



NRECA
Spotlight
on **Excellence**
Awards

2026-2027

Call for Entries

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About the Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program

The Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program has recognized outstanding work produced annually by electric cooperative communications, marketing and member services professionals across the network for more than 39 years. The award categories reflect the wide variety of communications used by today's co-op communicators, and award winners showcase top-tier, industry-leading practices. Their outstanding achievements have lasting impact, demonstrate a high level of professionalism and deliver exceptional results. For more information, visit cooperative.com/spotlight.

Summary of Changes for 2027:

The 2027 Spotlight on Excellence Awards program introduces several updates and enhancements to better reflect the strategic, integrated communications work happening across electric cooperatives today. Key changes include:

- Streamlined categories to reduce complexity and raise the bar for excellence.
- Simplified entry process focused on impact and outcomes.
- More consistent judging through a standardized rubric and expert reviewers.
- Expanded recognition to highlight more high-quality work and share best practices.
- Peer-to-Peer feedback option: Communicators will have the option to submit work for peer feedback from communications leaders outside of the awards competition window.

2027 Award Cycle

Deadlines and Key Dates

Entries Accepted September 14, 2026 through October 26, 2026
Judging November 16, 2026 through February 1, 2027
Edgar F. Chesnutt Award Winner Notified February 22, 2027
Winners Notified Week of March 8, 2027
Winners Announced Week of March 29, 2027

Eligibility

NRECA voting members, including electric cooperatives, public power districts, statewide associations, G&T cooperatives and service members, and wholly-owned subsidiaries in good standing may submit an entry to the Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program. The submission must be original work produced and implemented by co-op employees or under the direction of co-op employees.

Requirements for Spotlight on Excellence Award Entries

- Work submitted must have been implemented from November 25, 2024, through October 26, 2026.
- All entries must have been used to promote the mission of the cooperative organization.
- Consultants, agencies and freelancers are not allowed to submit entries to the awards program directly, nor are they eligible for awards in any category. Work done in conjunction with an agency, freelancer or consultant is acceptable if it meets the following criteria:
 - The cooperative must have regular, ongoing and strategic involvement in the creative, execution and review process of a project.
 - The entry is submitted by someone employed at the cooperative. Entries submitted by an agency, freelancer or consultant will be disqualified without a refund.
- An explanation is given that clearly indicates what tasks or role the cooperative completed and what tasks or role the agency, freelancer or consultant completed specific to each entry. Entries lacking a description of how much work was done by the cooperative versus any agency, freelancer or consultant may have 10 points deducted from the final score, or the entry may be disqualified without a refund.

If you are unsure about your entry's eligibility, please contact the Spotlight on Excellence Administrator at spotlightonexcellence@nreca.coop for clarification.

Reasons for Disqualification

An entry may be disqualified for the following reasons, without a refund:

- Payment was not received.
- The entry was submitted after the deadline.
- The entry does not follow all rules as outlined in this document or is submitted without completing all required information.
- It is revealed that an entrant was not forthright on their entry form.
- The entry was submitted by, or primarily created, implemented and/or evaluated by an agency, freelancer or consultant and not by the cooperative.
- The cooperative did not have regular, ongoing and strategic involvement in the creation, execution and review process of a project.
- The entry does not include proper supporting materials in the format requested and/or the entry includes broken or expired links that are not amended in a timely manner.

Award Categories and Submission Criteria



Excellence in Content & Storytelling

All Written Work and Publications

This award recognizes outstanding written communications that inform, engage and inspire cooperative members, employees or stakeholders. Entries may include news stories, feature stories, columns or blogs, newsletters, magazines, annual or impact reports and special publications of any length.

Judges will evaluate clarity of message, strategic purpose, audience relevance, quality of storytelling and measurable impact. Winning entries will demonstrate strong content that supports the cooperative's mission, strengthens audience relationship and advances organizational goals.

Excellence in Digital & Social Communications

Web, Social Media and Innovative Digital Use

This award honors excellence in digital strategy and execution across web platforms, social media channels and emerging digital tools. Entries may include websites, social media campaigns, digital engagement initiatives or other innovative uses of technology to connect with members and stakeholders.

Judges will consider strategic alignment, creativity, audience targeting, engagement metrics and measurable results. Winning entries will showcase co-ops that are leveraging digital platforms to build trust, increase participation and deliver meaningful impact.

Excellence in Visual & Multimedia

Video, Photography, Design and Advertising

This category celebrates powerful visual storytelling and multimedia execution. Entries may include short- or long-form video, photography, graphic design, branding, advertising campaigns or integrated visual projects.

Judges will evaluate creativity, production quality, visual cohesion, clarity of message and overall effectiveness in supporting strategic objectives. Winning entries will demonstrate compelling visuals that enhance understanding, strengthen brand identity and move audiences to action.

Award Categories and Submission Criteria



Wildcard

The Wildcard category provides flexibility to recognize exceptional work that does not fit neatly into other categories. This may include co-op events, employee and/or member engagement initiatives, crisis communications efforts, emerging platforms or experimental communications strategies.

Judges will focus on originality, effectiveness, strategic intent and impact. The Wildcard award ensures the program remains adaptable and responsive to the evolving work of electric cooperative communicators.

Best Strategic Communications Campaign and Edgar F. Chesnutt Award

Honors an internal or external initiative that features either a short- or long-term, multi-channel communications campaign designed to inform, educate, persuade or promote an action (e.g., public relations campaign, program rollout, etc.) through specific objectives, budget and results. The campaign can include print, digital and physical elements. Entries should be program-specific rather than a department's work plan.

