

In it to win it: Sweepstakes addicts living the dream

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Each day around 8 a.m., retired grandmother and occasional actress Mary Lu Marr flips on the TV, pulls out her trusty laptop and gets to work at her "part-time job."

For the next few hours, the Dublin woman will enter hundreds of sweepstakes, filling out forms and transcribing product codes. This has been her hobby for more than 40 years, and persistence has paid off -- she has won cruises, a car, home theaters, even a year's supply of Godiva chocolates.

Her latest haul came in February with a \$50,000 grand prize from lunch meat maker Carl Buddig.

"I really don't know anyone else who does it like I do," Marr said. "It's obsessive."



Mary Lu Marr, of Dublin, is photographed with just a few of the items she has won playing hundreds of sweepstakes a day online at her home in Dublin, Calif., on Wednesday, March 5, 2014. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

like her trip to the 2010 Winter Olympics, or a costume party dinner on the Hogwarts set during London filming of a Harry Potter adventure.

"You're always waiting for the call or email," Wilman said. "I'm probably the only person who looks forward to Mondays because that's when the mail service starts back up."

An estimated 55 million Americans enter sweepstakes each year, according to one industry guide. The contests serve a purpose -- companies collect personal data on those who enter and generate

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But she isn't alone. Industry experts believe there may be hundreds of thousands of Americans just like her. They even have a word for the phenomenon -- "sweepers."

"The term 'sweeper' is someone who enters sweepstakes as a hobby," said Carolyn Wilman, a Canadian author of two books on the subject. "It's no different than sitting around with trains or coins or whatever people do for fun, except ours can take you on crazy adventures."

Wilman, who calls herself "The Contest Queen," attended her first sweepstakes convention in 2005. A daily sweeper, she occasionally wins big,

brand interest. Sweepers, who tend to sign up regardless of the brand, undermine those goals, but not everyone thinks they're a bad thing.

"The perception is that no one wants them entering and stealing the prizes from customers," said Jeff Renda of Sweepstakes Pros, a San Jose company that runs sweepstakes nationwide. "But these people are consumers, too. Even if they aren't specific to the brand, it doesn't matter in the long run, you just have to make sure you're hitting the market goals you want."

Thanks to the Internet, what once took extreme sweepers much time and postage is now as easy as a few clicks of the mouse.

To keep tabs on giveaways, sweepers turn to online or print newsletters. Craig McDaniel, a.k.a. "Mr. Sweepy," is president and founder of Sweepstakes Today. His free online newsletter boasts 300,000 members, of whom about 3 percent enter between 50 and 100 giveaways each day, he said. Their average age is 45, and three-quarters are female.

"We get a regular following who are virtually addicted to sweepstakes," McDaniel said. "They've replaced buying a lottery ticket with entering contests. That's how addicted they are."

McDaniel, who values his lifetime winnings at \$100,000, said most of his site's "10K Club" members -- sweepers who've collected prizes worth more than \$10,000 -- average 50 daily entries.

"The first thing they do is get their coffee and get started," McDaniel said. "The downside is while there are a lot of people who take the hobby seriously, a lot will get burned out before they even begin. They think 'I'm not lucky' and they quit."

Robert Hoffman, of Castro Valley, is an extreme sweeper and a believer. He has lifetime sweep earnings of more than \$1 million.

On a typical morning, he rises before dawn, grabs a cup of joe, and starts on his sweeps. Then, armed with envelopes and contest announcements, he boards BART for work in San Francisco, signing up for more along the route. He mails in more than a dozen entries a day, as well as 50 to 100 more online.

"You can't win if you don't enter," he said.

Hoffman first got hooked in the 1970s, winning a gas station drawing for free fuel. He's since gone on dozens of free getaways, including the Super Bowl, NCAA Final Four and Hong Kong, won gas for life and driven a NASCAR on the Charlotte Motor Speedway.

His latest win went to his son -- a basketball shoot-around with Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors.

Nothing comes free, though; he spends thousands on mailings each year.



Robert Hoffman of Castro Valley, Calif., poses with 6-year-old son Arik at their home Tuesday, April 1, 2014, with some of the items they've won over the years from entering more than 400,000 sweepstakes. (D. Ross Cameron/Bay Area News Group)

One year, his tax bill on wins topped \$35,000.

Though the rewards can be plentiful, Hoffman said it takes a special person to stick with it.

"There's a lot of people who want to learn how to get something for nothing. The fact is that there's a lot of work and money that goes into it," he said. "If you do this more than two years, chances are you have an obsessive, addictive personality, just because of the sheer magnitude of what you need to do."

He could be talking about Marr, who bought cold cuts "by the armful" for months to reel in her \$50,000 grand prize. She said she'll spend those winnings on a Mexican cruise with her sons and six grandkids.

"I think people are skeptical about it at first," she said, "until they see you win."

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TALK LIKE A 'SWEEPER'

- Sweeper: Someone who enters sweepstakes as a hobby.
- Affy:: Short for "affidavit." Used to identify the winner, usually done by requiring photo ID or a quote about the win for media purposes. It's good news for sweepers because it only comes when you win a big prize (usually over \$600).
- ARV: Average Retail Value, comes to bear when it's time to pay the IRS.
- Dumpster diver:: One who scavenges through trash in search of bottle caps, game pieces or points from sponsors.
- Early Bird prizes: Be one of the first people to enter the sweepstakes and you're guaranteed a win.
- Freebies: Free items given to all entrants, while supplies last.
- FSOT: For Sale or Trade. expressed when someone wins a prize they can't use.
- GLTA: "Good Luck to All." A goodwill expression used when discussing new sweepstakes, sharing tips, wins, etc.
- Hall of Fame: A win with an ARV of more than \$5,000.
- IWG: An instant win game.
- Snails: Mail in entries.
- Vote for Me Contest: A contest where a person is selected by the contest sponsor to be a finalist and the public votes on the best entry.

Source: Contests.about.com, Craig McDaniel