

THE CONTEST CENTER

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About a year ago, I started a small company to run word puzzle contests. I called it The Contest Center, a rather pretentious name, but one I hoped would fit as the company grew to what conceivably could become my regular occupation when I retired.

My early aims were modest. I did not expect floods of entries, only enough to keep the enterprise self-supporting. After all, I not only had a more-than-full-time job, but a busy schedule of civic, charitable, and religious activities. However, I soon discovered that even my modest goals would be difficult to achieve.

I launched my first contest with an ad in a contest magazine in September 1980. I offered a top prize of \$500, which I felt would draw many entries, and so get the company off to a great start. Instead, I learned some expensive lessons.

The most important lesson was that a new sponsor needs to establish a reputation for honesty and reliability: that you judge fairly, and pay off promptly. By a most unpleasant coincidence, several of the leading contest magazines had run articles about cheating promoters just one or two months before my contest appeared. The publishers of these magazines like to repeat these stories often, so that prospective contestants will enter their contests and not their competitors' -- a reasonable tactic, but hardly fair to their advertisers!

The result was that I received only 42 entries at \$5 apiece. Since I had already paid for the ads, and to equip a small office in my basement, I had to come up with the whole \$500 prize out of my own pocket.

For my second contest I was rather more cautious. I geared the prizes to the number of entries so that I couldn't pay more in prizes than I received in entry fees. It didn't help. The second contest was mathematical in nature (you had to multiply some of the numbers together). Contestants shunned it. So the entry fees covered the prizes, but not the advertising costs, and again I took a loss.

Twice burned, I adopted a new technique. I started two more contests, but I accompanied the ads with articles in the puzzle magazine. I explained what I thought my new company could offer (e.g., new types of puzzles, responsiveness to the preferences of the contestants), and what

my policies would be (e.g., not dividing the prize money until each share became a pittance). These articles have now become a regular feature of the magazine, where I answer readers' letters, explain new types of contests and contest formats, talk about word rules (on which I hold strong opinions, quite different from other sponsors' views), report on the progress of my contests, and describe some of my experiences as a fledgling contest sponsor.

I do not know whether it was the policies I propounded, or simply that I was revealing myself as an individual, not a faceless corporate entity, but both of those contests made small profits, enough to cancel the loss from my second contest.

After these two successful contests, I decided to expand my horizons for the fifth contest. I advertised in several mass-circulation newspapers, and also some mail-order specialty publications. The experience was degrading. I became exposed to the world of opportunity seekers, a frantic subeconomy of small businesses trying to make money from each other, like a bowl of turtles, each trying to climb to the top of the stack on the backs of all the others. I received heaps of mail from people or firms promising instant wealth if I would sell their product, use their service, or let them sell my product, with endless variations.

One smart operator has found a loophole in the postal law against chain letters, namely, if you offer something in return for the money sent, then the scheme is legal. All you need to do is send the chain letter to people offering things for sale. So every time you place an ad that looks like you are selling anything, you will attract at least a dozen of these chain letters. I had seven ads. One enterprising fellow sent three of these chain letters in one envelope. There is even a company that, for a fee, will get you onto several of these chains.

Then there are envelope stuffing rackets, drop shipping, mailing list sellers, people to print or distribute your ads, how-to books by the score, people to buy your customer lists (the other end of the mailing list selling business), many with false religious or charitable tie-ins, and through all this a thread of erotica: pictures, books, films, or video cassettes to buy, sell, or swap, or lists of buyers or sellers of these materials, even instruction on how to dodge the postal or tax laws on these transactions.

One cannot come through such an experience without feeling contaminated. The few legitimate contestants who emerged from these ads justified the cost neither in dollars nor self-esteem.

Still, I haven't given up. The entrants from the regular contest magazine continue to enter my new contests in growing numbers. Either they like the types of contests I offer, or the way that I conduct them, or they finally have confidence I won't suddenly disappear in the night, leaving the prizes unpaid. Anyway, I now have a small but loyal following to whom I will, in my turn, be loyal.

Since most of the contests I have conducted are word-oriented, Word Ways readers may be interested in the philosophy of puzzle-selection that I have developed. Briefly, I try to make my puzzles different from each other, and from the puzzles of other sponsors. There are several conflicting constraints on the choice of a puzzle: it must be interesting and easy to understand, it must be easy to work, and yet it must manage to avoid ties. My secret is to set up simple but conflicting goals. To illustrate how this can be done, consider my most recent completed contest. The object of this contest was to fit as many words of five or more letters vertically or horizontally into a 7x12 grid as possible, using as many of the letters MONEY (valued, respectively, at 21, 22, 16, 9 and 6 points apiece) as possible. The winning solution is given below, with the vertical and horizontal words separated by lines:

M	M	M	M	M	O	N	O	T	O	N	E
O	A	U	O	M	O	N	O	T	O	N	Y
R	M	M	N	M	O	N	O	M	E	R	N
M	M	M	E	H	O	M	O	N	Y	M	O
O	O	Y	Y	M	E	M	E	N	T	O	O
N	N	H	O	N	E	Y	M	O	O	N	N
E	N	E	M	Y	C	O	M	M	O	N	E

It is easy to find words using lots of these letters: ENEMY, COMMON, MEMENTO, ECONOMY, etc. However, the longer the word, the harder it becomes to fit into the diagram. Words up to seven letters can share a row, as ENEMYMEMENTO, but the longer words like MONOTONY and HONEYMOON must be placed horizontally, with the extra spaces in the row taken up by vertical words. Thus the goal of choosing words with the highest percentage of the desired letters conflicts with the geometric task of fitting them into the diagram.

I'm still learning the ropes of the contest business, and wish to be responsive to my potential audience. Therefore, I always end my articles with an invitation for comments, criticisms, et al. Write to me, Frank Rubin, at The Contest Center, 59 DeGarmo Hills Road, Wappingers Falls, NY 12590 (enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope, and you'll get a personal reply). What kinds of contests do you like? Dislike? Have you ever had a bad experience with a contest? I welcome all opinions!