Entrants will need to summarize the Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation steps used for the campaign as specifically as possible within the word limits of the online entry form.

Entry Fees and Payment Information



Early Bird Discount

We are excited to announce an early bird discount for the 2027 awards cycle!

- *What:* Entrants will receive a 20% discount for entries purchased and submitted in the early bird period.
- *When:* Between September 14 and September 25, entrants will be able to purchase and submit early bird entries.
- *How:* Simply follow the same payment link on the [Spotlight webpage](#).

Regular Entry Fee Period and Other Payment Information

The regular entry fee is \$100 for all categories.

Regular Entry Fee Period: September 26 through October 26, 2026.

All payments and entries must be submitted using the online form on the Spotlight on Excellence Awards webpage on [Cooperative.com](#) by the deadline of October 26, 2026. Once payment is received, you will receive a confirmation email with a link to the entry form.

Refund Policy for Entry Changes and Cancellations

Entries, cancellation and changes in payments will be accepted until the deadline date. Cancellations for entries are fully refundable. Unpaid entries will be disqualified. If your entry is disqualified for any reason, you will not receive a refund. Cancellations to the entry and additional entries can be made online.

Visit [cooperative.com](#) > Member Center > My Registrations. Any other changes must be submitted in writing to the Accounts Receivable department at accountsreceivable@nreca.coop.

Questions Regarding Payment

Questions regarding payment should be directed to the Accounts Receivable department at 703.907.6875 or by email at accountsreceivable@nreca.coop.

Please note: The online payment portal and submission platform will accept entries submitted until Monday, October 26, 2026 at 11:59 PM PT. Staff within NRECA's Accounts Receivable department will only be able to assist you until 5 PM ET that day. No extensions will be given. Please plan accordingly.

Submission Information

All entries must be submitted using the online submission platform, Award Force. You will receive a link to Award Force in the confirmation email sent to you after your payment has been received. Please read all instructions carefully and provide all information requested before proceeding with your submission. Note the following:

- Entries, both in-progress or already submitted, can be revised, withdrawn and re-submitted up until the deadline on Monday, October 26, 2026.
- An employee of the cooperative must submit all entries. Agencies, freelancers or consultants are not permitted to pay for or enter submissions.
- All required fields must be completed for a successful submission. If you are missing required information, the Award Force platform will prompt you to complete the required field before proceeding.
- Entered work using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to assist with planning or ideation is permitted; however, the work may not be a complete creation of AI. If AI was used in development of the entered work, the use of such tools must be disclosed.
- If a password is necessary to access the hosting site, it must be included with the URL. Passwords and access must stay active until after the Connect Conference in May 2027.

How to Use Award Force for Your Spotlight Award Entry

- Visit cooperative.com/spotlight.
- Select the "Submit an Entry" button to be taken to the payment portal.
- Submit your payment information.
- Check your email for payment confirmation, which will include the link to the online submission platform.
- Create an account on the Award Force submission platform or log into an account used for a previous submission cycle.
- Select the following information:
 - Chapter: Spotlight on Excellence
 - Category: The same information as entered on the payment portal
 - Classification: As needed
- Complete the required information on all tabs.
- Upload the required attachment materials at the end of your entry.
- Be sure to press the "Save+Next" button at the bottom of your screen to save the information on that page and advance to the next page. You must select the "Save+Next" or "Save+Close" button to save your information before leaving the page. If you do not, your information will be lost and will need to be re-entered.
- Press the "Save+Close" button to save your entry before submitting and to complete it at another time.
- Press the "Submit Entry" button to submit your entry upon completion.

Judging & Scoring Information

Judging Information

The Spotlight on Excellence Awards judges consist of faculty from accredited schools of journalism as well as practicing communications, marketing and graphic design professionals. The judges remain anonymous.

When evaluating the Spotlight on Excellence Awards entries, judges consider the following information:

- Completeness of the entry forms and following instructions.
- Quality of work product and effectiveness of the project in achieving the stated objective(s).
- Entrants' answers to the submission questions:
 - What makes this work strong or innovative?
 - How was this work developed and executed?
 - What results or impact did it achieve?

Scoring

Spotlight on Excellence entries will be evaluated on absolute scores rather than a comparison of entries. Each award category will be scored out of 100 points. All entries that receive an average score of 95 or higher will receive a Spotlight on Excellence Award. Please refer to the judges' rubrics on cooperative.com/spotlight to view the evaluation criteria for each category.

The judges will award the Edgar F. Chesnutt Award to the cooperative whose entry receives the highest score of all entries in the Best Strategic Communications Campaign category.

Individual Scores and Judges' Feedback

Following the Connect Conference in May 2027, individual scores and judges' comments will be available for viewing via the Award Force platform. These will be in-depth commentaries, noting positive aspects of your entry and, where appropriate, suggestions on how it could have been stronger.

Award Notifications & Recognition

Winners will be notified in mid-March of 2027.

Additional Recognition and Retention of Entries

Winners will have the option to display their work at the Connect Conference in May 2027.

All winning entries will be added to the Spotlight on Excellence Library of Leading Practices. This resource allows fellow co-op communicators to view winning entries from previous years, learn from them and apply new ideas to their own projects at their co-ops.

Winning entries may also be featured on cooperative.com or other NRECA features or communications. By completing the entry form and submitting your materials, you are agreeing to any future use by NRECA and the Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program.