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Two of the contestors, Fern Corraini, left, and Carolyn Wilman, react to mailing a contest entry and winning movie passes, respectively.

'Winning For a Living' a documentary about people with one blinding ambition: win contests

[Vinay Menon](#)

They're not doing anything wrong. So why are they so annoying?

Rummaging through recycling bins? Asking for God's help to win a new car? Thinking positively to snag a free trip? Prowling through the cyber wilds, skulking for contests? Filling out hundreds of ballots to win a new TV?

Who are these freaks among us? Why can't you watch them without chucking something at the TV and shouting: "Stop being so greedy! Give somebody else a chance to win that dishwasher you (insert preferred vulgarity here)!"

Winning For a Living (CBC, 9 tonight) is a fascinating (read: annoying) new documentary about "contestors" (read: freaks).

A contestor is a subspecies of Canadian that emerged from the primordial marketing swamp with one blinding ambition: win contests.

Take Toronto's Mike Smith, a fellow we meet tonight.

Just how determined is he to win a new 32-inch TV? He fills out ballots while driving! You've heard of road rage? This guy will give you TV rage.

"A full red light, I get six or seven ballots made out," Smith mumbles, as if in a lobotomized haze.

But here's the thing: Smith has already won *seven* TVs! Not to mention a car, computer, vacations, you name it. All told, he figures his "contesting" addiction has netted \$250,000 in prizes over the past three decades.

Smith's long-time strategy: he stuffs ballot boxes with hundreds of entries. For example, in pursuit of that 32-inch TV, he dropped off more than 2,000 ballots to stores in one weekend.

(When I toiled in retail, many moons ago, we had a name for people like this. Hint: it wasn't "contestor.")

Mike's "whole world" revolves around trying to win free stuff. And as we can plainly see, it's his marriage that's losing. Not that he seems to care. As he says: "If they think I'm crazy, well, that's fine."

Great. Because I think you're crazy. Honestly, if you care about winning a toaster more than spending time with your family you should put down the pencil and seek professional help.

Another contestor, Carolyn Wilman of Oshawa, has won free vacations, merchandise and "celebrity meet and greets," including a photo-op with Sting.

Wilman calls herself "The Contest Queen" and has even written a book on the subject: *You Can't Win If You Don't Enter*. Okay, she's not annoying. She's charming. No, she's both!

Then there's Rosemary Chiu of Newmarket, who now earns about \$1,000 a month from contesting. In her best year, she cleared \$44,000.

In one scene, Chiu and her three sons are picnicking and everything – the food, the plates, the ball they're kicking around – came from a contest. Goodness, she even manages to win a car while the documentary is shooting.

We also learn Canadian companies spend about \$200 million a year on contests and promotions. And there are discussions about new contest-aiding software and commentary from marketing experts.

Again, the contestors are playing by the rules. No matter. Watching them in action is like watching looters stream out from a shattered storefront while carrying appliances on their heads: it seems wrong.

Sure, anybody can stuff ballot boxes or call radio stations 500 times a day. But wouldn't it be better if nobody did?

Why do these contestants have to ruin contests for normal people with normal lives and normal amounts of time for doing normal things?

Why are they so annoying?

"I want to win trips and washers and dryers," says one contestant. "I have a lot more things that the universe is preparing to send to me."

(Insert preferred vulgarity here.)

vmenon@thestar.ca