

Posted on Wed, Sep. 10, 2008

'Sweepers' clean up

You can too, they say, in ever-more-popular sweepstakes. But bagging the big win takes work.

By Natalie Pompilio
For The Inquirer

The Philly Cheesestakers' meeting started with a roll call. But instead of names, it featured wins.

Two Crate & Barrel gift cards. Four tickets to a Phillies game. Boxes of chocolates from Dove. A pair of underwear from Hanes' "Wedge Free Wednesday."

Melanie Liller - who six years ago founded this group devoted to entering sweepstakes - went last. Her wins? Six packs of Sun Chips, a \$5 Starbucks gift certificate - and a \$4,000 grand prize from Twizzlers that included a TV, Wii and a new sofa.

"Ooooooh!" the group exclaimed appreciatively as Liller ticked off her list.

This was one of those moments so-called sweepers live for, the thing that makes all the envelope-stuffing and stamp-licking and keyboard-clicking pay off: a big prize that reminded them all, again, that anybody could be a winner.

"Our hobby is rather unusual," said Liller, 43, of the Northeast. "I enter a lot of sweepstakes. My husband calls it 'gambling with stamps.' "

Long a way for companies to draw consumers to their products, sweepstakes are bigger than ever, with thousands of prizes up for grabs every year and millions of people trying to win them. Geri-Anne Benning - whose company, Alliance Sweepstakes Services, manages sweepstakes - said she's getting more inquiries from people who want to hold sweepstakes and more entries to the contests themselves.

"Companies that probably wouldn't have thought about doing a sweepstakes are now incorporating them into their marketing plans," Benning said. "They're looking for a way to build a database and target their audience, and they're finding they get a response to sweepstakes."

Benning attributes the increased interest mostly to the Internet - it makes finding contests so much easier. Where once people had to rely on direct mail or their cereal box, "Now you've got Google, Yahoo and all the other search sites, and you just enter

'sweepstakes,' " Benning said.

Ken Carlos, who cofounded www.sweepsadvantage.com with his wife 10 years ago, said site traffic has grown from 2,000 visitors a day to 12,000.

"Sweepstakes entry is increasing in popularity," Carlos said.

Maybe it's the economy. In 2007, the HGTV "Dream Home Giveaway" drew 41 million entries. Carol McLaughlin, who publishes a sweeper newsletter called "This N' That," noted that high fuel prices are reflected in sweeps prizes.

"A lot of companies are giving gift cards for gasoline," she said. "The sweeper is drawn by what's being offered. The marketer is looking at how to get their attention."

Judy Karff, 66, of Northeast Philadelphia said her postal carrier used to laugh at her sweeping habit, especially because she used to leave a note on her door detailing her location each time she went out in case the Publishers' Clearing House Prize Patrol came by. (Actually, she still does this.)

Then one day he delivered her a \$500 check from Vicks VapoRub.

"He said, 'It's for real,' " Karff remembered. "I said, 'New roof or liposuction?' " (She went with the new roof.)

Sweepstakes aficionados have their own lingo. To win any of the "3Cs" - cars, cruises and computers - practitioners need to have the "3Ps"- patience, persistence and postage. Someone who takes a bunch of "OEBs" - that is, official entry blanks - and sends them in by the hundreds is said to be "mega-entering."

Local contests, like those sponsored by supermarkets, are easier to win than national ones. Instant-win games on the Internet are set to give winners at certain times of the day, so some think it's best to log on in the middle of the night.

Some sweepers decorate their entry envelopes with stickers or watercolor. Others use return address labels with lucky symbols such as four-leaf clovers and pots of gold. Since many contests require only a postcard to enter, sweepers like to send cards that are special to them, or make their own from scrapbook materials, wallpaper and magazines.

McLaughlin stresses the power of positivity. As the coordinator for the Northeast Mini Sweepstakes Convention slated to be held in Hershey, Pa., in October, she wants people to realize the impact that attitude will have on their chances. In other words, the energy you put in the envelope will be returned.

"There's always a group in there that says I never win anything," McLaughlin said. "We're desperately trying to get their self-esteem back up."

Because being a sweeper does take work, Liller says entering is "like my little part-time job," and when she's going "full throttle," she'll put in as much as three hours a night,

which isn't easy for someone with a husband, a child and a full-time job. McLaughlin, 56, of Croydon, said she sometimes skips a day of sweeping, then doubles her efforts later. She limits herself to two 100-stamp rolls per month and notes, "A roll of stamps a month, you should definitely win something."

She says that 36 weeks into this year, she had already won 30 prizes, including \$1,000 in cash and \$400 in gift certificates to a dollar store.

"For every 100 entries I put in, I hit something," McLaughlin said. "Everyone who knows me knows exactly what I do to enter. They just don't want to do the work. That's what it comes down to - those who are going to do the work."

Sweepers love talking about what they've won. McLaughlin likes to go through her house and point out different items: Six-burner gas grill? Won it. TV? Won it. Blender? You know the answer.

When Liller's 6-year-old daughter, Alessandra, heard that a classmate was going on vacation, she asked the obvious question, at least to her: "Who did you win that from?"

Liller prompts her daughter with questions - When do we go to shows? When do we go to see Annie? When do we go to Disney on Ice? When do we get new TVs? - the answer each time is, "When we win it." (Except when the question is "When do we go to Sesame Place?" because "Mommy broke down this year," Liller laughed.)

Vera Carvalho brought pictures from her recent trip to Costa Rica, describing how she won it after mailing in one 3-by-5 card to a www.discovery.com sweepstakes.

Group members encourage one another. They share information about ongoing sweepstakes. They trade decorated envelopes. Theirs is easily the loudest, most gregarious table in the restaurant.

"We speak the same language. We support each other," said Ellen Barenbaum, 57, who spends about two hours a day on sweeping and once won a \$15,000 cash prize to remodel her kitchen. "We're happy when someone else wins and hope the next time it'll be us."

Sweeper Jacquelyn Massey of West Philadelphia said some of her friends make fun of her hobby, but she shrugs it off.

"People look at you like nobody ever wins. People do win, and they win all the time," said Massey, 59, a high school teacher who won a car in 1996 that she still drives. "If I'm feeling stressed, if I get into sweepstakes, whether online or pen and pencil, it just kind of cools me out. The possibility is always there."