

The Thrill Of The Win

Contest hobbyists get in the game

BY LISA KADANE, CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 28, 2009

For Tania Bugnet, entering contests is a part-time job. Out of work since April, the Calgarian spends 20 to 25 hours a week entering online giveaways.

"I average, I believe, 150 to 200 entries a day," says Bugnet, 32.

Since she started entering contests seven years ago, Bugnet has won a trip for two to Jamaica, a \$1,000 HBC gift card, an Xbox 360 system, a bra and panty set worth \$450, tickets to Flames games and numerous movie passes.

Her best year was 2007, when she accumulated prizes worth \$7,400. She even blogs about it at luckycanuck.blogspot.com. And she is far from alone. "Contestors" (as they call themselves) as far away as Australia and Pakistan follow Bugnet's blog. Websites such as canadaonlinecontests.com and canadasweepstakes.ca help avid contestors find and enter contests. There are even Yahoo groups dedicated to helping the winning-obsessed. "(The online groups) are such a huge resource," Bugnet says.

"It's a very karmic kind of existence -- if you share what you have with the group, you're going to receive wins."

Carolyn Wilman shares a different winning philosophy.

"You can't win if you don't enter," says the Oshawa, Ontario-based contest enthusiast, who has written a book by that title.

So good is the self-named "Contest Queen" at winning --from radio call-ins to drop box draws to online competitions-- she turned her lucky streak into a career.

Her website, contestqueen.ca, provides resources, tips for avoiding scams, and also promotes her book and seminar (How to Win Cash, Cars, Trips and More . . . Online!). But what it comes down to, really, is frequency.

"You have to enter a lot," says Wilman, 42, who spends a couple hours a day entering contests.

"It's a numbers game." So far this year she has

won more than \$27,000 in prizes, from a trip for six to Whistler to a \$25 Sears gift card. Since she began eight years ago Wilman has netted more than \$150,000 in prizes.

In 2007, companies spent \$200 million on contest promotions in Canada, an amount Wilman says is predicted to increase to \$600-million by 2012.





tania bugnet shows off some of the items she has won through her contesting efforts, including an Xbox, a trip to Jamaica, several cameras, a blackberry and numerous books. she says she enters between 150 and 200 contests a day, mostly online.

Photograph by: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

That's a lot of carrots dangling in cyberspace.

And that's where she draws the line--entering contests can't pay the bills or fill the fridge (unless you're winning cash or gift cards), but it wins her quirky items such as a Vegas Uncork'd Cooking Class.

"It affords you things you'd just never pay for."

Shelly Wing agrees. The 30-something Calgarian only enters contests she really wants to win, and then only sporadically. Still, she's won a trip to China and a \$1,000 cash prize off the radio.

And she recognizes the hobby's dark side.

"It can end up being a waste of time," she says. "There are people that get addicted to it."

They become compulsive in their desire to acquire something for nothing. Such "acquisitive desire" drives this behaviour, says Dr. Jon Amundson, a clinical psychologist in Calgary.

"That's the magic part-- the power of free," he says.

For the most part, Amundson says spending hours a day entering contests isn't a big deal "until the time it becomes a big deal."

As in--you neglect to feed the cat, or stay up all night or miss work because you can't pull yourself away from the computer.

Realistically, the biggest downside to this potentially compulsive behaviour, which he likens to gaming, is the time sink.

"You may discover that you have spent 182 hours to win a trip (so)maybe the actual cost of that is a lot higher than you thought," he says.

But if you're OK with that, something for nothing is a powerful incentive. And you can't beat the rush of winning.

lkadane@theherald. canwest.com