



Launching a **First-of-Its-Kind** Global Advocate Awards Program



By:

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Intro

The pandemic has been a time of great struggle but also great ingenuity. No one had a playbook, so we all made it up as we went along. Some ideas sprang up only to fall by the wayside shortly after. Other ideas broke through to become tangible and lasting—even in a digital setting.

One of those ideas is hosting virtual events. A necessity during the days when travel was forbidden, many attendees and businesses have come to recognize the time and cost savings of hosting virtual or hybrid events and adopted them as a long-term strategy.

Networking giant **Cisco** decided to take this idea one step further, creating a first-of-its-kind event to publicly recognize its outstanding customers and partners.

I was one of the people behind this bold endeavor. I started at Cisco in 2016 on the Customer Stories team, where I nurtured our customers and empowered them to share their compelling technology success stories. It was important to make our customers feel valued for their time with us, and it was a natural transition for me to move into our burgeoning Global Advocacy organization. As Head of Cisco's Global Advocacy Communications & Amplification team, I oversee how we show up as an advocacy organization externally while also educating our internal stakeholders on the value of advocacy.





A Digital Answer to Our In-Person Plans



It's no secret that Cisco has a large group of raving fans around the globe. We harness the energies of these advocates in our customer community, Cisco Insider Advocates. It's a dynamic, vibrant community that includes great resources, tech insights, and best practices. We have a lot of fun educational challenges—or targeted asks—for advocates to complete, and there's a buzzing discussion forum. We develop our community so advocates get the maximum value, and they're highly invested in the community because of that.

Meaningful relationships with our customer and partner advocates are foundational to the success of our advocacy mission. I had long desired to create a program to recognize our advocates worldwide, but there was never a great time to launch it because we had so many other critical initiatives at the helm. Finally, we found a window to host a pilot event at Cisco Live EMEAR in Barcelona back in February 2020. It received outstanding feedback from customers and internal account managers alike. So of course we were keen to carry that momentum into a full-blown global awards program.





But within a few short weeks after Cisco Live, the pandemic sent everything into a tailspin. Over the next few months, I became even more determined to recognize and connect with our advocates, especially since we missed seeing them in person. So we shifted gears to focus on creating a world-class Global Advocate Awards program that would culminate in a virtual ceremony.

+ A True Partner and Trusted Sounding Board



Creating an awards program of this scale for the first time was a six-month process, starting with defining the award categories, criteria, and program framework alongside securing internal stakeholder alignment. This cross-functional team effort involved multiple Cisco business units, from technical marketing to global communications to customer experience, working in lockstep from start to finish.

Cisco has a lot of resources, but we had a slew of creative agencies who helped this event come together. **Influitive** was there from the very beginning



“Influitive’s deeply profound knowledge of Cisco’s advocates and community made them a **strategic partner** throughout the process. I don’t know if we could have pulled off the event without them.”





1,483


Unique **Visitors**

282



Live Chat Messages

and was one of the most critical partners in getting this event off the ground. Cisco Insider Advocates is built on Influitive, and they've partnered with Cisco for years to develop our advocate community. Their deeply profound knowledge of Cisco, our advocates, and our community goals made them a strategic counsel on this project. They were a sounding board for me throughout the entire process, and I honestly do not know if we could have pulled off the event without them.



We worked together to define the award categories, establish the scoring model, and clarify the best way to evaluate various award criteria— all new for us. Influitive helped ensure that we weighed advocates' activities fairly and accurately across all 10 award categories. That scoring model provided an objective outline for our esteemed judging panel, which consisted of both Cisco leaders and external subject matter experts.

The inEvidence team, part of Chime Communications, really helped bring the entire virtual awards ceremony to life. We worked closely with them to solidify the overall branding, tone, and trajectory of the awards event. SALT agency, based in Spain, supported us with a robust digital graphics package, including a social media graphics kit personalized for each nominee and award winner. Meanwhile, the social media experts at Harvard UK, also part of Chime, worked with us to develop a highly-strategic social media campaign to drive visibility and generate buzz for the Global Advocate Awards.





