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Lady Luck- Canada's Contest Queen Carolyn Wilman Spills Her Secrets

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Mike Dojc

Carolyn Wilman's IMLUCKY license plate is not just hubris—that's just how she rolls. This charmed stay-at-home Oshawa mom could supply the producers of Wheel of Fortune with a week's worth of bonus round mega swag. In the last four years Wilman has won over \$100,000 in prizes. Big-ticket windfalls include a 14-day whirlwind European tour, a meet and greet with Police frontman Sting, and an invite to a feast in the great hall on the set of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire in London, England. Her booty stash is also teeming with countless watches, movie and theatre passes, dvds, and lifetime supplies of snack foods. What's her system? With the aid of



The Premise behind the Claw Machine: Everybody wants to win

auto-fill software and
quickfire contest tip-offs
from a plethora of

something even if it costs you a roll of quarters

enthusiast sites like contesthound.ca and contestcanda.com, Wilman is able to click her way through over 200 contest ballots per day in just a couple hours. Wilman's winning strategy: "Enter, enter, enter." After all, as her book title points out "You Can't Win if You Don't Enter." We grilled the self-anointed Contest Queen (her website ContestQueen.com is an invaluable resource for people aspiring to win loads of free stuff) on her royally rewarding obsession.

What compels you to enter again and again and again?

I call it contest crack, one hit and your hooked. There's nothing like the feeling of winning. I only spend an hour to two hours doing it a day. I have a laptop and sometimes I do it in front of the t.v. or I do it in my downtime instead of reading a book, gardening or going to play hockey or whatever people choose to do with their evenings. I choose to enter contests.

Is luck just cosmic coincidence, or do we have to make our own luck? It's both. You look at the planet and some people are just luckier than other people. There's a great quote: 'The harder I work, the luckier I get.' People always ask, how do you win so much? Well, if you put in 200 entries per day you're bound to win something.

If you spend a couple hours a day entering contests, how long before you start winning?

Now there's beginners luck and some people win right away but the average rule of thumb is three to six months. People don't like to hear that because it's a long time but it just takes one big win. One woman was entering and entering and entering. She got a call from a company and they left a message on her machine. Her boyfriend told her she had a message from some contest and joked 'I bet you won another baseball hat', so she checked the message called him back: 'I'm getting a mustang. I just won a car.' Well that shut him up pretty quickly.

When did you realize you were totally addicted to contesting?

I'll never forget it. It was 7 a.m. on a Sunday and I'm entering online while simultaneously breastfeeding my daughter. Some men squirm when I tell this story. I had a nursing pillow around my waist, the radio was going in the background, and I'm waiting for the cue to call-in, so I'm multitasking. I was listening for the Guy's Getaway weekend back when A.M. 640 was MOJO, an all guy's radio format. I called in and I was the first caller. I was like 'omigosh I'm so quick. I called back and I was caller two. I thought 'no way'. I called again and again and I was all six callers! Right at that moment I knew I was going to win. So we qualified for the draw to win the Guy's Getaway and the next morning the D.J. called for the draw and asked if my husband was there. And I said "wake up we won the prize!"

Those Guy's Getaways were pretty awesome, what did you win for your hubby?

He got to judge a Hawaiian Tropics bikini contest down in Florida. My husband loves me. I have a picture of him with four bikini-clad women and he loves it, he's grinning away.

What inspired you to write a book about contesting?

I had been working in sales and marketing for 15 years and was laid off in the dot com crunch and. Just as things started to pick up again and I started working on contracts I got pregnant. So I had this little hobby and when my daughter was two-and-a-half I started to think that since she was getting older, she didn't need me as much and I wanted to get back to work. At that time My husband and I won a trip to Los Angeles and while we were in L.A. we got notification that my niece won a trip for four to New York that I'd entered her in. Then when we got home we won another trip, this time to Europe. Everybody kept asking me, what are you doing, what's your secret? After a while I thought, I have system. I should be writing all this stuff down.

Do you enter friends and family members to increase your odds?

Yes. There's a contest right now to go to Atlantis, a hotel in the Bahamas. So I entered myself and my husband and one of my best friends and another best friend and their fiancé because I'm trying to win them a honeymoon so I don't have to buy them a gift. So I've been entering them in every trip contest I spot.

When you enter family and friends is the expectation that if they win they'll share the prize?

You have to have agreements with people in advance before you enter them. My sister won a trip for two to Greece on a ballot I entered on her behalf and I told her to take her girlfriend. We are very different people and I knew she'd have more fun with a girlfriend so I said 'look take a friend, just buy me something good.' Ultimately the winner has the release form and can do whatever he/she wants. People have lost friendships over this so if you are going enter somebody either form an agreement with them in advance or just enter them because you want them to have the same fun and excitement you do and have no expectations.

What have you won in the last couple of weeks?

Well let me open my Excel spreadsheet. I started keeping tabs on everything I won in 2004 and it comes in handy because there is a standard six-eight week waiting period before receiving a prize so if I don't get something on time I can follow-up. My daughter won a chocolate bunny, I won a fifty dollar gift certificate to a restaurant, and a mystery prize from a Taco Bell instant messaging contest. It's exciting, I don't know what it is yet— I have to wait for it to show up in the mail. And my girlfriend won movie passes. That's what we've won so far this month and it's only the tenth!

