

Con Tests

Over the years, I sure have "won" a lot of goodies in industrial contests. While not obvious, aggressive use of these contests often can turn into some very useful *Midnight Engineering* tools.

Besides the prizes themselves, these contests force you to creatively think about problem solving. They lead you into new areas of thought. They can bring you recognition, networking, and professional contacts. They can provide free advertising. When the winners are announced. When the designs are published. And, best of all, when the results end up in ap notes that are circulated forever.

Now, here is the deep dark innermost secret of industrial contests: *Nobody enters them!* Unlike national magazine sweepstakes, there's typically only a few to a few dozen entries. And most of those are uselessly second rate.

Or else will totally fail to communicate. Or otherwise completely miss the point of the contest.

I guess I got started on all this in my junior year in college. Seems there was this IRE student paper contest with a then-princely \$25 first prize. Several days before the contest deadline, I asked the IRE faculty advisor how many entries he had. His answer was "none."

Considering this to be fair to middlin' odds, I entered the contest. Not surprisingly, I won. The \$25 was used to buy Fink's *Television Engineering Handbook*. Which in turn led to big bucks in a long and ongoing career.

Luck has nothing whatsoever to do with it. Winning is simply a matter of repeatedly playing odds that normally seem to be in your favor. If some contests seem to have one-in-eight odds of payoff, entering five of them gives you nearly even odds of winning. Just enter often, and the statistics of large numbers will guarantee you a lot of wins.

Every time.

As I see it, there are three possibilities here: There's announced third-party contests, the far better *unannounced* contests, and *contests you run yourself*.

Let's explore some of the options...

Announced Contests

There are several dozen major industrial design contests each year. Along with countless minor ones. And zillions of win-something-so-we-get-your-name offerings.

You can usually find out about these contests in those industrial trade journals. Electronic biggies here include *E.E. Times*, *Electronic Design*, *EDN*, and *Electronic Products*. I have listed a few of these in the sidebar. A complete list of all trade journals can be found in *Ulrichs*

Periodicals Dictionary. Either on the reference shelf of your local library or online at *GENie* or one of the other commercial BBS services.

More on trade journals in [RESBN08.PDF](#).

Other contests usually crop up in direct mail card packs, trade shows, and seminars. Always keep an "instant entry" rubber stamp with you when you attend *any* trade show.

In general, the more difficult the contest and the more hurdles they put between you and a qualifying entry, the better your odds and the fewer the total entries. Each new hurdle they place in your way dramatically drops the total remaining number of qualifying entries.

In one recent semiconductor design contest, you first had to run out and buy an expensive development kit from a snotty and uncooperative old line distributor. Then you had to master the machine language instruction set for their device. Then you had to generate new and unique working and camera-ready source code.

While meeting some really bizarre design rules.

Then you had to actually mail in your entry. In some attractive and publishable form that clearly communicated. Each stage significantly reduced the number of genuinely competitive entries. Meanwhile, sibling departments in the same company stupidly buried their contest ad campaign with zillions of their own double page *non-contest* ads. Thus totally diluting the intended message.

The greater the number of hurdles, the better your odds of winning. By far.

I will spare you that politically incorrect joke where Shorty's punch line is "Only enough to win." But in any contest, the same rule applies. *Your risk must match your reward*. Enter *only* enough to win.

You want to spend only the minimum possible time and effort to give yourself reasonable odds of scoring. And no more. A ferinstance: Say there's a super easy card pack contest with a soldering station as its only prize. \$500 list but only worth \$200 to you. Your only cost and effort is a minute's time and a 32 cent stamp. If there are 625 other entrants, you have a unity risk-reward ratio.

You enter this contest only if you feel that 625 or fewer entries are going to happen. In the case of a card deck, they're probably only going to get a few hundred at most.

So, the odds are in your favor. Go for it.

Some Guidelines

Here's some tips I picked up along the way towards scoring big on most industrial contests...

Seek contests out—Aggressively tune yourself in to the sources and places where industrial contests are likely to be announced. This includes all the trade journals, card packs, industrial shows, and seminars.

Go for multiple prizes—Contests having many prizes can immensely improve the odds of winning something. You should focus on the *third* prize, and never the first.

Play the odds—Ask how many people are likely to enter and how many are likely to be genuinely competitive. Start with the circulation and the probable response rate. If the odds aren't well in your favor, don't enter.

Do only enough to win—Don't let the contests become obsessive. Spend the absolute minimum time and effort needed to give you reasonable odds of producing a creative entry. And not one second or dime more.

Welcome hurdles—A hurdle is any turnoff that will slow down the other entrants. Hurdles can be as mundane as needing a stamp or taking more than five minutes to fill out a form. The more hurdles, the better. Then leap over them in a single bound.

Give them what they want—Always ask *why* they are *really* having the contest. Then tell them what they want to hear in the way they want to hear it. If the judges are listed, try to visualize their egos and their hidden agendas.

Communicate!—How you say something is far more important than *what* you actually say. Only a few seconds will get spent "qualifying" your entry on their first pass. Make sure those seconds count.

Enter often—The more "favorable-odds" contests you do enter, the more you will win. It is that simple. Eventually the laws of big numbers are certain to turn in your favor. Do use multiple entries (having different names) when and where possible. But not to the point of competing against yourself. Or watering your entries down.

Actually enter!—So many people never follow through. They will start on a contest and lose interest on the first hurdle. Once you start on an entry, don't stop. Shove the thing out the door! Deliver the goods.

Non-Announced Contests

It is much better when the company *does not know* they are running a contest. The advantages here are obvious. First, there'll be far fewer entrants competing against you. But best of all, you are free to select your own prizes!

