

Want to win big bucks? Let your computer be your guide

With Internet sweepstakes and software shortcuts, contest junkies are getting wired

RENEE HUANG

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We used to think of contest junkies as *I Love Lucy*-style gals-on-a-spree or nerdy coupon clippers in pilly cardigans.

Now, they're a whole new breed: computer-savvy, young and wired in, trading tips in on-line discussion groups and setting up programs to automatically find and fill out entry forms.

And it's all so easy. "If I happen to be on-line, and have time to surf, I'll enter some contests," says Marie Anne Guinto of Toronto. Four years ago, the 31-year-old events manager won her first spa package and hasn't looked back. Since then, she has won a desktop computer and printer, an all-expenses-paid trip to Venezuela and a \$2,000 shopping spree courtesy of the Bay. That's in addition to countless theatre and movie tickets, dinners and NHL hockey seats -- more than \$20,000 worth of prizes all told.

Despite a hectic schedule that involves planning and overseeing events for Toronto's Learning Annex, Guinto spends several hours a week entering draws. "If you don't even try, you'll never have the chance to win," she says.

The Internet contest phenomenon also has spawned a whole subculture of on-line discussion groups, such as one on ContestCanada.com, where members exchange insider tips on the hottest Canadian draws, as well as the duds to avoid.

Scams are rampant on the Internet, so testers advise sticking to big-name companies. They also open separate contest email accounts to keep their hobby-related mail or spam from clogging their personal or work mailboxes.

Marketers are increasingly using sweepstakes as a carrot to entice people into handing over their personal email. A recent industry report found that marketing dollars spent on games, contests, and sweepstakes rose 10 per cent to \$1.65 billion (U.S.) in 2001, much of it migrating on-line, where execution is cheaper.

On-line contests are also easier for contestants. There are even software programs -- there's a free one called Sweep! -- that fill in on-line ballots automatically and keep track in a customized portfolio. Best of all, you can do it without paying a bundle in postage.

But some fans still choose to enter contests the old-fashioned way, filling out entry forms on cereal boxes like Adam Sandler's character in the film *Punch-Drunk Love*.

Self-described contest nut Sylvia Schmidt, 24, drove all over Ontario in the fall to enter a Loblaws draw for a laptop computer. She entered ballots in 21 Loblaws stores across the province.

Schmidt, who works as a receptionist for a television company in Toronto, enters about 30 contests a year. She's won "a few" computers and a slew of tickets. "I don't think I'd make a career of it but it's a large hobby," says Schmidt, whose older sister won a \$40,000 dream trip to the dinosaur badlands in Drumheller, Alberta, for her daughter's class.

Some people enjoy the challenge of more creative contests. Thirty-three-year-old Dean Villafuerte of Hamilton won a year's supply of Kraft Dinner not once, but two years in a row. The first time, he sent in a recipe that incorporated the famous macaroni and cheese. A video in which he dressed in tuxedo tails with an umbrella made of Kraft boxes and went around touting his slogan, "You can dress it up and take it anywhere" clinched Villafuerte's second cheesy win.

But it isn't just today's extreme prizes -- a dream cottage in Muskoka, a million Air Miles or a week-long cooking course for you and your friends aboard a private yacht -- that fuel the current craze.

Tonja Tarr, 26, a Feng Shui consultant and instructor who's been hooked on sweepstakes for more than a year,

thinks contest winning is all about good karma.

She counsels her clients to be open to the idea of winning. "If you start to open up or don't limit the way you attract things to yourself, [winning] is definitely out there," she says.

Guinto also believes there's more than chance operating. She's scored so many times a mathematician friend told her, "You shouldn't be winning all this. The odds are against you."