The Snowball Effect: How Recognizing Advocacy Builds Advocacy

With the foundation set, we turned our attention to the Global Advocate Award experience. We had a few non-negotiables:

- **The virtual ceremony had to stand out.** The pandemic forced companies to pivot to virtual events, and we wanted to distinguish ours among the crowd.
- **We wanted the event to be fun.** We have a fun company culture and a lively advocate community, so naturally we felt the Global Advocate Award program should emulate that energy. The more fun we have, the more engaged our partners and advocates become, and the more value we can provide in exchange for meaningful acts of advocacy.
- **The experience had to include an element of advocacy education.** Advocacy matters, and it was crucial that we explain the significance of our advocates' activities, what they mean to Cisco, and how these acts of advocacy can and will help them expand their professional profile and level up in their careers.



Cisco Landing page stats



3,814

Views of Our
#CiscoAdvocateAwards
Instagram Reel

604

Hashtag Mentions



←

“Making advocacy a cross-organizational effort means **advocates feel appreciated** by everyone and brings them closer to your brand.”

+

↓

We scored an outstanding musical guest, **DJ Graffiti**, who took the audience on a worldwide tour through song and scenery in real time—something unlike any of us had ever experienced with a virtual event. Our host, **Jay Baer**, did an amazing job setting the stage. We worked with Jay to develop a script that underscored why advocacy is more relevant today than ever. He also discussed how our customers and partners can use advocacy to take their professional brands to new heights.

We incorporated advocacy education into the Cisco Insider Advocates community, creating an entire channel dedicated to the awards program. Within that channel, we made challenges that introduced the awards, outlined the program’s benefits, and explained the judging criteria. These challenges also pushed advocates to share on their social channels.

Once we had our shortlist of 50 nominees, we provided them with personalized content, including graphics they could share on their social channels. This content celebrated their achievement and drove further awareness of the awards program.

In the end, the event was a resounding success. From our 167 advocate nominations received, we produced a shortlist of 50 nominees and presented awards to 11 winners across three regions.

We had 1,483 unique visitors to our Cisco landing page, 282 live chat messages, and 47 click-throughs for advocacy social pages. There were 3,814 views of our #CiscoAdvocateAwards Instagram reel, and another 604 mentions using that hashtag. Meanwhile, our advocate Twitter account saw 25,132 impressions.

+ Where to Start When Developing a New Advocacy Program

This was the first time in Cisco's 30+ year history that we presented a completely digital global awards program, so it was a significant achievement. While we didn't have any expectations for the event at the outset, we have a lot of takeaways we've learned for next year's awards.

With that in mind, here are my tips for anyone attempting to engage their existing community in a new way:

- **Understand what drives and motivates your advocates, and play into that.** Cisco advocates really appreciate recognition, and they deserve it. Who doesn't love being recognized for their hard work?
- **Offer lots of moments for advocates to shine.** In addition to the promotion we did for nominees, Emma Roffey, VP of EMEAR Marketing and Advocacy at Cisco, also shared a customer spotlight blog highlighting our winners and commending them for their efforts. Neville Letzerich, VP and CMO of Cisco Security, shared a video and blog celebrating the Cisco secure advocate nominees and winners. We shared these posts widely—not just within Cisco Insider Advocates, but also on our external social channels—ensuring it got a lot of visibility across the industry.



Cisco Landing page stats

25,132

Twitter account
Impressions





- **Make sure the spirit of the brand proliferates in the new endeavor.** All the content our advocates shared on social channels and the event itself was visually on-brand for Cisco while still playing into our fun advocacy culture. But more importantly, this event was a cross-organizational effort, making our advocates feel appreciated by the entire organization and bringing them closer to our brand.
- **Provide value and make participation worthwhile.** Digital fatigue is real. We had to provide attendees with an experience that was lighthearted, unique, and fun, but also an experience that was valuable in the long run. We offered information on the importance of advocacy and opportunities for them to share their knowledge. Over the years, we have seen several advocates recognized, even promoted, within their organization as a result of industry thought leadership and being recognized through valuable programs like this.

I knew the program was a success when I saw advocates post about their nominations and how proud they were of that achievement. They even organized watch parties at their local restaurants with other advocates and Cisco account managers. Seeing that effort and pride was the icing on the cake, and building that passion is what advocacy is all about.



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