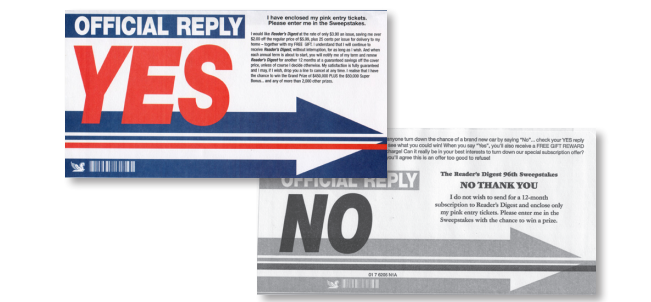


***"This Statement is Issued on the Assumption that you would be willing to accept payments worth up to \$500,000 should you win."***

The promotional literature of the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes campaigns in the late 20th century remains virtually unresearched by historians or other scholars although it arguably represents the largest and the most impressive gamut of monetary imitation to have ever been issued by a single commercial entity. This is a brief history and critical summary of some of its marketing methods.



*The Reader's Digest Magazine* was conceived in 1922 by a convalescent American serviceman named DeWitt Wallace (1889-1981), from his pastime of cutting articles out of books and magazines and pasting them into albums. By printing and selling his compendiums on news-stands and to subscribers, Wallace made his own personal fortune and turned The Reader's Digest into a multinational corporation with non-English editions published in many parts of the world.

Subscriptions to the magazine were always sold via direct-mail—that is by advertisements sent in personally addressed envelopes through the U.S. mail service. As sales of the magazine grew into the millions, the Digest's marketing teams were able to experiment with postal media on a scale that was historically unprecedented and they began devising promotional strategies that went far beyond simple pamphlets and slogans. The amount of names and addresses in the Digest's data-bases by the 1950's meant that test results could be subject to sophisticated methods of statistical evaluation to improve sales techniques. Some of these methods, such as multiple regression analysis invented by the Digest and came to be universally adopted by direct-mail marketers and the surety they provided at the time fostered an energetic open-mindedness toward experimentation amongst the company's copywriters. Any idea proposed by the creative teams, no matter how improbable, could be tested for profitability by including it in advance mailings and in smaller state-specific mailing lists. For the U.S. magazine alone, a typical trial series containing 30 or more different promotional ideas was mailed out three times each year and the accuracy of their returns was testament to the vast numbers which helped the Digest calculate its strategies. An example might give an idea of the kind of advantage yielded by scale: in the early 1960s the company trialed a new offer attached to a promotional package with the slogan "Everybody wins a prize", the prize being a copy of the *Reader's Digest First Aid Guide*. The 16 million packages that were mailed out produced a marginal increase in the usual numbers of those who kept the book and accepted the subscription offer, which translated to roughly 2 million new customers. When the marketing teams sent out the *First Aid Guide* to those who had declined, they included another copy of the same Reader's Digest subscription offer and were rewarded with an extra 270,000 subscribers who had since reconsidered—over a quarter million new customers who signed up at no extra cost to the company.

The showcase of the Reader's Digest marketing laboratory was undoubtedly the Sweepstakes competition, conceived in 1962 by then-copywriter Gordon Grossman who went on to become the company's marketing director. It was originally intended to be an incentive to lure players into subscribing to the magazine, however its immediate success flagged the beginnings of a hugely efficient mechanism used by the company to sell a wide range of products which came to include recorded music, reference books and videos. The Sweepstakes have subsequently become a defining feature of direct mail - notorious for audacious gimmicks and their tenacious pursuit of the individual customer. The ideas dreamed up by the Reader's Digest creative teams have long since been copied by other large direct-mail operations such as the Publishers Clearing House as well as countless other small sales operations.

