

May 13, 1999

## Cruises, Cars, Cash and No Stamps to Lick

By BONNIE ROTHMAN MORRIS

**E**very day, Wendy S. Limaugé spends an hour online entering sweepstakes and contests, chasing after the four C's -- computer, cruise, car and cash -- the tantalizing prizes coveted by sweepstakes entrants everywhere.

Since January of this year, Ms. Limaugé has won 21 prizes, including candy, 5,000 frequent flier miles, \$200 in cash, a mountain bike and bike helmet worth \$700, and a CD by Kari Wuhrer, an actress and pop singer. (Ms. Limaugé had no idea who Kari Wuhrer actually is.) She didn't win a cruise, she didn't nab the car, and the cash prize barely covered her monthly fuel bill, but she is thrilled because her son won a \$2,000 laptop computer in an online contest.

"People think I'm super lucky or I'm crazy," said Ms. Limaugé, 38, of Ledyard, Conn., a full-time computer instructor and mother of three who owns a company called The Computer Lady. "I get to win things I could never, never buy or couldn't afford to buy."



George Ruhe for The New York Times

**ENTRIES BY E-MAIL** - Wendy Limaugé enters so many sweepstakes that she has a bar chart of her winnings. Online contests have allowed her to cut her postage bill sharply.

Ms. Limaugé has been entering sweepstakes and contests fervently for five years, both on and off line. Last year, she spent \$1,200 on postage entering mail-in contests. This year she has set her mail budget at \$400 because she is entering more contests free online.

Ms. Limaugé's perseverance is not unusual for the hobbyists who call themselves sweepstakers. The spread of sweepstakes and contests on the Internet is causing the ranks of sweepstakes enthusiasts to swell, and, not surprisingly, increasing the number of dinky prizes whose initials are more like C for crab meat or B for beef jerky.

Mike Reilly, who is the Webmaster at [www.sweepstakesonline.com](http://www.sweepstakesonline.com), a Web site at which 60,000 users have chosen to register, opened his virtual doors in 1995. Back then, there were 20 new sweepstakes to list every week, he said, but hundreds of new ones are now opening daily.

Reilly, who said he had inherited the sweepstakes hobby from his mother, said his Web site listed 20 to 50 new sweepstakes a day.

On any given day, Reilly's site is a portal to thousands of contests. In late April, one could log on and link to a national contest for a trip to Lake Tahoe.

---

## Contests, with prizes big and small, are proliferating on the Internet.

---

Another contest's grand prize was a signed poster of George Strait and the Dixie Chicks, while second prize was a George Strait CD.

Other contests listed prizes like small amounts of cash, software and bouquets, for instance.

"There's always plenty of bottom-feeder-type sweepstakes on the Internet," said Evan Neufeld, a senior analyst at Jupiter Communications, a new-media research company. "High-level sweepstakes, where you can win a million dollars, is a

relatively new medium. A lot of people who design sweepstakes haven't gotten their heads around it, but I think it's coming."

Sweepstakes, online or off, are games of chance in which entering is free and the winner is chosen from a random drawing. Contests are games that require the contestant to perform a task to enter, like answering trivia questions. Sweepstakes and contests are time-honored approaches to the marketing of consumer products and services.

On a grand scale, these games are time-sensitive advertising campaigns meant to prompt a specific action by consumers by offering the lure of enormous winnings.

Sweepstakes and contests, which require contestants to fill out forms with personal information, have also been used by marketers to generate new leads and mailing lists.

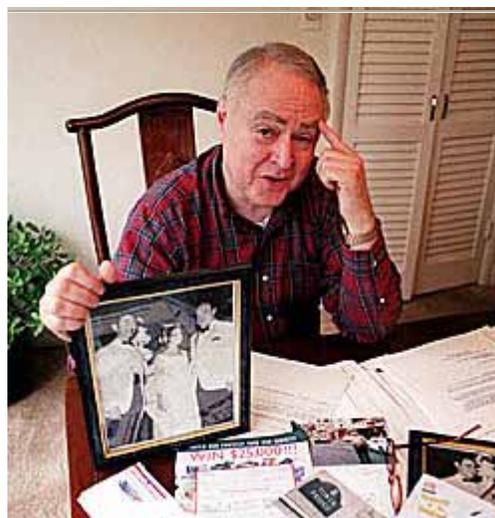
Before the rise of the Internet, sweepstakes and contests were all about what marketing people call branding.

Online, the objectives are to attract traffic to the site and to collect personal information.

Colin Webster, the president of a small auction site, [www.edeal.com](http://www.edeal.com), routinely runs what Neufeld might refer to as a "bottom feeder" contest but which serves his marketing objective perfectly.

In April the company promised to give away a multimedia CD player that plays downloaded music off the Internet to new registered users. The prize cost the company \$199. By mid-April, Webster said, he had totaled up about 800 new registered users on the site.

For sweepstakers, the Edeal contest is a golden opportunity. The odds of winning -- 800 to 1 -- are exceptionally good.



