

Constant contestants

A new breed of enter-to-win enthusiasts are answering all the skill-testing questions they can in order to win big

Stephanie Wells

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Everyday, you likely pass up several opportunities to own a flat-screen television or take a trip to Hawaii. Unless, of course, you are a contestant.

To these people, entering contests is a hobby that borders on an addiction. The words "no purchase necessary" make their eyes light up and they happily spend hours scanning periodicals, clipping out forms, figuring out odds and furiously licking stamps.

Is it all worth it? Steve Ledoux certainly thinks so. He is America's self-proclaimed "Sweepstakes King," and he's won 500 prizes in the last 10 years: everything from an all-expenses-paid trip to see the Rolling Stones live in Berlin to a year's supply of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. He's also won trips to Maui, Jamaica and just about every other sunny vacation spot you can name.



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(See hard copy for illustration).

It all started in the early '80s when he appeared on the game show Match Game and won US\$6,000. The experience gave Ledoux a taste of winning, and sparked his enduring interest in entering contests. Since then, he's written *How to Win Lotteries, Sweepstakes and Contests in the 21st Century*, and he's made TV appearances on ABC's *The View* and CNN to share his wisdom.

Ledoux will be the first to tell you it's not all about luck. He's got a number of tricks, picked up and honed over years of filling out ballots, sending in entries, and generally testing Lady Luck. For example, he'll fold up an entry like an accordion before dropping it into a ballot box. That way, it "puffs up out of the stack of other, flat entries."

If you're still skeptical, examine the odds. Lotteries can yield big cash prizes, but the chance your numbers will come up is almost nil. Your odds of matching seven out of seven numbers in the popular Super 7 lottery are one in about 21 million. On the other hand, many contest rules note that "odds of winning depend on number of entries received." This means you are competing against several thousand other entrants, rather than millions of numerical possibilities. You've got to like those odds.

Pat Darrah, a TV-news cameraman from Toronto, is also a contest junkie.

"It all started out quite innocently," he says, but his winnings now include an all inclusive trip to Aruba, a year's free Molly Maid service and a VW Beetle.

One year, Darrah filled out 6,000 ballots, but his name wasn't drawn. When the same contest came up a year later, he was still determined. He flooded the ballot boxes at Blockbuster Video with 3,612 entries and finally won.

"It takes persistence," he says.

Darrah says contesting needs to be approached with the right attitude. "View it as a hobby. Any hobby takes time." He also warns against contests that may be thinly veiled attempts to sell gym memberships or time-share condos. The general rule is that contests sponsored by large companies are legit, and Darrah says those should be entered with enthusiasm. "If you don't enter, you'll never win."

The Web site www.contestcanada.com is an online database of contests for every kind of prize your heart could desire. Cars, cash, trips, electronics, even kids' toys are up for grabs. Joe Head, co-owner of the site, says it boasts 50,000 hits per month.

Head notes that for some testers, a determined focus has replaced some of the fun. Some spend hours every day, typing or writing out their contact information again and again on entry forms. "It's turning into more of a business," he says. Head himself has won a dozen trips in the past five years, his favourite being to the Super Bowl. He says it's his dream to win a car. His motto? "Enter everything."

Ledoux wants people to discover the fun of entering contests. He encourages those new to entering, reminding them that "just by writing out your basic information, you have the chance to win a trip to Europe or a big screen TV." Ledoux still can't believe his own luck. He remembers walking the streets of Berlin, thinking, "all it took for me to get here was to fill out an entry form."

So lick those stamps. Patrol the (reputable) contest Web sites. Mail in entry forms. Stack the odds in your favour.

"There is a system to it," Ledoux says. "You're not relying on luck. You don't have to be lucky to win."

Well, maybe just a little.

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