

Contest convention a first for Canadian players



The Annual National Contestors Convention is promising to introduce the 'rock stars' of their world. And yes, there will be prizes.



After losing her internet marketing job in 2001, 39-year-old mother Carolyn Wilman decided to turn her part-time contest hobby into her full-time career.

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They are coming from as far as Vancouver, and from seven U.S. states including Florida and Louisiana, to hear keynote speakers tell them how to avoid scams, think positive, and even use feng shui, the ancient Chinese art of placement, to improve their luck.

There are those who enter the occasional contest on a whim, and then there are the "pros" -- people who work methodically from their kitchen tables or computer desks, figuring out their best odds and filling hundreds of forms each week.

The hobby can be a lonely one, but now the Canadian Contestors Association has stepped in to bring people together.

The first Annual National Contestors Convention is taking place at Toronto's Sheraton Centre on September 21-23. The convention is a place for contest hobbyists to "share ideas, learn from the pros and participate in draws for fabulous prizes."

One-hundred-fifty have signed-up so far. Oshawa's Carolyn Wilman, one of the organizers, thought attendance would be higher, but she suspects people are a little "gun shy" because it's the first one in Canada.

"Every time I open my email we have someone else signing up. But that's the nature of conventions, people wait until the last minute," Wilman said.

Seventy per cent of the participants are woman, many of them mothers.

"Every little bit of something extra helps when you are a mom. And if you have little ones it's a good way to relax and grab some time to yourself when the kids are asleep," said Wilman.

Wilman thinks the introduction of online and text message contests have brought more men to the hobby, because of the technical aspect. She suspects there will be an even split in a few years.

One participant of note is William (Buck) Buchanan from Pennsylvania, known in the community for his contesting zeal. A few months back Buck won a motorcycle, which he was proudly riding to the post office to drop off more entries when he got in a serious accident. He lost his leg below the knee as a result of his injuries, and his doctor forbade him from attending the U.S. contesters' conference in June.

The accident hasn't stopped Buck, and he used the Canadian conference as a goal during his rehabilitation process.

Wilman began her own contesting hobby in 2001 after she read an article in Reader's Digest about a woman who was winning contests left, right and centre.

"I thought, wow, I can do that. So I started entering on a daily basis," Wilman said. "Until it became a sad addiction," she said with a chuckle.

She has since written a book titled, "You Can't Win if You Don't Enter," and created the website, www.contestqueen.com, where others can access her tips, contests, and group chats. Wilman spends one to two hours a day entering 50 to 200 contests. Now she is so busy with the convention, she is lucky if she gets to enter one.

"The fun is the adrenaline rush, I call it contest crack. One win and you're hooked," she said. But all jokes aside, Wilman has won big prizes. Her favourite was a trip for four to London, England to visit the Harry Potter film set. She took her daughter, then three, and mother and husband.

"The really cool thing about this hobby is that you get to do things that you don't get to do in everyday life. And even if you were wealthy you could never buy them."

A whole new world

Linda Horricks, like Wilman, also feels contests bring her opportunities to see and do things she normally would not have the chance to experience.

Horricks usually enters 100 to 120 contests a day, and wins about four times a month. She has been an avid member of the community for just under two years, and has won airline tickets, iPods and Xboxes. She too has a website, www.contestgirl.com, where she shares contests and tips.

Her most interesting win was a trip to Toronto to see Body Worlds, an eerie travelling exhibition of preserved human bodies and body parts that are prepared using a technique called plastination. "I wouldn't have gone to that normally. Actually, it had been here in Ottawa and I didn't go. But I went and it was fascinating," she said.

But there are downsides of contesting. It is possible to let the idea of winning, and the obsession of missing an opportunity get away from you.

"When the time or money people spend [on contesting] starts to interfere with their home life is then there is a problem," notes Dr. Nigel Turner, an addiction specialist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

"It's hard to say whether it constitutes gambling, but there is certainly a relationship.... The question is; are they hurting themselves or their families? If not, then it's not a problem. But they are exposing themselves to a certain amount of identity theft through online contests," said Turner.

Wilman recalled a trip in 2004 she won to L.A. where she found herself agitated because she hadn't entered a contest in about a week.

"I kind of freaked out a bit. But then I realized I was being insane. I was on a win!" she said.

"I have let that go. If I am destined to win, I will win. If I am not, I am not. I just have fun with it now," noted Wilman.