

# O-1 VISA QUICK-START GUIDE: 7 STEPS YOU CAN TAKE RIGHT NOW TO JUMPSTART YOUR AMERICAN DREAM

## ACTION ITEM #5. ENTER SOME CONTESTS: "PRIZES AND AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE FIELD."



On to Action Item #5! We're really making some progress here on getting your O-1 evidence into shape to be a winnable petition. #5 is, enter some contests. Get some awards. Win some prizes. Score some honors.

Entering competitions might be a little easier for the introverts than pitching the press, but it's still going to take some work. As they say, you have to enter to win. This is your second most important "acclaim" category (after media coverage), so it would be smart to spend some time and attention on it.

### REVERSE-ENGINEERING THE "PRIZES AND AWARDS" CATEGORY.

Remember how, with our "original contributions" category, we reverse-engineered the evidence collection process, and started with very specific factual impacts we could prove in the industry as a whole?

And with our media coverage, we did the same thing? We deliberately picked the publications that would yield nice big gold nuggets, and worked backward from those?

We'll be doing the same thing here with the prizes and awards. We're going to cherry-pick the contests you enter, to make sure you can PROVE the very specific O-1 elements that USCIS wants to see.

We're going out prospecting for a small pile of gold nuggets that's totally optimized for your O-1 petition. There are thousands of great contests out there, so let's find the most O-1-friendly ones.

There are 3 things we'll be looking for, in choosing the contests that you enter. To score 3 or 4 "award" nuggets, let's look for 20 or 30 high-quality competitions to enter, then narrow them down.

### ELEMENT #1: INDIVIDUAL RECEIPT OF THE AWARD.

First, we'll be seeking out competitions that hand out individual awards, not just big-group awards. USCIS wants to see a nice color photo of a trophy or certificate with your name on it. They want to see a photo of the judges physically handing you the award. They want to see the name of the award, the date, the place, and the name of the presenting organization.

Here's what doesn't work that well for O-1 purposes: A photo of you in a huge, anonymous group award, like a chorus or a sports team. They really want to see a shiny thing with YOUR name on it.

This is tricky for founders and entrepreneurs, because startups are usually a team effort. Most pitch competitions require teams. Many of them don't even accept entries from solo entrepreneurs. In this situation, it pays to seek out competitions that recognize the winning teams, and then give individual prizes to the team members BY NAME as well.

These can be hard to find. Next best would be some nice photos showing your COMPANY winning the award, with your company's name on the shiny thing, and you receiving the award with 2 or 3 co-founders. That's still pretty good for O-1 purposes.

You don't have to win first place. Silver and bronze definitely count.

Also, not all awards have trophies. That's OK, as long as there's evidence of you winning something or being honored. Being selected to give a TED Talk is a great example of this.

By the way, here are some things that might have your name on them, but don't count as O-1 prizes or awards: Nominations without wins. Letters of appreciation. Employee-of-the-month awards. Student-level prizes. Popularity contests. Online polls. YouTube views.

## **ELEMENT #2: FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE FIELD OF ENDEAVOR.**

We're also looking for contests that specifically state that they require "excellence" in order to win. We're looking for situations where the presenting organization spells out really explicitly, in the entry criteria, how they judge the competition, what attributes they're looking for, and how they make their selections.

Most high-quality competitions do this. You'll be submitting the contest rules as evidence in your case, so we need to verify that their requirements spell out in detail the kind of "excellence" that they're seeking.

It would also be super helpful to track down some exhibits that show statistics about this award. USCIS loves to see facts about the size of the applicant pool, the credentials required of entrants, the number of awardees, the prestige of the selectors, and the lists of winners in prior years.

Statistics showing hierarchies, percentages, and winnowing are very helpful to the adjudicator. For example, 1% of applicants win. Or 3 winners are chosen from a pool of 1,000. Or the winner must enter first a local, then a regional, then a statewide, then a national, then an international competition.

Obviously "excellence in the field" means your work, not your hobbies. Also, "excellence" means achievement. Awards for hard work, luck, dedication, future potential, appreciation, longevity, or volunteering for an event or group don't count for O-1 purposes.

## **ELEMENT #3: NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF AWARD.**

Finally, you'll want to enter contests at national or international levels of competition. USCIS defines this as "awareness of the accolade in the eyes of the field nationally or internationally." Basically this means showing that your entire industry thinks this is a really cool thing to win. You're looking for something on the level of Tech All Stars in Europe, the SXSW Awards, the Imagine Cup, and international startup competitions with entrants from all over the world.

A good, high-quality award will generate some buzz beyond its own locale or region. It will be well-publicized and prestigious. The awards ceremony will be well-attended. Some celebrities will be there. For every winner, there will be a pool of disappointed non-winners. If your award has these features, it's got a good chance of O-1 success.

By far the best evidence to show an award's national or international recognition is big-name press coverage, either in popular media or in professional publications for your field. The strongest stories would be about you, your accomplishments, and your winning of the award.

Next best would be media coverage of the awards ceremony generally, with some background about its prestige and selectiveness, plus a list of award winners in various categories. Additional evidence might include general stories about the award, its criteria for selection, its exclusiveness, and the like.

Other documentation might include annual "best-of" lists of award winners, a comparison of the award to lesser regional or local awards, or an entry in an almanac or yearbook.

## **A LITTLE-KNOWN WINNER IN THIS CATEGORY: AWARDS OF VENTURE CAPITAL FUNDING AND GRANTS.**

Here's an amazing O-1 "dark horse" that really works to the advantage of founders and entrepreneurs. Internal USCIS documents show that adjudicators are specifically trained to look for venture capital funding and grants as evidence of "prizes and awards." How cool is that?

The 3 elements of proof are the same. Obviously the win is for your company, not for you individually, and that seems to be OK in this situation. You'll still need to gather proof of "excellence": Your investors' selection process, how competitive it is, and what percentage of applicants win funding.

You'll also need some exhibits showing the national and international prestige of your investors. Document their industrywide reputation, media coverage about them, their track record of success, and some unicorns – big-name companies where they were early-stage investors.

You can also use this template for acceptance into prestigious international accelerator programs like 500 Startups – document this with the same 3 elements you use for traditional prizes and awards.

OK, Action Item #5: Enter Some Competitions. We're almost done! Make a list of prestigious national and international competitions in your field. Document the criteria they use to decide who wins, and why. Then enter, enter, enter! Have some fun with this, because there's absolutely no downside to it. If you don't win, just move on to the next one. Hopefully you can collect 3 or 4 very nice big gold nuggets to add to your "acclaim" pile.

One last thing – it sounds obvious, but it's easy to forget in the excitement of the moment. When you win, work it! Document the award – AND all the media buzz and accolades that go with it. Collect press clippings, video, online articles, and interviews. Afterward, go back and get a list of all the media outlets that covered the event, and make sure you gather all their coverage. Your 2 most important "acclaim" categories – media coverage and awards – can work together to build a really great O-1 petition.