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## Contest Queen Shares Winning Secrets

By [Bobbi Dempsey](#)

Wish you could get cool stuff for free, legally? Try entering contests. You can win everything from toys and T-shirts to cars and trips.

While winning depends a lot on luck, there are things you can do to greatly increase your odds. That's where Carolyn Wilman comes in.

Wilman, who calls herself the Contest Queen, estimates she's helped people [win](#) more than a million dollars in prizes, including cash, a Ferrari and even a house.

Some of her tips for winning:

### **Read (and follow) the rules**

It seems so obvious, yet many people don't do it. "This is the number one mistake," Wilman says. Common rules include deadline for entries, limitations on number of entries, restrictions on who can enter and contests that are void in certain geographical areas. Wilman points out that even if you win, you can be disqualified if the company discovers you didn't follow the rules.

### **Focus your efforts online**

More and more companies are focusing on online contests, which are easier and cheaper for people to enter. Wilman believes mail-in sweepstakes may eventually fade away completely in the U.S.

### **But don't totally abandon snail mail**

Until mail-in sweepstakes go extinct, enter at least a few of them here and there. With [postage](#) costs rising – and online contests so easy and convenient – fewer people are entering mail-in varieties. Bottom line: fewer entries mean less competition, so your odds are better.

### **Watch out for scams**

These can be fake "contests" or [phony](#) "winning notifications." Stick to contests from companies you recognize. Other red flags: winning notices that ask you to send money or are sent via e-mail from a suspicious sender. Real prize notifications come from the sponsor's company or a legitimate firm that handles contests (they are sometimes called fulfillment companies). The only costs you should incur are the fees to have your affidavit notarized and returned by overnight delivery or another confirmable method – and this is usually only required for large, high-value prizes.

### **Join online contest communities**

You can meet other "contest fans" and discuss your shared hobby. Even better, you can exchange [contest](#) leads, tips, advice – and congratulate each other on your winnings.

### **Pursue your hobbies**

Wilman says this is a great way to find contests that will interest you. "Visit online sites related to your [hobby](#) and look for links for current promotions. You can also sign up for notices of future contests."

Take advantage of all available entry methods: Wilman says your contesting strategy should include a mix of all five major tactics: in-person, call-in, mail-in, online and text. "This will maximize your odds of winning," she says.

Check out Wilman's resources: She has a book, newsletter, blog and audio broadcasts. Find out about all of these on [her site](#).