

Online Sweepstakes Pioneer Nets a Prize a Week

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Ledyard - In her spare time, which often means those quiet hours between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m., Wendy Limaugé sits in front of her computer tapping briskly over her keyboard in search of yet another Internet sweepstakes.

Despite the late hours, her nocturnal mission remains focused, and Limaugé can point to a growing pile of winnings as testament to her successful Worldwide Web wanderings.

Each day, the software instructor spends at least an hour entering online sweepstakes. Some nights, it means registering for an AT&T contest; other nights it includes filling out a form for basketball player Grant Hill's "Shoot the Net" sweepstakes. Whatever the stakes, Limaugé will enter, and she's part of a growing number of fellow Internet "sweepstakers" who are seeking a cyberspace chance to clinch an online prize.

Sweepstakes have been around for decades, but the popularity of the Internet has added another dimension to the free giveaways. Now people can simply visit various Web sites, such as www.sweepstakesonline.com, which lists ongoing contest. By clicking on the link and doing a few quick keystrokes, they have entered a contest at no cost.

Companies are catching on to the growing popularity of the contest and are using sweepstakes to drive business to their site. Just as casinos advertise giveaways to entice people to their gambling halls, companies are advertising sweepstakes on popular sites such as yahoo.com to lure in Web browsers. Consequently, the number of contests has ballooned.

"When I first went on the Net in 1995 looking for contests, I'd maybe come up with 20 a week, and now you can literally find hundreds of new ones daily." says Mike Reilly, founder and president of the sweepstakesonline.com Web site based in Redmond, Wash. "It's just exploded, because people know that this is a great way to get traffic."

The contests have become so popular that sweepstakesonline.com receives 280,000 visitors a month, making it one of the top 1,500 Web sites in terms of traffic, Reilly adds.

The spread of Internet sweepstakes has also led to an increase in people who enter them. While some may have stayed away from sweepstakes in the past because it was a cumbersome process or they had to pay for postage, people are more willing to simply fill out a form on the computer.

"(Mail-in sweepstakes) will still be around...but it's going to become smaller and smaller because you can enter the same sweepstakes in most cases these days via the Internet, so why spend postage," Reilly says.

"If you can have multiple entries in a contest, why spend the postage when you can spend your \$19.95 and get it free. I think the only people who do that now are the hard-core

hobbyists and people who think that for some reason or another they will win my mailing in," he says.

With their growing popularity, online sweepstakes are getting harder to win.

Limaugé, who enters about 100 sweepstakes contests a month, estimates that 80 percent of the things she wins come from the online contest. But, as more and more people gain access to the Internet, she agrees that the sweepstakes are becoming more difficult to win.

"I used to win everything under the sun," she admits. "Now, with so many people the odds aren't as great."

Nick Taylor, publisher of the Minnesota-based "Best Sweepstakes Letter," agrees. "The more entries, the harder it is to win."

Despite the odds, Limaugé is still managing an impressive take. It's readily apparent in a visit to her Meetinghouse Lane home, which she shares with her husband and children. Whether it's a stereo, headphones or new drapes, the fruits of her labor are just about everywhere you look.

But Limaugé, who by vocation remains a computer instructor, does not consider herself lucky. Instead, she thinks of her hobby as a side business whose gross revenues have topped \$9,000 so far this year. Subtracting the \$350 she has spend on supplies for mail-in contest and other costs, Limaugé estimates that she's netted more than \$7,000.

"The rule of thumb is you are going to lose 80 percent of the time, but you can't lost all the time," she explains. "If I don't win something once a week, there's something wrong."

Recent congressional hearings, however, revealed a darker side to the growing Internet sweepstakes mania. People testified that they spend thousands of dollars buying merchandise in hopes of winning. But Limaugé has little sympathy. The whole point, she stresses, is to read the rules, and they clearly state that participants don't have to buy anything.

Limaugé is an organized woman. She confesses that she "played office" as a young child rather than "play house" because she preferred to file things. Today, she's developed a scientific approach to her Internet hobby. She has notebook divided by months that show which sweepstakes are offered and when they are due. She also documents what she enters, how many times she entered, and how much it cost in postage.

For the online sweepstakes, Limaugé has a color-coordinated graph, which show how much she has won each month, quite handy for tax purposes. She also has records of her expenses (she steadfastly limits herself to \$50 a month) and has created files that are dedicated to various sweepstakes contest.

While Limaugé has been successful, she laments that she has not achieved pure sweepstakes success. She explains that there are four C's to true sweepstakes nirvana: cash, car, cruise and computer. Of those, she has only won cash. But her son, she proudly says, won his own computer via a sweepstakes game.

Limaugé's frequent success is evident in the casual way she discusses the prizes she won. She breezily mentions that she won a \$7,000 trip to see "Star Wars" in seven cities. The package included hotel, airfare and limousine rides to the theaters in cities such as Chicago and San Francisco.

Limaugé is not excited about everything she has won and often ends up with random items that she would rather do without. The problem she says, is participants have to enter a sweepstakes to win the grand prize but could easily win one of the smaller prizes.

So Limaugé either gives the prizes to friends or donates them to Ledyard's youth services program at the end of each year. Already, she has collected two bags worth of items, including Grant Hill baseball caps and basketballs that she intends to give to the town.

The less-coveted prizes have also proved to be profitable in some cases. Once she won a two-year supply of Baby Ruth candy bars, which arrived in one bulk shipment.

She started giving them away, but then realized that she could obtain a PlayStation video unit with a proof of purchase. So she quickly instructed her friends to give her the wrappers back, and she sent them in to redeem them for the PlayStation unit.

Yet she didn't stop there. Limaugé then went on the ebay.com Web site and sold the item for \$250. "People think I'm crazy," Limaugé says. "I think it's neat."

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