In the 1980s, after the death of DeWitt Wallace and with profits from the magazine in decline, the company restructured and the Sweepstakes became an overt marketing ploy to lure customers into purchasing cassettes and videos from an expanded 'books and home-entertainment' division. The pushy approach was curtailed in 2001, when legal action brought by 32 U.S. states obliged the Reader's Digest to pay \$6 million in compensation to those identified as "high activity" customers. A condition of settlement was that Reader's Digest refrain from "misleading customers into believing that they have won, are about to win or that they have a better chance of winning a sweepstakes by purchasing or subscribing to the companies products". Sweepstakes marketing was subsequently eliminated from the U.S. marketing operations although it still continues to make profits in many other countries, including Australia and Canada.

Although it is in some respects the poorer cousin of the lottery, the approach of the direct-mailing sweepstakes campaign tends to be more aggressively inventive. One consequence of this is that its promotional literature is prolific and perhaps for that very reason often dismissed as 'junk mail' (a term considered by direct mailers as a pejorative), disregarded by collectors of ephemera as being trivial and by everyone else as being simply annoying and unimportant. It is unfortunate that the creative and experimental edge of direct-mail marketing is a subject that is so neglected—ignored at the expense of those who are otherwise such attentive scholars of printed ephemera.

**TECHNIQUES:**

Sweepstakes promotion takes shape around the need to maintain its technical distinction from the lottery. This is a legality that enables the sweepstakes to operate and one which allows it to prosper in circumstances where private lotteries are prohibited. There are three differential conditions that define the competition. One is that there should be no consideration placed on entry - that is to say it should not cost money. A restriction like this would be fatal to a lottery which generates its profit from the sale of tickets however the object of the sweepstakes is to get people to subscribe to the magazine and to purchase products rather than to make money from a one-off draw. To this end the contest should ideally be drawn out for as long as possible, to ensure an lengthy, paying relationship between subscriber/purchaser and the marketing company.

Two innovations devised by the Reader's Digest helped make sweepstakes competitions profitable within the boundaries of lawful gaming and set them apart them from the lottery: the first was simply to draw the winning numbers in advance. In legal terms this change eliminated consideration: every recipient was automatically an entrant, they just had to return their personally assigned "lucky numbers" to see if they were prize-winners. This tactic also gave the marketing teams license to trumpet confidently: "You May Have Already Won A Prize" - a slogan that became an attachment to each subsequent competition.

The second innovation was to include two reply envelopes in the promotional package: one was marked Yes and the other No. The recipient was thereby given a clear choice of whether to subscribe or not and informed that entry was not contingent on subscription. The fact that they might be encouraged by brighter and colourful labelling on the Yes envelope was beside the point. This kind of graphic incentive did not qualify as 'consideration' in the context of the game.

The lucrative potential of including monetary tokens in marketing literature had been realised as far back as 1957, when the Reader's Digest sent addressed envelopes containing a pair of penny coins to 25 million non-subscriber households. The recipients were invited to keep one penny and return the other as a deposit toward a magazine subscription. So many Americans responded to this campaign that the US mint, concerned at the growing shortage of pennies in circulation, made private arrangements to supply the Digest with the coins directly from its reserves. This hugely successful campaign inspired the development of a variety of monetary devices which, together with the Yes/No reply envelopes, would solicit the recipient's first steps toward a contractual relationship with the company.



LINE-RULING: The impression given to a sweepstakes entrant that he or she is close to winning a prize is conveyed by two sorts of documents: the first are certificate tokens made to look as if they have intrinsic monetary value. These resemble banknotes, cheques, seals and even passports. The second sort is composed of ruled lines and typeset words made to look like bureaucratic papers such as invoices, office memos and receipts. Both could be considered to be categories of monetary imitation: while the certificates are straight-forward declarations of fiat value, the ruled papers convey the sense that the only thing between the entrant and the jackpot is a series of administrative formalities - a message communicated by documents so familiar that they seem banal or mundane.

