions?**

As we've said, we're always keen for feedback on what worked well in the Awards and what we could do better. After all, the Plain English Awards are all about striving for excellence and that means us too.

- Keep going!
- No.
- No — the feedback we received after making the shortlist was very helpful and we have made further changes to our site area since receiving this. After we submitted two applications to the Plain English Awards last year we heard nothing regarding who the finalists were, or who had won each category. Better communication I think is needed.
- Think hard about what further benefits can be identified for sponsors.
- The Awards ceremony last year (2014) was well-managed. As an event, it was imaginative & engaging.
- Keep on making the Awards even bigger and brighter.
- I can only see these Awards becoming more and more popular.
- I enjoyed the word games the MC got the audience to play at the ceremony — I thought this was a great way to create an enjoyable atmosphere.
- Just keep them going!! It would be good to have a few more categories — sometimes it's hard to fit something you're proud of into the categories available, eg what does 'technical' mean in terms of 'technical communicator'?
- It would be easier to enter web pages if we could send links rather than using Word (we don't usually use Word at our work — in fact, you practically have to beg to get a Word licence these days!)

### **When we asked you to be a sponsor, what motivated you to say yes?**

We're always exceedingly grateful to the organisations and foundations that sponsor the Plain English Awards. We see sponsorship as an excellent mutually-beneficial opportunity to support the efforts of those advocating and working towards clear communication.

- This sponsorship was part of the portfolio before I joined the organisation. We are interested in supporting financial literacy, good governance and transparency.
- From an end user perspective, it's important people receive information in language they can understand. Any organisations that promote that should be supported.



- BusinessNZ was happy to provide support in the initial start-up phase of the Awards because of the value to business generally of clear communication.

### **What are the benefits of sponsoring the Awards to your organisation?**

Sponsorship should by nature be of mutual benefit. We're always keen to hear of these benefits, or how sponsorship opportunities with the Awards could be improved.

- It's good for us to be associated with such a worthy cause.
- It conveyed to our membership our belief in the importance of clear communication.
- There are limited benefits to us specifically (but it is not an expensive sponsorship).