



# A Consumer's Guide to Sweepstakes and Lotteries

Publication 546  
July 2007

## **A Consumer's Guide to Sweepstakes and Lotteries**

Direct mail sweepstakes promotions offer consumers the chance to win money and prizes in return for opening an envelope and returning the entry form. As more companies use sweepstakes to draw attention to their products and services, and as participation increases, growing numbers of individuals are winning prizes, many in quite substantial amounts.

You should know that legitimate companies that offer sweepstakes promotions want your experience with their offers to be enjoyable — and they want you to respond. They also want you to understand that you have an equal chance of winning, whether or not you order the offered merchandise.

The Direct Marketing Association, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and Call for Action, Inc. have prepared this booklet for you to use as a guide when responding to sweepstakes offers and for recognizing the difference between legitimate sweepstakes and other types of offers, such as prize promotions, and illegitimate promotions that misrepresent themselves and seek to defraud.

## **Increased Consumer Protections**

The Deceptive Mail Prevention and Enforcement Act grants increased powers to the U.S. Postal Service to better protect consumers against those who use deceptive mailings featuring games of chance, sweepstakes, skill contests, and facsimile checks. The law applies to sweepstakes sent through the U.S. Mail<sup>®</sup>, not to sweepstakes conducted via the Internet or telephone, unless the mail is involved in some way.

According to the Deceptive Mail Prevention and Enforcement Act, required disclosures must be “clearly and conspicuously displayed,” that is, “readily noticeable, readable, and understandable” by the target audience. The law strictly prohibits these false representations in sweepstakes promotions:

- That the recipient is a winner, unless that person has actually won a prize.
- That the recipient must order to enter.
- That an entry must be sent in with payment for a previous purchase.
- That the recipient must make a purchase in order to receive future sweepstakes mailings.
- A fake check if it does not include a statement on it that it is nonnegotiable and has no cash value.
- Any seal, name, or term that implies a federal government connection, approval, or endorsement.

In addition, consumers have the right to stop receiving sweepstakes mailings. Sweepstakes promoters must give consumers a reasonable way to request removal of their names from mailing lists. Marketers must maintain a record of all “stop mail” requests and suppress the names for 5 years. The requests must come in writing and can come from an individual or from an individual’s guardian or conservator. Consumers have the right to sue in small claims court for failure to remove their names from sweepstakes mailing lists.

The U.S. Postal Service can stop mailings from being delivered, and marketers are subject to substantial penalties for noncompliance with the law, including the failure to set up a reasonable system to prevent unwanted mailings.

## **What is a Sweepstakes?**

By definition, a sweepstakes is an advertising or promotional device by which items of value (prizes) are awarded to participating consumers by chance, with no purchase or entry fee required to win.

## **What is a Lottery?**

Unlike a sweepstakes, a lottery is a promotional device by which items of value (prizes) are awarded to members of the public by chance, but which requires some form of payment to participate. Lotteries are illegal, except when conducted by states and certain exempt charitable organizations. If you believe you have received a solicitation in the guise of a sweepstakes which is an illegal lottery, you should contact your local Post Office™ or state Attorney General's consumer protection office.

## **What is a Skill Contest?**

Skill contests are different from sweepstakes offers. In a skill contest, the winner is determined by skill — not chance — and an entry fee or purchase may be required. There are many legitimate skill contests. For example, in a skill contest you may write a winning jingle, solve a puzzle, or answer a question correctly. Your skill or knowledge is what wins the contest, not chance. Know how the contest works, what the prizes are, and what the fees are before paying anything to the company.

## What is a Premium Offer?

Premiums are gifts that companies make available to all recipients who respond according to the company's instructions — for example, a travel bag received with a new magazine subscription. When everyone who responds to the offer receives the same gift item, without any element of chance, the offer is not a sweepstakes.

## More About Sweepstakes

Consumers often ask how companies can afford such substantial prizes. Sweepstakes are so successful in generating attention to their offers that substantial revenues are gained for the companies that sponsor them.

Thousands of corporations give out millions of dollars yearly to lucky consumers. Your chances of winning will vary with the number of people who participate in a particular sweepstakes and the number of prizes offered. You should realize, of course, that the chance of winning a large prize is generally quite small. In most cases, you can enter as often as you receive sweepstakes entries, and some companies will accept write-in entries on a postcard. Check the official rules. But, remember, there is no chance to win unless you enter!

Advertised prizes should be awarded unless otherwise stated in the rules. Check the official rules to see if all prizes are guaranteed to be awarded. Most sponsors will provide a list of all prize winners if you are interested in receiving this information.

## **No Purchase Necessary — It's the Law!**

You never have to purchase an item or pay a fee to enter and win a sweepstakes. You always have an equal chance of winning whether or not you order — it's the law.

