

The stuff of winning contests

By Traci Rader, Times Correspondent

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VALRICO — Kathleen Spight is a methodical sweepstakes contestant. There are the morning calls to sweepstakes hotlines. After that, she spends time filling out self-addressed envelopes for contests.

Sheer persistence tilts the odds in her favor, but a little luck doesn't hurt. Whether she's good, lucky or both, Spight has had quite the sweepstakes haul in the past 15 years.

She has won the four "Big C's" of sweepstakes: cash, car, computer and cruise. She has taken home a Harley-Davidson, a Mercedes and a big-screen TV. She has won trips to Aruba, Spain, the Cayman Islands, Las Vegas and the 2006 Super Bowl. Then there's the countless number of smaller prizes: gift certificates, cash and gift baskets.

"I'd like to thank all the local retailers like Publix, Winn-Dixie and Sweetbay for their generosity," Spight says, jokingly comparing herself to an Academy Award winner for all of her effort.

Effort indeed.

Spight starts her morning by calling several sweepstakes phone numbers and following the automated instructions. Like all sweepstakes stalkers, she talks about the bigger contests.

"Pepsi is giving away a Corvette," she says, hesitant to share the information. But she already won a car. She'll let that one slide.

After the phone calls, Spight, a retired school counselor, fills out self-addressed, stamped envelopes. Details are important: Some contests require a specific size postcard, which may or may not meet postal regulations.

Details matter, but the official rules are gospel. When the rules allow a daily entry, hard-core sweepstakes entrants do just that. Some months, Spight spends more than \$100 on postage.

It also takes time. A serious sweepstakes entrant may spend five to 15 hours a week entering contests and even more time tracking contests with sweepstakes clubs or on Web sites.

Seniors are the most likely to be sweepstakes hobbyists because they have more free time, says Geri Anne Benning, a partner in Alliance Sweepstakes Services, which manages contests and sweepstakes for large and small companies.

About 17 percent of sweepstakes submissions are repeat entries, she estimates.

That, Spight says, is the difference between those who never win and those who do, often.

So what's Spight's advice?

The best sweepstakes are local, she says, because there's a better chance of winning. Regional and national contests are next best.

"Don't make it more than a hobby," she says. "You'll be miserable. It's a game of chance, and you have to have the passion and

patience."

>>fast facts

Got the bug?

Before getting caught up in sweepstakes fever, here are some things to know:

- Sweepstakes are a way to gather market research data, but it's illegal to sell entrants' information. Florida has especially strict sweepstakes rules, requiring companies to be registered and bonded if prizes are over \$5,000.
- Never enter a sweepstakes that charges a fee. It's a scam. For other good advice, see www.fraud.org/tips/internet/sweepstakes.htm.
- Stick with major sponsors and established companies to avoid scams. Never give away your Social Security number until you receive a prize affidavit from the sponsor.

Sources: Alliance Sweepstakes Services, Kathleen Spight