Line-ruling is indigenous to monetary management—it divides the page into tables, detachable coupons, numerical accounting columns and demarcates space for signatures and checkmarks. A framework of graphic surety is constructed around an instructional core that guides the recipient through the task of administrating their finances. As a purely promotional device, the ruled page demonstrates how effectively the process of registration and entry can be convoluted and presented as a kind of administrative puzzle. The entrant might be required, for instance, to separate stamps from a sheet, wet the adhesive on the reverse, attach them into allocated areas on another document, use scissors to detach these as compound tokens and finally insert them into either the Yes or the No envelopes provided by the mailer. Each routine like this is fairly simple in summary, but taken together and surrounded by such an extraordinary scaffold of ruled forms and instructions they can make it seem as though the prize might arrive simply as a reward for having correctly read through the paperwork and fulfilling all the required steps. The patience required to do so suggests that the ideal recipient is one with time on their hands—a retiree or pensioner for example, someone belonging to a demographic for which (as for young children) money is tied more closely to providence or welfare governance than to the measurable outcome of paid employment.

It was because of concerns that the elderly, poor and demented were being unfairly targeted and spending unnecessarily

on subscriptions that the company was bought before the Federal Trade Commission, which in 1969 sought a 'cease and desist' order against the Sweepstakes promotions. One of the objections concerned the close resemblance to legitimate monetary articles of Sweepstakes material such as "checks, money and certificates". The attack on "confusingly simulated items of value" as they became known, constituted a serious threat to the Reader's Digest marketing division for whom the monetary association was a constant and renewable novelty that kept the public interested in the competition (Grossman called it the one truly fruitful area of creative improvement in the Sweepstakes). Compliance with the Commission's ruling had the effect of permanently stifling development in this area, even though the order was rescinded in 1981 after the company sponsored tests to determine if customers were actually fooled into mistaking the mock 'documents of value' for real ones. The tests, verified by academic studies, were conducted door-to-door using the original materials and showed that confusion manifested in only about 1.8% of respondents.

TACTILE: The coins that had been sent out to prospective subscribers in 1957 were the first of what became known as "action devices". The concept pre-dated the sweepstakes, but once attached to it, became an enduring and identifying feature that worked by calling for a physical response on the part of the recipient. Free "gifts" were an ideal vehicle for response, given that they place a social obligation on the recipient. It is especially true of the of money (itself a medium of obligation) even when its penny-value makes the measure of obligation so small as to be merely symbolic.

The company rightly calculated that any response to their promotional package would be a useful one. They ensured that the "action device" was differentiated from the other materials in the package by shape or texture and in this way, encouraged the recipient to attend to the accompanying directions. The material agency used to stimulate a physical response has since been expanded and abstracted into a variety of tactile signs incorporated into the paperwork of the package, each of which signals an action that should be taken. The physical interventions necessary to complete registration are so numerous and diminutive as to be almost charming. They consist of peel-off stickers, scratchable foil panels, detachable cardboard car-keys and numerous other odds and ends, each made special by its being conspicuous against the flat, graphic foundation of the paper. Metallic inks and plastic laminates add to an entirely tactile dimension that invites the fingers to explore and adjust its parts. It is this playful modularity that provokes a childish curiosity in many people and gives the sense that the package is an extension of the competition itself.



The most basic and important response device is perhaps the perforated detachable coupon which, even when abbreviated as a dashed line and scissors icon, must be one of the oldest contractual "action" devices used on paper. One could see it as a skeuomorphic derivative of the medieval chirograph - a modernised zigzag cut that substitutes a convenient, almost courteous, sign of indenture. With this line of fracture and separation from the magazine or subscription card, the coupon rule generates an informal and obligatory kind of "token value" in the portion that has been detached. The perforation itself - the dashed cut that demarcates the paper - has a tactile and mechanical association to the clothing zipper—it can even make a similar sound when activated. Like all the other action devices in the package, it operates on the principle



of seduction, revealing the sweepstakes package in a kind of 'striptease' uncovered by the recipient whose peeling, scratching and tearing brings matching numbers into view and rewards them with supplementary bonus prizes. An essential but understated aspect of 'undressing' the Reader's Digest package is that if it has been completed properly the document cannot be dressed up again: the pleasure of 'unzipping' comes at the price of 'damaging' it and in this manner its contractual power is enhanced. This is true of all the mechanisms that demand action - they cannot help leaving behind signs of having been 'actioned'. As a 'sub-network' of contests they slow down the process of gratification, not just to extend the intrinsic pleasure of excavating small treasures from the paper's surface but also to activate a series of micro-contracts and irreversible "events" within the package.