### **Why are separate “yes” and “no” response envelopes used?**

Such envelopes are provided to help the sponsor fulfill orders promptly to ensure customer satisfaction. The “no” responses receive equal treatment in the sweepstakes, but do not require order processing.

## **Be Smart: Read the Rules**

Rules, and the way they are written, can tell you much about sweepstakes promotions and the companies sponsoring them.

Read them carefully! Your entry can be discarded if the rules are not followed to the letter. If you can't find, read, or understand the rules, you may want to think twice about entering.

*The following information should be set forth clearly in the rules or elsewhere in the mailing:*

- No purchase of the advertised product or service is required to win a prize, and a purchase will not improve the chances of winning. (These disclosures must appear in the mailing and on the entry form, in addition to being in the rules.)
- All terms and conditions of the sweepstakes promotion, including entry procedures and eligibility requirements, if any.

- If applicable, disclosure that a facsimile of the entry blank or promotional device may be used to enter the sweepstakes.
- The termination date for eligibility in the sweepstakes. The termination date should specify whether it is a date of mailing or receipt of entry deadline.
- The number, retail value (of noncash prizes), a complete description of all prizes offered, and whether cash may be awarded instead of merchandise. If a cash prize is to be awarded in installment payments, that should be clearly disclosed, along with the nature and timing of the payments.
- The estimated odds of each prize. (If the odds depend on the number of entries, the odds should be based on an estimate of the number of entries.)
- The method by which winners will be selected.
- The geographic area covered by the sweepstakes and the areas in which the offer is void.
- A name and business address where the sponsor can be contacted.
- Approximate dates when winners will be selected and notified.
- Publicity rights regarding the use of the winner's name.
- Mailing address so that consumers may request a list of winners for prizes of more than \$25 in value.
- An address or toll-free telephone number where a recipient may request a name to be removed from the sponsor's mailing list.

## **We Have a Winner!**

Winner selection in a sweepstakes is conducted in an unbiased manner to give all entries — those with and without an order — an equal chance to win. This is usually done by a random drawing or a preselected number.

In a random drawing, entries are either picked manually by trained judges or by a computer using random-selection programs.

In a preselected number sweepstakes, a number is picked at random by an independent third party before the mailings are sent to consumers. The winning number is kept secret from the sponsor until the end of the promotion. Each preselected winning number corresponds to a specific prize.

Throughout the life of the promotion, numbers are randomly assigned to entries, and a record is kept of the numbers returned. At the end of the giveaway, the winning number is revealed to the sponsor, and the number appearing on each response (“yes” or “no”) is compared to the winning number. If the consumer who received the winning numbered entry did not respond, then the sponsor may award the prize to another entry.



## Consumer's Checklist

The following questions, along with a good dose of common sense, should help you in evaluating sweepstakes or other promotions.

### ✓ **Are the rules and entry instructions for the promotion easy to find and understand?**

If you can't understand what you must do to be eligible, think twice about responding. Make sure you understand the difference between an order for a product or service and a sweepstakes entry without an order.

### ✓ **Does the advertising copy state that no purchase is necessary in order to win?**

By law, no purchase is necessary to enter a sweepstakes, and the chances of winning are the same whether or not you order.

### ✓ **Are the prizes worth winning?**

Make sure the prizes are desirable and worth the effort. Do you really want to win them? Is there a cash option?

### ✓ **Is the grand prize awarded to only one winner, or is it a shared prize among many entrants?**

Because of the expenses associated with sponsoring a sweepstakes, some companies conduct what is known as a "pooled" sweepstakes. In other words, one grand prize is shared by all who enter the sweepstakes. Shared sweepstakes may still be worth entering, but read the rules to avoid disappointment. The shared prize can be as little as a few cents.

✓ **What are your chances of winning one of the major prizes?**

If you have the winning entry and respond, you will get the prize. However, it pays to check the small print of the offer you receive. If the odds of winning a particular prize or award are “1:1,” that means that everyone who responds will get that award, which is an inexpensive item and, not the more valuable prize. Remember, many people participate but there may be only one top prize. Ordering will not improve your chance of winning.

✓ **Is this a sweepstakes or another type of offer?**

Premium promotions (also known as prize promotions) are often confused with sweepstakes. If there is a disclosure such as “This is not a sweepstakes,” make sure you fully understand what the prizes are, what the odds are, and what’s required before participating.

Examples of offers that can be confused with sweepstakes include postcards and other mailings that congratulate you as a recipient of a valuable prize or award such as cash, a car, or a glamorous vacation. Such promotions may ask you to call a 900 telephone number to learn what prize or award you have won, although the rules state you may request this information by mail instead.

