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The Land of Odds

By PAUL-MARK RENDON

Think you've got an iron-clad contest? Carolyn Wilman, Canada's 'contest queen' says too many contests are full of holes and marketers are on the losing end

Carolyn Wilman loves her tea. "I'm a total tea snob," says the Oshawa, Ont. resident, sitting at her kitchen table, pouring a cup of Fortnum & Mason Afternoon Blend, a new favourite she picked up on a recent trip to London, England. The \$9,000 family vacation in December cost her next to nothing. She won it as part of a *National Post* contest promoting the latest Harry Potter movie. "I actually have a picture of me sitting in Dumbledore's chair. It was great!"

In less time than it takes to pour another cup, it becomes clear that Wilman could just be the luckiest woman in Canada: Last year, she won more than 150 contests worth approximately \$34,000 in cash and prizes. In 2004, she won 125 contests. Her efforts have landed her and her family everything from \$1.50 music downloads to a \$10,000 Greek Island getaway.

But luck favours those who play the odds. And Wilman, the self-styled "contest queen," plays them like a Vegas veteran. Every month, the contest "hobbyist" (she dislikes the word "professional") enters between 6,000 and 7,000 ballots, winning an average of 10 to 15 contests. Wilman once even averaged one win a day for an entire month.

"Say there's a contest for a car," says the stay-at-home mother. "Well, everyone in my family can use a new car. So I'll enter me, I'll enter my husband, my mom, my sister, my brother. I might even enter one of my best friends."

Wilman often gives her winnings to family, friends and charity, and all that balloting has made her an expert on what makes for a solid promotional contest. With marketers' below-the-line budgets growing and contests being used to connect with the best prospects, Wilman says flaws are also becoming more commonplace. She estimates 25% of the contests she enters have holes that, if not fixed, can mean hurting the relationship companies are trying to build with consumers.

"When they get people calling up and asking 'how many times can I enter 'cause that's not in the rules, what's the end date,' or that your web page keeps crashing, you've got to listen to those people," she says. "We're the ones bothering to let you know there's something wrong. Everyone else won't. They'll just click on your site. They can't get in? Oh well, gone!"

Parked outside Wilman's house is a maroon Jeep Grand Cherokee with a licence plate that says it all: "IMLUCKY." While it's a hint of her success, she usually prefers to stay humble. Not everyone in her online contest playing community wins as much as she does, after all. "It's part of my karma," she says. "I don't want to get the evil eye."

What she wants is to help-both marketers and contest players. For the latter, she plans on self-publishing her first book this month, titled *You Can't Win If You Don't Enter*, filled with tips gleaned since 2001, after the dot-com bust left her jobless and the birth of her daughter meant spending more time at home. To aid in her winning ways, Wilman uses computer programs like RoboForm, an autofiller that lets her enter any number of contests with a few keystrokes. "This saves so much time... And it's completely legal."

For marketers, she offers services like contest auditing, pre-testing, education and strategy through her website, contestqueen.com. Wilman's quick to assert that she never breaks contest rules. Hobbyists or enthusiasts, she adds, can in fact be a marketer's most valuable ambassador.

"We talk about you online-it's buzz marketing at its finest," she says. "The problem is companies hate the hobbyist. They think we're just out to win."

And winning is definitely taken seriously, says Brenda Pritchard, a partner at Toronto's Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP, who heads the firm's national advertising law practice. In an effort to increase their chances, some would-be winners bend the rules with amazing ingenuity. Pritchard tells of one woman who created 10,000 e-mail addresses for a contest that stipulated a maximum of one entry per address.

Others use programs like RoboForm to fire e-ballots faster than a machine gun, taking advantage of contests that fail to state a maximum number of entries per person. "We had one contest where a client said someone was entering 30,000 times *per minute*," Pritchard says.

"A lot of marketers may not understand what's capable on the Internet today," says Duncan McCreedy, executive vice-president of the IC Group, a Winnipeg-based promotions management company that handles as many as 150 contests each year for clients like Visa, Pepsi QTG and AOL Time Warner. He's seen instances where 95% of contest entries originate from as few as 10 individuals.

"It's significant," he says. "If the proper security mechanisms aren't in place, you're going to see 60% or more of the registration data come from less than 1% of the unique registrants."

But those are extreme cases. Pritchard, who is also co-author of the book *Advertising and Marketing Law in Canada*, says most contests usually go according to plan, and having lawyers check them beforehand is a big reason why. Her best advice? "Don't just go online, copy somebody else's rules and assume that it's going to work for your promotion," she says. "And step back from it. Have somebody who's not integrally involved see if it makes sense. You want consumers to understand it." Overly complicated rules, she says, result in frustration and, ultimately, less participation.

