

Gimme, gimme gets

They've got it, you want it, here's how to get it all for free

Aug. 29, 2006. 06:57 AM

SHAUNA REMPEL
TORONTO STAR

"No purchase necessary."

Is there any phrase sweeter to a cheapskate's ears?

Certainly not to mine, but it actually wasn't until recently that I unleashed the freebie addict inside. It all happened with a radio commercial for a backpack beer cooler, found free inside a case of beer.

I wanted that cooler, but unfortunately I'm not such a fan of suds in general. Then the announcer said the magic words: "no purchase necessary."

One toll-free phone call and two weeks later, I had my very own backpack/cooler delivered right to my door. And it didn't cost a cent.

It got me thinking — maybe I could get other things without purchase. And with that, my Gimme Gimme Summer began. I would listen to radio commercials for that little legal phrase so often accompanied by "while supplies last, must be legal drinking age," that most people tune out like so much white noise. (Ever wondered about the legalese? See sidebar.)

Soon I was in possession of coupons for steaks, ice cream, a bottle opener and yet another cooler. But I realized that adage involving free lunches, or lack thereof, is true. To get two free steaks, I had to submit a 100-word essay on "Why I love to barbecue." Hmmn, I wonder if "hickory-smoked" counts as two words? How many times can I write "sizzle"?

Some things really weren't free at all, when you factored in the postage, admin fees and shipping. A World Cup T-shirt available "free" would have ended up costing \$6.50. For that price, you might as well buy a couple of shirts in Chinatown after the final game, which is probably when the shirt would have arrived anyway.

An offer for a "free" iPod from a bank was actually the opposite of free, when you think of it, because it required you to transfer all the money in your chequing account. I may be addicted, but the idea of basing financial decisions on a giveaway is going too far. (Okay, so I once signed up for a credit card to get a hat, but I've matured since then.)

I would have gladly taken home an iPod in exchange for test-driving



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

You too can get free stuff from corporations. But be careful - you just might get addicted.

Legal free stuff

So why do beer companies say there is "no purchase necessary" to get that T-shirt or duffel bag?

Legally, companies have to offer the promotional premiums for free in order to avoid encouraging irresponsible drinking, says Brenda Pritchard, who practises advertising and marketing law at Gowlings in Toronto.

Pritchard says the premiums also have to be relatively inexpensive; again to comply with legislation designed to ensure that people will not feel obliged to buy large amounts of alcohol in order to get the goodies.

But don't expect to write in and get comped on those little airline bottles of alcohol you see attached to bottles at the LCBO, says spokesman Chris Layton.

The LCBO's social responsibility guidelines let liquor companies offer "value-adds" to customers, just as long as they're under \$5, says Layton.

"We don't want to encourage immoderate consumption," he says of the \$5 limit.

a new vehicle, but sadly that promotion by Toronto Jeep dealers ended before I even heard about it. Another lesson learned: gotta stay on your toes to get the goodies.

Then there were complicated instructions involving postage, properly sized envelopes, and giving out personal information that I wasn't sure any beer company needed to know. This was hard work.

"The customer always has to do something," agrees Eleanor Friedland, vice-president of the Consumers Council of Canada.

Friedland says companies are legally bound to obey rules regarding these promotions, such as making sure there are enough supplies available for everyone to get the freebies.

But she says companies sometimes make it difficult to actually get the goods, as I found out. The fine print regarding promotions should be more prominent, and in plain language, Friedland says.

Undaunted, I decided to expand the net of freebies and see what else I could catch. So, of course, I went online, where it's much easier to find free stuff if you don't mind spam and the occasional scam. In the case of the HotMat company, my free personalized mouse pad required that I register with a psychic, who in turn wanted me to sign up for digital cable. Meh, I didn't want a mousepad with my name on it anyway.

"One of the reasons these companies do this as a marketing ploy is they get your name," says Friedland. "They have your name and your address. They even have your email address, and you are a potential new customer."

So there may have been an ulterior motive behind that free Stress Test I got from the Scientology centre?

But not even a religious group or the prospect of being on dozens of mailing lists could deter me. Blank CDs, romance novels, painkillers, contact lenses, even scary-looking home facial peel kits — I signed up for all of them.

Pilates classes? Can't even pronounce it properly but I'll be there. Free "colour design" beauty makeover? Sure thing. Bag of dog food? Good to have in case I get a dog. Jumbo pack of condoms? Uh, that's good to have around, too.

But even though I signed up for most of this online, it still arrives via snail mail. So while waiting, I looked for ways to get my freebie fix. City events proved an excellent source, with the bonus of instant gratification and no mail carrier ringing the buzzer at 8 a.m. with a package that won't fit through the mail slot.

For example, at the Pride Parade, packs of gum, beaded necklaces and cellphones, not to mention all manner of prophylactics, were up for grabs. Most of the stuff was being thrown out into the crowd, so a certain amount of skill and luck was involved.

By the middle of the Gimme Gimme Summer I was on a roll, an out-of-control roll. I found myself going out of my way to visit radio stations and stores where there might be a chance at a free can of pop or sticker.

Even free stuff on the sidewalk cast off by my neighbours had a new allure.

"Given that the LCBO doesn't allow deep discounts ... this gives the customer something of added value," Layton says.

Other added values are the nearly 60 LCBO locations throughout the GTA where alcohol reps regularly offer samplings of their products — a free way to get primed before a night out.

(Must be legal drinking age, of course.)

And as for that skill-testing question that accompanies contests, according to gaming law experts Michael D. Lipton and Michael Weber, it's all about "games."

Sections 197 to 206 of Canadian Criminal Code detail the restrictions about gaming in Canada, including a law against private companies presenting games of chance with valuable prizes, including contests.

But apparently it's not gambling if companies add a skill-testing question, which is why you have to put your long division skills to use before you can claim a prize.

It's also a Criminal Code offence to require contestants to pay to enter, which brings it back to the "no purchase necessary" requirement.

Shauna Rempel

Now, the thing about free stuff is no matter how strong the urge to grab as much as possible, you can also afford to be picky. So even though I could use a folding chair, especially a free folding chair left on an Annex sidewalk, I don't need it so much that I'll take one that wobbles. Especially when it comes with a handwritten caution: "may fold up while you're still in it."

But a few houses away a gold-painted wooden footstool in the shape of an elephant is too good to pass up. And a bobblehead doll that not even the garbage collectors will touch? That's ... priceless.

But when I found myself contemplating free adult "bladder control protective underwear" I knew I'd hit bottom.

So, like any other addict, I sought support. I found online freebie forum Goldfishlegs.ca, where members cheerfully own up to their addiction.

"I've got freebies coming out my ears, I tell you," Sheryl Altvater says gleefully. The Oshawa freebie fanatic also runs <http://canadian-freebies-n-stuff.com>, where people can share information about free offers in Canada.

"Unfortunately, the U.S. has the best freebies," says Altvater.

But Canadians can join Bzz-Agent, a Boston-based word-of-mouth marketing site that rewards members who try out new products and fill out surveys about them. Altvater says as a BzzAgent she's been able to sample food and beauty items before they hit store shelves.

I didn't need any more temptation. My friends were already uncomfortable going out in public with me dashing around filling my pockets with samples. In any case, the thrill was starting to wane, as things I'd never use started to pile up in my apartment.

What did I end up with? Basically just a bunch of stuff to pack up the next time I move.

Or I could just give it all away.

JD@thestar.ca

Shauna Rempel is a copy editor for thestar.com