

## Want to be a winner? Here's how

September 27, 2009

By **ROSE PANIERI** rpanieri@scn1.com

As the recession drags on, many people are out looking for a second job to make ends meet.

Cindy Sykora has found a better way to keep her head above water. She enters -- and wins -- contests.

Sykora landed a trip to Hawaii, a vacation in the Bahamas, a new car and \$10,000 to fill its gas tank. She scored new kitchen flooring from Menard's and cash prizes galore.

What began as a hobby has turned into a lucrative means of riding out the recession. She now tells others how they can do the same. This month the Palos Heights woman visited Lockport and Crest Hill libraries to share her insights.

### **Something for nothing**

A workers' compensation coordinator by day, the 50-year-old Sykora devotes about an hour every night to her hobby -- sweepstaking.

"After my daughter was born, I was a stay-at-home mom. I went on the computer and found hobby boards for sweepstakes and contests," she said. "I read a post from a Chicago woman who won a brand new car through a radio station."

Sykora had never owned a bright, shiny automobile. Could an average woman who lived an average life get something for nothing?

"I e-mailed the woman who won the car, and she encouraged me to start entering contests," Sykora said. "The very next day I noticed that the Menard's I drove past every day was having a grand opening sweepstakes. Each day I'd drop off one free sweepstakes entry."

Two weeks later, Sykora got a phone call that made her a believer. The home improvement store called to let her know she had won the grand prize: new kitchen flooring.

"I was hooked," Sykora said.

### **Thousands of chances**

Once Sykora made up her mind to enter contests, she found opportunities everywhere: at grand openings, in the mail and on the Web.

"There are literally thousands of sweepstakes sites on the Web," Sykora said. "If you want to find contests, go to Google and type in 'how to win sweepstakes' or 'sweepstakes entries' and you'll be on your way."

Once you find a contest or two to enter, be sure to read the rules carefully. To increase the odds of winning, do your homework.

"I try to learn as much as possible about the contest to put the odds in my favor," Sykora said. "What most people call luck, I call common sense. It's not difficult if you do a little research and read the fine print."

According to Sykora, one of the first rules of sweepstaking is to be aware that the winner is responsible for paying taxes on prizes won.

"You'll see contests where a radio station is giving away a party with a rock star," Sykora said. "Be aware that there is a monetary amount assigned to all prizes, and a prize such as this might be worth \$25,000. You'll pay taxes on that amount."

### **May the odds be with you**

When it comes to contests and sweepstakes, Sykora is mighty choosy. She's not a gal who wastes her time on a pie in the sky.

"I don't play the lotteries unless the prize is really big, like \$150 million," she said. "Personally, I do not enter the Publishers Clearinghouse; when you have millions of people entering a contest the odds are against you."

She's also studies the rules of the contest and the length of time it's open to entrants.

"If a contest is open from November to December, there will be a lot of competition and your odds of winning decrease," Sykora said. "A contest that's only taking entries for 30 to 60 days is a much better bet."

The more difficult it is to enter the contest -- the more hoops contestants are required to jump through -- the greater the odds of winning.

"I entered a photo contest once. For the contest, you had to show yourself involved in a sport with the product. So we took a picture of my daughter with a suntan product and a bottle of water," Sykora said. "These were the days when you had to get film developed and make a pretty big effort to enter, but in our case it was worth it. We won one of the first prizes."

### **You're (not) a winner**

Sykora also warns not to get taken in by scam contests.

These days e-mail and regular mail boxes often are filled with messages announcing "You've won!"

Sykora said that if you don't recall submitting an entry, don't fall for the bait. Be especially wary if you're asked for personal information such as a Social Security number or financial information such as your bank account or credit card numbers.

"First and foremost, you never, ever give out personal information like your Social Security number, bank or credit card accounts," she said. "If you get an e-mail saying you're a winner, don't click on the link in the e-mail. Go back to Google and look up the company, contact a representative, and ask if you are indeed a winner."