In contrast to the sobriety and efficiency of the line-ruling, the tone of the tactile dimension is expressive and congratulatory. An air of positive enthusiasm accompanies every secret that is revealed and applauds the successful undressing of each of the document's parts. It is inconceivable in this system of calculated actions that a sticker could ever be lifted or a foil rubbed away to reveal a blank or a message that says "Sorry, better luck next time".

We regard you with great esteem Mr D Taffa. And once it was decided that you definitely qualified for this exclusive Winter Catalogue offer -- which comes to you with special participation privileges in the Sweepstakes Finals, THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO HESITATION ON OUR PART.

LETTERING: If one were to analyse the Sweepstakes promotional literature as a form of theatre, then its styles of lettering and typography might suggest a cast consisting of just three players: the Reader's Digest Corporation, the Sweepstakes contest and the Prospect ('you'). Because the literature so frequently addresses the Prospect, its lettering functions like a speaking voice, inflected with expressions of urgency and encouragement. It is not just the figure of the customer that is personably fabricated by these means, the promotional copy also bespeaks the company, through the voice of its office bearers and signatories (the Sweepstakes Committee Chairman, the Chief Financial Officer, the Prize Award Manager, etcetera). Sometimes the voices seem not to be assigned to any particular character, but weave a path through the paperwork like so many sprites whispering advice into the ear of the reader. The phrases: "We regard you with great esteem Mr. D Taffa". and "THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO HESITATION ON OUR PART" appear to be scripting the part of an enthusiastic guide chaperoning the prospect through an automated process toward a certain fortune.

P.S. Don't forget to return your Sweepstakes documents as soon as you receive them! Good luck!

Advertising copy typically privileges handwriting over type, employing the former as a theatrical aside when a direct, no-nonsense comment is called for. This trope appears in abundance in sweepstakes copy (most often in the hastily scribbled "Good Luck!") but it is complemented here by an entirely new textual construction—a sophisticated compound of the human and the mechanised which originated with the Reader's Digest pioneering use of IBM computer software in the 1960s to insert personalised details into the text of the

advertising copy. In the absence of any existing term, the style could be termed the 'processed personalisation' for it is most often expressed in the form of the Prospect's name printed by a hand-operated electric typewriter of the type that was common before the advent of desktop publishing. Reproduced in this way, the Prospect's name represents a kind of personalisation made semi-automatically by mechanical process. In dumber forms of marketing where 'personality' is contrived simply from signs of the hand-made or hand-written, any hint of mechanisation might stand in contrast to the personal and appear characterless or 'sterile'. Direct-mail however, dealing as integrally it does with production-line mass mailing and postal service, presents the mechanical in a more benign role. The typewriter represents the link between these two characterisations, with a style of printed impression that sits somewhere between an authoritative typography and a casual freehand. One of the most important advantages of the machine is that it doesn't create the potential problem of illegibility that is risked by poorly executed handwriting, nor does it have a cloying intimacy that might suggest flattery or disingenuousness. The typewriter conveys a balance of irregularity and clarity that comes across as sober and collegial and in the case of the sweepstakes copy, its slab-serif 'voice' assumes a dual personality: it can be an efficient clerk (who fills the blanks in the form) or it can take the more personable tone of a letter being dictated by an editor to his secretary.