Non-announced contests have scored me scads of laser printers, premium FM receivers, high capacity disk drives, computers, video editing systems, microcontrollers, paper handlers, displays, etchers, plotters, and phone accessories. Plus great heaping piles of other assorted goodies.

In one case, I was able to "lease" out some "won" video equipment, converting it into unlimited free stays at a superb New Mexico wilderness bed and breakfast. This is "creative financing" at its very best.

Another name for a non-announced contest entry, of course, is the *unsolicited proposal*. You write a company offering to review one of their products in a magazine. Or beta test it for them. Or become a developer. Or propose to work up a significant third-party improvement on it. Or do

a trade journal story. Or write an application manual. Or other tech docs. Or provide outside expertise.

A related ploy is the *equipment loan*. Often, a new piece of gear will be loanable to you for nearly any reasonable request. More often than not, you can renew the loan two or three times. Eventually the paperwork may fall through a crack somewhere and the ownership goes into limbo.

It is extremely rare to ever have to actually return the equipment. Especially stuff you really want to keep.

A ten or a twenty percent yield on well-reasoned and properly placed unsolicited proposals is not unheard of. If your results are lower, you simply send in more proposals.

And do so more often.

If the first proposal doesn't hack it, send in a fancier one a few months later. Keep on trying.

Unless you are after something really big, keep your request to a single page business letter. Self-published on your PostScript laser printer. Tell them what you want, exactly what you are going to do for them, and hint at who you are. Written and mailed requests are infinitely superior to email. Because they are harder to ignore.

Always try to write to a real person, not a title. Names can sometimes be found as press release or article authors. Or simply by calling a receptionist. Naturally, it pays to collect names well ahead of the times you actually need them. Do so religiously.

Do be sure you can deliver on what you promise. If you mention a magazine's name, be certain they have at least heard of you. Also, promise them as little as possible in as nebulous a form as possible. Consistent with getting and holding their interest.

Also, never ignore any return request. Simply answer it with a new proposal, keeping the dialog alive. And always build on your track record.

Your Own Contest

Running your very own contest has a number of major advantages. First and foremost, a contest can be a great form of advertorial, letting you promote your products largely free of advertising costs. Second, a contest can give you new product ideas for future development.

Third, a contest puts you in direct contact with your readers and clients. Letting you "close the loop" to more closely meet their needs. And finally, a contest gives you highly qualified new customer names.

I guess my own contests pretty much meet the industry average response. All a person really has to do to score an *Incredible Secret Money Machine II* is show me some reasonably creative or somewhat original thinking. The typical contest exposed to, say 240,000 readers, pulls an average of *three* entrants! Only rarely do I get more entries than the dozen books promised.

As to the *tinaja quests*, very few winners actually claim them. Because pretty much the same number of random drop-ins show up, the total number of tinaja quests stays more or less the same.

Lately, we've been substituting tramway hunts for tinaja quests. More on this in [GRAMTRAM.PDF](#) found on my www.tinaja.com. Previous *Blatant Opportunist* columns also appear here, along with lots of other stuff.

Some major rules here: Make sure your contest requires genuine skill to complete. Otherwise, you may run afoul of

INDUSTRIAL CONTEST RESOURCES

Design News

8773 S Ridgeline Blvd
Highlands CO 80126
(303) 470-4000

EDN Magazine

275 Washington St
Newton MA 02158
(617) 964-3030

EE Times

600 Community Dr
Manhasset NY 11030
(516) 365-4600

Electronic Comp. News

1 Chilton Way
Radnor PA 19089
(215) 964-4345

Electronic Design

611 Rt #46 W
Hasbrouck Hts NJ 07604
(201) 393-6060

Electronic Products

645 Stewart Ave
Garden City NY 11530
(516) 227-1300

ENie

401 N Washington St
Rockville MD 20850
(800) 638-9636

Machine Design

1100 Superior Avenue
Cleveland OH 44144
(216) 696-7000

Synergetics

Box 809
Thatcher AZ 85552
(520) 428-4073

Ulrichs Dictionary

121 Chanlon Rd
New Providence NJ 07974
(908) 771-7714

your state's lottery regulations. And, of course, be sure to actually award the prizes. Demand all entries be *written* and *mailed*, so you have an audit trail. And never "steal the plans" without giving full credit.

Be certain to file and save *all* responses.

There's several other reasons for demanding written hard copy entries. You can easily tell the seventh graders from the CEO's, since the seventh grader's handwriting will be far more legible. This is also an intentional hurdle that dramatically chops most low-quality submissions.

This Month's Contest

For our contest this month, just tell me a story involving you and some industrial contest. An announced one, an unannounced one, or one you ran yourself.

As usual, there will be a dozen *Incredible Secret Money Machine II* book prizes, along with an all expense paid (FOB Thatcher, AZ) *tinaja quest* for two going to the very best submission of all.

By the way, I just bought an *entire* community college electronics department at auction. I've got some really outstanding buys, especially on Tek and Fluke logic analyzers. Repairable Mac boards. Also rare Tek manuals. Call, email, or write for a free listing.

A reminder about my new web site at www.tinaja.com. Where you'll find lots of my reprints, our new *Synergetics Consultant's Network*, and annotated site links.

Let's hear from you. ♦

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 33 books and countless articles. Don maintains a US technical helpline you'll find at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all his own books, reprints and various services.

Don has a free new catalog crammed full of his latest insider secrets waiting for you. Your best calling times are 8-5 weekdays, Mountain Standard Time.

Don is also the webmaster of www.tinaja.com where a special area has been set aside for Midnight Engineering readers. You can also reach Don at Synergetics, Box 809, Thatcher, AZ 85552. Or email don@tinaja.com