What's the wackiest prize winning experience you've ever had?

Through a Toronto Sun contest I won silver passes to the Toronto Grand Prix last summer so right off the bat that was pretty good. Three other people won as well but to win the grand prize, lunch with Bret "The Hitman" Hart, you had to sumo wrestle the other contestants wearing sumo suits. It felt like it was 100 degrees outside and my hands barely stuck out of the sumo suit so I didn't stand a chance. Only one other contestant showed up and he was at least a head taller than me and this guy had sumo wrestled before. He squashed me, but it was fun. I did get to meet Bret Hart after and he autographed a picture. I didn't mean anything to me because I'm not a wrestling fan but I gave it to my friend's son and he went berserk over it.

You won your husband in a contest in a way, how does that happen?

Isn't that cool! You know I met somebody else who won their wife. I told that story and then he said he won a trip to Alaska and met his wife there and they got married and they live here now. I

thought I was the only one. Anyway, I went to a product launch, I think it was for Toshiba, and it was at the King Eddie hotel in Toronto. This was back when the computer companies were still making money off of hardware. I saw him standing there and thought he didn't look too bad and went over to talk to him. So I won tickets to the Ice Capades and asked 30 people to go with me and no one wanted to go. So he said yes and we had a good time and I only found out last year that he didn't even like figure skating. He only went because he liked me.

I get calls all the time saying I've won a trip to cottage country for the weekend or a cruise or something like that and I typically hang-up because it's usually a company hawking timeshares. Since you enter so many contests do you ever get sucked in by telemarketing calls?

No, because I know the difference. There are outright scams where they'll say 'you've won something, send us \$700 and we'll send you the prize.' Then there are the ones from cottage country where they say 'you've won a weekend, come up and watch a timeshare presentation.' You do get the weekend free and if they're giving away one time-share or a free trip somewhere they get like a million entries and then they give away only one prize. So it's legal but your chances of winning are so slim that it feels like a scam. I had a friend test it out. He went with his kids for the weekend, sat through the 90-minute time-share thing, but he knew what he was in for so he had a nice free weekend.

Do you have any good luck charms?

I do. I will do anything to win. A friend of ours with a horse gave me a horseshoe and I put it up above my office door. I figured, what the heck. I also had the house professionally feng shuied. I bought this gorgeous glass snowflake and hung it in my office and then we won a trip to Banf and I was like What's up with that, I want a warm weather trip! And then I realized my office is in the travel area of my house and the snowflake is in the wealth area of my office so I'm attracting cold. So, I put a crystal up just to see what happens. I don't know if it will work, but if it does, I'm going to Aruba. I figure it can't hurt.

Whenever my father enters a raffle he folds up his ticket in a very particular fashion believing the more obtuse the angles the higher probability it will be chosen when a hand ruffles through the tickets. Is there any truth to that?

When you fold a ticket it takes up more space than if it is flat so there are more opportunities for a corner to be grabbed. In theory this works but it isn't always the case. I went to the annual contest convention in the U.S. (*1st Canadian one on the way this September.) They sell crimpers so now instead of just folding the paper they put their entry through a little machine which smushes it into different designs. So I'm watching this big rotating drum with 600 entry forms in there and not a single one is moving. They're all crimped. It was insane. We won box seats at a Maple Leaf hockey game this past January and all 20 winners were put into a draw and four names were to be picked that would become eligible to win a big screen t.v. Well I folded my ballot and they picked all flat ones. I thought 'Damn I should have tried flat'. I think part of it is what you believe works.

Do you keep a scientific calculator beside all your phones at home just in case you get a win call but need to answer a skill-testing question in order to win the prize?

No, but sometimes they can be confusing. Sometimes they ask them in BEDMAS [ed note: That's Brackets, Exponents, Division, Multiplication, Addition, and Subtraction for those who forget grade seven algebra] and sometimes they don't. So when I get called with a skill testing question I ask

them how they want me to answer it, as they read it out or using BEDMAS. They will tell you because they don't want you to lose just because you didn't understand. They're not out to get you.

Are the questions typically pretty easy to answer then?

Yeah, and my math has actually improved. I can do almost all of them in my head now, I'm very proud of myself. They're usually really easy like $10 \times 2 - 5$ so the answer is 15. Sometimes they're a little harder like $500 \times 5 \div 10 + 50 - 150$ but that's about as hard as they get and that last one was just an online contest entry question on Homebasics.ca so I can use the calculator feature on my computer to answer that one.

Are most contesting hobbyists women?

In the U.S. and Canada in the past it was mostly women because most contests were mail-in and women just had more time in general not to say that we'd lounge around our houses eating bon-bons while we watch our fifteen kids but in some ways it was easier for women to do it. But now that contests are 80-90% online and men tend to gravitate to technology there are more and more men are coming out. Our club in Durham is half men. I'd say currently overall it's 70-30 with women in the majority but give it a couple years and I think it will be 50-50.

An abridged version of this article first ran in Chill Magazine

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Interesting article! Wish I had that kinda time on my hands!

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true dat! It's funny I used to have the contest bug though and would enter lots of cereal box contests but I was nevereven close to the extent of the Contest queen. The best thing I ever won was a big bertha driver in a radio call in contest and I also won a Pat Borders (Former Blue Jays catcher) signed ball.

#2 - Fri Aug 31, 2007 3:55 PM EDT REPLY 