**\$500,000 Prize Eligibility for:** Sponsor: Reader's Digest  
MR TAFFA

More interestingly, the use of the typewriter reveals something essential about the role of the company and its relationship to the prospect. The mechanical insertion of the Reader's Digest into a graphic blank seems to position the Corporation outside the administrative framework of its own competition while at the same time placing the esteemed prospect (without prejudice) *into* it. A clever disingenuousness is at work here in the fact that the Reader's Digest is complying with the regulations governing the holding of sweepstakes by which it is obliged to select winners without consideration. The draw must be fair and impartial (i.e. mechanised), and whether the recipient decides to subscribe or not has no bearing on their chances of their winning the prize. So even as it characterises itself as a cheerleader on the sidelines, the company is elaborating a truth about its own position in relation to the game. The ingenuity of the Reader's Digest at the *real* game of solicitation is articulated in their strategies of abeyance, of 'suspending' the prize in such a way within a net of formalities that the likelihood of winning seems to be an inevitable consequence of the efficient administration of paperwork. The personal address (the voice that addresses the reader by their name) speaks from 'outside' the net of contest formalities but it also manages to cohabit this graphic/technical construction with the prospect. The pitch and intimacy of these 'voices' owes everything to typography and to the various styles of lettering which are continuously modulated in character. I have described these as tacking between the mechanised and the personal, although with regard to the aims of direct marketing literature it should be pointed out that neither is really what it seems. It would be more accurate to say that both are 'engineered'.

Other kinds of lettering used in the promotional material include imitation 'stamps' (their simulated application exaggerated with rebound impressions and smeared ink), and machine-recognisable OCR characters, which are scattered throughout the literature in nonsensical abundance and give a reassuring sense that the outcome of the contest is being governed by a coalition of the providential and the automatic.

PREDESTINATION: The strong promissory vein that runs through all Reader's Digest Sweepstakes material originates in part from the statement devised early in the campaign's history by their legal team as a technical circumvention: winning numbers were drawn in advance and the recipients of personalised mailings were advised: "You May Have Already Won..." The impact of this single idea on all the Sweepstakes material that followed cannot be overstated. The statement itself capitalises on the daydream of fortune (which for most people is the only pleasurable component of the contest) by taking the lateral step of announcing that the 'win' may have already occurred. By formulating this twist in time, the promissory clause is projected forward to cover all the forthcoming promotional material. Instead of promising the possibility of a chance event in the future, every token, stamp and official document represents a genuine effort to uncover a treasure that may already have been assigned to the recipient. I have termed this technique 'predestinative' because I know of no existing word to describe it. It is ubiquitous but most clearly articulated in the voice that seems to speak from the sidelines about the future—but with the past tense. It is a prescient voice that sells the value of the ephemeral by suggesting softly over and over that you may wish to "retain it for your records."

Predestinative techniques tap a natural tendency to fantasise about providential wealth and in this respect there is little difference between the Lottery or the Sweepstakes—the magnitude and audacity of the advertising copy finds a companion in the healthy imaginative workings of the human mind. The extra dimension that the Reader's Digest sweepstakes gave to this fantasy was that the draw had already taken place and so the dream became one of uncovering a prize that was already the Prospect's due.

DATE	DEPOSIT	INTEREST	BALANCE	
1/ 1/98 to 12/31/98	+\$1,200.00	+\$3,286.55	+\$48,362.89	If you've been following the progress of your "account" on the left, you can see that after 30 years it could have grown to over \$40,000.00.
1/ 1/99 to 12/31/99	+\$1,200.00	+\$3,515.07	+\$73,077.96	
1/ 1/00 to 12/31/00	+\$1,200.00	+\$3,755.25	+\$78,033.21	
1/ 1/01 to 12/31/01	+\$1,200.00	+\$4,007.65	+\$83,240.86	So be sure that you don't miss out on this wonderful opportunity -- and mail back your official Sweepstakes Book today.
\$43,240.86 could be yours just for mailing this book back to us before January 31, 1972.				Good Luck, <i>Carolyn Aronov</i> For The Association
(14)				P.S. LOOK INSIDE THE SEALED "SUPER BONUS" ENVELOPE ENCLOSED FOR NEWS OF A SPECIAL EXTRA PRIZE!