Neglecting the details is another problem. Wilman says she's had mail-in ballots returned to her because the address posted by the contest didn't exist. One management firm even admitted to her that it didn't test a contest web page before it went live. "They fixed it, but if you're Joe Average and you couldn't enter those first few days, would you bother going back? No. Lost customer."

McCreedy says contests often veer off track during the design and development crunch, when approvals don't happen fast enough and an imminent advertising campaign or product launch forces the supporting contest to face the music prematurely. "If they only have a couple days to get it in market, they blow through the testing period," he says. "You could see how it could go off the rails pretty fast."

And when things go wrong, they can be disastrous. In 2001, a printing error forced Ultramar to activate its backup plan. The gas retailer had distributed 314,000 promotional booklets throughout New Brunswick. Three of them were supposed to contain an instant prize of \$1,500 in gas, but the misprint turned 100,000 of them into instant winners. An apologetic Ultramar held a random draw for the three prizes instead, as set out in its regulations.

Pepsi wasn't so lucky. In 1992, in the Philippines, an under-the-bottlecap promotion was to award one \$50,000 prize, but a printing error made 800,000 bottlecaps grand prize winners. Pepsi offered to pay \$20 to anyone with a winning cap. The public scoffed. Things went from bad to worse. "Bombs were thrown into Pepsi bottling plants, two people died in riots and all foreign-born Pepsi executives were flown from the country," Pritchard says. "It was a disaster."

Mike Accavitti, the former vice-president of marketing for Windsor, Ont.-based DaimlerChrysler Canada, knows promotional contests aren't all fun and games. For its "You Could Be A Millionaire" promotion that ended in January, DaimlerChrysler took out insurance against scenarios that included multiple million-dollar winners, he says, adding DC's legal team, ad agency and contest management firm were all involved right from the start. "We didn't cut any corners."

Scott Cruickshank, sales manager for Brantford, Ont.-based Marco Sales & Incentives, a third-party fulfillment firm that handles as many as 800 contests each year, including DC's Millionaire promotion, says a common misconception he sees involves marketers who want to build a database, thinking all the information gathered through their contest is fair game. Current privacy laws say otherwise. "There's no more default where if people don't check a box, I can still use (their information)," he says. "It's not a negative opt-in anymore. It's a positive opt-in."

On the upside, Accavitti, who was transferred in January to DC headquarters in Auburn Hills, Mich. for his new role as director of Dodge Motorsports, says he isn't bothered by contest professionals. DC's two or three major contests each year, he says, are invaluable for things like driving traffic to dealerships, introducing new products and generating publicity. "We know that in order to break through, you have to go out on a limb. You have to take some risks."

Back at her house in Oshawa, Wilman's doorbell rings. Seconds later, she hauls a large cardboard box back into the kitchen as her cherubic three-year-old, Nicole, bounces by her side, fixated on its contents.

"Ho-lee-mo-lee! Look at all the stuff we won!" Wilman says, pulling box after box of Girlfitti-brand accessories from Crayola onto the kitchen counter. She entered herself, Nicole and her husband into the YTV contest after learning about it from her online chat group. A few minutes later, the phone rings. It's a radio station calling to notify Wilman of yet another win. She jots down the information, smiling.

"I love doing this," she says, opening one of Nicole's new toys. "Go have fun now. Who's a winner?"

Nicole shuffles off into the family room. "I am!"

Wilman's winning advice

State your purpose:

Is it brand awareness? A new product launch? Attracting new customers or building a database? Pick one and stick with it. Too many objectives muddle the message.

Typecast:

The purpose of a contest self-selects its type. For example, brand awareness contests should allow for daily entry. If you're trying to build a database, ensure there's an opt-in or opt-out section.

Take aim:

Who is your target? If it's a younger crowd save the mail-in ballots for older demographics, and go instead with online or text messaging.

Take the heat:

Does your internal team have the resources to handle tens of thousands of letters? Will your website crumble under the weight of hundreds of thousands of visitors? Consider hiring a third-party specialist to deal with it.

Rules rule

Include who is eligible, how often they can enter, how many people per household can enter and the start- and end-dates of the contest. Remember, rules are a legal document.

Listen up:

Contest players, especially hobbyists, should be valued for their feedback.

Plan B:

What is your contingency plan for changes in prize availability? List your backup plan in the regulations. Have a PR strategy ready.