Ann Grillo for The New York Times

MEMORIES OF WINNERS PAST - Norman Posner, a sweepstakes enthusiast, won his first contest in 1969, a trip to Miami Beach for his wedding, with Bob Hope as his best man.

In a contest sponsored by [Delivere.com](http://Delivere.com) (pronounced Deliver-ee), the odds of winning a Volkswagen Beetle, for instance, are estimated at 300,000 to 1. For a new Buick promotion, the odds of winning are a million to 1.

"Online, all you see is the prize -- branding is almost irrelevant," said John Feldman, an associate at the Washington office of Arent, Fox, Kitner, Plotkin and Kahn who specializes in sweepstakes and contest law.

Since Herb Smith began entering sweepstakes online last August, he has won a Halloween costume, an eight-piece Tupperware set, "a ton of T-shirts" and computer software. He has also won a pair of Levi's in the wrong size.

"Now they're having trouble getting back to me about exchanging it," said Smith, 50, of Bay City, Ore., a senior technician at a hardware factory.

Smith said he entered about 150 contests every day online, going through [www.webstakes.com](http://www.webstakes.com), a Web site with direct links to promotions, and through leads that he finds through the [www.sweepstakesonline.com](http://www.sweepstakesonline.com) site.

Smith recently won a Sony Playstation, a device he has no use for. Now he has vowed to enter contests only if they have prizes he's itching to win.

The forms that contestants fill out online, often quite detailed, enable the company running the promotion to try to sell something to that consumer with an exquisitely appropriate message once the contest ends, said said Andy Batkin, the chief executive of Interactive Marketing and the co-chairman of the Interactive Media Council of the Promotion Marketing Association.

"The buzz word online is permission marketing," Batkin said, adding that the marketing message may then be perceived as content, rather than an advertisement, and may have more impact.

Contest entrants do have some safeguards against being bombarded with e-mail, after entering a contest.

At the bottom of online contest entry forms -- at least the ones with rules written by lawyers -- there is generally a click-on box that asks if the consumer wants more information from the company. It is up to the consumer to agree to receive more mail or not.

Sweepstakes players say they rarely receive unwanted commercial e-mail, or spam, for that very reason. Unlike less diligent contestants, they are more likely to read the rules, every last one of them, looking for loopholes that increase their chances of winning.

Perhaps the most visible rule is the one that casual sweepstakes entrants might look upon dubiously. It says the contest "requires no purchase to enter," and it is usually at the top of most rules pages.

Who hasn't believed that buying magazine subscriptions increases the odds of winning the Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes, for instance?

"A purchase cannot impact one's odds of winning," Feldman wrote in an e-mail message. Purchasing products to enter a contest online, he explained, is almost a non-issue.

The online playing field, then, appears to be a more level one for the sweepstakes neophyte.

Online, he wrote, "the idea of making a big deal about whether you bought something or not doesn't come up with great frequency."

Still, sweepstakes players look for ways to beat the system to win. Norman Posner, of Pikesville, Md., won his first contest in 1969. His prize was a trip to Miami Beach for his own wedding, with Bob Hope serving as the best man.

Since then, Posner has won cars, cruises, trips to Europe, television sets and T-shirts galore. He said he was lucky, yet he added that gimmicks helped. For mail-in contests, he folds his envelopes, which he said added surface area and made the envelope more likely to be grabbed.

---

## **SWEEPSTAKES SHORTCUTS**

Many sites link directly to sweepstakes and contest pages that enable entrants to bypass the home pages of the sponsoring companies.

These Web portals are a boon to sweepstakes hobbyists who enter as many contests as they can as quickly as possible every day.

But to contest sponsors, who are probably seeking to drive traffic to a particular site, "this is less than good," said Evan Neufeld, a senior analyst at Jupiter Communications.

To avoid fraud and spam E-mail, entrants should read the rules carefully. If a fee is required for entry, the contest should be based on skill.

Many states have laws that govern the size of the prize in such a contest. Legally, all sweepstakes in which the winner is decided by chance must be free.

At [www.sweepstakesonline.com](http://www.sweepstakesonline.com), the owner, Mike Reilly, has written software, Autosweep Desktop, that automatically fills in contest entry blanks. It is available for a trial run from the Web site. Contest links may also be found at [www.sweepthenet.com](http://www.sweepthenet.com), a newsletter, and at the [www.winsweeps.com](http://www.winsweeps.com) site.

---

He draws rainbows across the stamps to attract attention to them. He also visualizes himself winning or using the prize.

Entering contests over the Internet is trickier, admitted Posner, a parole officer and professional hypnotist. Last year, to enter a local radio promotion conducted via e-mail, Posner colored in the background on his entry.

"I didn't know if they would receive the color -- it might be gray," he said.

Posner's efforts, colored background or not, won him a trip to London.

While other sweepstakes quests for the big prizes may not be as fruitful as Posner's, contestants say they all get a thrill when they find packages waiting for them at their front doors.

Even if it's a cup of candy.

---