Reader's Digest marketers devised many methods of getting the mind to feed on the image of fortune. An early example of predestination invited the Prospect to consider a 'bankbook' that showed how his or her winnings might extend into the future as capital. Grossman reflects on the magnitude and effect of this device:

The bankbook itself was a 16 page booklet. It was printed on a huge 64" x 80" sheet, then folded and cut to bankbook size on special machinery, which also bound and stapled it in a blue cover. It was a production tour de force. ...it was a remarkable success. It swept the Reader's Digest world like a benign tsunami. Within months, adaptations appeared in a dozen languages for almost every product line. This one idea alone fuelled worldwide Reader's Digest profits for years.



Illustrating predestination in terms that are culinary rather than monetary, the speculative itinerary for a 'proposed celebration dinner' resembles nothing less than the menu one might expect

to find on the winner's table. It provides options for a two-day winner's holiday in Sydney: champagne on arrival followed by a seafood buffet dinner, a prize-winner's luncheon at one of Sydney's premier restaurants on the following day and then a free afternoon to do some sight-seeing. Blank space is thoughtfully provided to add extra guests to the dinner ceremony and a check box to indicate if any one of them has special dietary requirements. Two more check boxes record whether the winner would prefer the \$450,000 prize money to be presented as a lump-sum cheque or as a guaranteed annuity for life. Each "choice" represented by a blank in this example is a predestinative 'action device' requesting complicity in a fantasy that speaks confidently from the future.

DAY 2	
8.00 a.m.	Breakfast in bed.
9.00 a.m.	Limousine sightseeing tour of city landmarks including the Sydney Opera House.
11.30 a.m.	Return by limousine for morning tea at Reader's Digest headquarters to receive your prize cheque.
12.30 p.m.	Prize winners' luncheon to celebrate your win at one of Sydney's premiere restaurants.

The Reader's Digest was eventually forced by law to discontinue its "You May Have Already Won..." headline and replace pre-selection with a simple drawing from all eligible entries. These continued to be accepted from both Yes and No replies so as to comply with the proscription against consideration, but it was barely enough to ensure their survival against a barrage of complaints brought against the promotional literature. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission had taken specific aim at the use of the term "Lucky Numbers" by the Reader's Digest, arguing that if the winning numbers had already been drawn then it was misleading to term any of the losing numbers "lucky". The logic struck at the heart of the predestinative clause, although Grossman writes that by this stage it was in use by hundreds of other direct-mailers and the line "You May Have Already Won..." had become "as routine as 'Hail Mary' to a lay Catholic". The Reader's Digest was able to quietly let it go without suffering any great setback in the number of respondents.

It is worth pointing out in conclusion that the techniques described above were not altogether new. As innovative as they were, the Reader's Digest sweepstakes campaigns had a formidable precedent in the lottery promotions of the 18th and 19th centuries. In his *History of English Lotteries* (1893), John Ashton gives the following account of predestinative delusion taking the form of a schedule written by a footman during the reign of King George II, in which the man details how he plans to use the lottery prize:

As soon as I have received the money, I will marry Grace Towers; but, as she has been cross and coy, I will use her as a servant. Every morning she shall get me a mug of strong beer, with a toast, nutmeg, and sugar in it; then I will sleep till ten, after which I shall have a large sack posset. My dinner shall be on table by one, and never without a good pudding. I will have a stock of wine and brandy laid in. About five in the afternoon I will have tarts and jellies, and a gallon bowl of punch; at ten, a hot supper of two dishes. If I am in a good humour, and Grace behaves herself, she shall sit down with me. To bed about twelve..."

According to Ashton the letter was discovered after the man became infatuated with a prescient dream, spent all his money on two losing tickets and then killed himself.