Remember that calling a 900 telephone number costs money, so find out what the charges are before calling. If you are interested in participating but do not want to pay for the call, use the free mail-in option. Calling will not improve your chances of winning.

If you receive a promotion congratulating you on winning a prize, but requiring a shipping and handling fee or a fee of any kind, it is not a sweepstakes, and it may be fraudulent. You never have to pay to receive a prize in a sweepstakes.

If the prize promotion mailing announces or implies you have won a prize of major value, it is probably untrue. If you have won a prize, it most likely is of low value, not the highest value shown in large print.

For example, if you respond to a dream vacation offer, you may find that the processing fee is greater than the value of the prize. Or you may learn you have to purchase goods, such as vitamins, water purifiers, security systems, or the like, to qualify for the prize. Such products are sometimes sold at inflated prices, and the prizes may be misrepresented. Jewelry values, for instance, are sometimes grossly overstated — or savings coupons may allow you only to receive discounts from merchandise bought from the promotion sponsor. The offers may constitute violations of the federal mail fraud statute. Beware of these schemes and report them to your local postmaster or nearest Postal Inspector.

If a promotion states: “This is a sales incentive offer,” do you have to pick it up or pay a shipping or delivery fee to get the prize? Sweepstakes-like promotions are often used by timeshare resorts to encourage you to visit the resort. Read the rules carefully to understand your obligations. Age and salary restrictions usually apply in such promotions. Further, a redemption fee may be required before you may claim your award.

✓ **Who is the sponsor of the mailing you received? If the company’s name seems familiar, are you sure it is that company?**

Disreputable companies sometimes use a variation of a nationally recognized name. Such promotions often charge shipping and handling fees. Generally, the prize you receive, if any, from one of these sound-alike operators will not live up to your expectations.

Also be wary of companies that claim to represent a known sweepstakes sponsor, especially if they request a fee such as a “refundable deposit” for their services or “prepayment of taxes.” Chances are they’re not who they claim to be. Call the sweepstakes sponsor directly to verify. Remember, you only pay taxes to the Internal Revenue Service.

## **Where Can I Turn for Help?**

To verify the reputation of a sweepstakes or other promotion, call the Better Business Bureau where the company is located, or your state or local consumer protection office. Be aware that many questionable promotion companies do not stay in one place long enough to establish a track record — an absence of complaints does not necessarily mean the offer is legitimate.

If you have a problem with a sweepstakes or prize promotion, contact the company. If you are not satisfied, you can ask the following organizations for assistance:

- The Direct Marketing Association (DMA) will forward your complaint to member companies to help resolve situations needing individual attention. DMA staff members also answer general questions about sweepstakes rules and DMA's ethics guidelines on sweepstakes.

DIRECT MARKETING ASSOCIATION INC  
CONSUMER AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT  
1615 L STREET NW STE 1100  
WASHINGTON DC 20036-3603  
202-955-5030  
e-mail: [consumer@the-dma.org](mailto:consumer@the-dma.org)  
[www.the-dma.org](http://www.the-dma.org)

- Contact the U.S. Postal Inspection Service if you think you've been victimized by a fraudulent offer. You can contact them at the following address, or check the government pages of your telephone book:

US POSTAL INSPECTION SERVICE  
CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS SERVICE CENTER  
222 S RIVERSIDE PLAZA STE 1250  
CHICAGO IL 60606-6100  
1-800-372-8347  
[www.usps.com/postalinspectors](http://www.usps.com/postalinspectors)

- Call for Action, the international non-profit network of hotlines working in partnership with radio and television stations, resolves consumer problems through free and confidential mediation.

CALL FOR ACTION INC  
5272 RIVER ROAD STE 300  
BETHESDA MD 20816-1405  
301-657-8260  
[www.callforaction.org](http://www.callforaction.org)

- The Federal Trade Commission provides information to help consumers spot and avoid fraudulent practices in the marketplace and can be contacted at the following address:

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION  
600 PENNSYLVANIA AVE NW  
WASHINGTON DC 20580-0001  
1-877-FTC-HELP  
[www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)

- Your state Attorney General or local office of consumer protection, listed in the government pages of your telephone book.
- The Better Business Bureau where the company is located.
- The National Fraud Information Center (NFIC), a project of the National Consumers League, which helps consumers with information, referral services, and assistance in filing complaints.

NATIONAL FRAUD INFORMATION CENTER  
1-800-876-7060 (9 A.M. TO 5 P.M., M-F)  
[WWW.FRAUD.ORG](http://WWW.FRAUD.ORG)

This booklet has been prepared as a public service in cooperation with The Direct Marketing Association, Inc., and Call for Action, Inc.



