

Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years

Contest and promotions guide

Promotions which award prizes might be called contests, sweepstakes, lotteries, raffles, drawings or games. The lottery section of state law, Wis. Stat. ch. 945, covers these types of promotions. In addition, Wis. Stat. s. 100.171, regulates prize offers. This brochure will help you understand these promotions and determine what is legal in Wisconsin.

What is an illegal promotion?

A promotion is not legal in the state of Wisconsin if it involves all of the following three elements: prize, chance and consideration.

Prize is the incentive offered to a consumer to enter a promotion.

Chance means that the winner is chosen by the "luck of the draw," with little or no skill or ability involved.

Consideration means anything that is a commercial or financial advantage to the promoter or a disadvantage to any participant. An example would be a required purchase or payment in order to participate. The following methods of entry are not consideration:

- The price of postage necessary to mail entries.
- The price of gas used to visit participating stores.
- Promotions where entrants must visit a store, or other location, as long as no purchase or admittance fee is required. For example, consumers may have to go to the store to pick up game tokens, match numbers or obtain entry blanks. These promotions are not illegal provided that free game pieces are available as an alternate means of participation.
- Furnishing proof of purchase if the required proof consists of nothing more than all or part of the container of any product or a facsimile. The law requires that facsimiles be accepted in order for the promotion to be lacking consideration. This provides individuals a way to enter without spending money.

If prize and consideration are present, a contest is still illegal if the outcome is determined essentially by chance, even though it is accompanied by some skill. For example, if the skill required in a contest involves simply guessing which word from

a provided list of possibilities is the correct answer, the contest would be illegal.

State lottery

The state-operated lottery, as conducted under Wis. Stat. ch. 565, does not affect other games, contests, drawings or promotions conducted in this state. Questions about the state-operated lottery should be addressed to:

**Wis. Department of Revenue
Division of Lottery
2135 Rimrock Rd
PO Box 8941
Madison, WI 53708-8941
(608) 261-8800**

Bingo and raffles

Nonprofit organizations are eligible to obtain licenses to conduct raffles or bingo events. Information and applications are available from the:

**Wis. Dept. of Administration
Division of Gaming
3319 W Beltline Hwy, 1st Fl
PO Box 8979
Madison, WI 53713
(608) 270-2555**

Casino nights

Games such as Las Vegas nights where participants make a payment or donation in order to

gamble with play money, and then use the play money at the end of the evening to bid on prizes, constitute illegal lotteries under Wisconsin law. The law does not exempt benevolent or nonprofit organizations.

Cross couponing

Certain cross couponing is legal in Wisconsin among retailers and manufacturers. For example, a manufacturer can run an ad which says, "Buy Tasty Salad Dressing and Get a Free Head of Lettuce." A retailer can run a promotion which states, "Buy a Cooler at Regular Price and Get a Coupon for a Free Liter of Soda at Joe's Market."

Redemption for merchandise

Retailers may offer coupons for redemption. For instance, local stores can offer a card that is punched every time a gallon of milk is purchased and when ten holes are punched, the eleventh gallon is free. Redemption of these coupons must be done by participating retailers.

Combination sales

If an ad reads, "Buy 3, Get 1 Free," the ad must either state the price of the product to be purchased or state that the product is being offered at its regular price. The intent of the law is that "free" means "free" and is not used as a disguise for a mark-up. For example, the law prohibits a coupon for a "free" side of breadsticks with a pizza if it requires you to pay a non-standard price for the base pizza.

Scratch-off games

Promotions by manufacturers or retailers that promise 10 to 50 percent off a purchase are legal only if the percentage or dollars off are revealed **before** the decision to purchase, or commitment to make a purchase, is made.

Prize offers

Even though many types of contests and promotions are legal in Wisconsin, consumers should still use caution. Many consumers receive mass-mailed solicitations that appear to indicate they have won a valuable prize. In order to participate, these promotions require that you pay a fee, purchase merchandise, or visit a timeshare resort or car dealership. Your chances of winning big are slim.

Wis. Stat. s. 100.171, regulates unsolicited prize notices given to individuals in Wisconsin. Under the law, solicitors may not request or accept any payment for prize promotions before they provide a **written** notice that contains:

- The verifiable retail value of each prize;
- The odds of receiving each prize;
- Any shipping or handling fees;
- Any requirement to attend a sales presentation; and
- Any restrictions or conditions on receiving the prize.

The Bureau of Consumer Protection or any district attorney may seek injunctive relief, restitution for consumers and civil forfeitures of up to \$5,000.

Intentional violations of the law could result in fines up to \$10,000 and two years' imprisonment.

Watch out for scams!

Just like everything else there are scam artists who use contests and promotions to try to get your money. A few tips to remember are:

- **Never pay to collect sweepstakes winnings.** Scammers state you have won a lottery or prize and must pay taxes or other fees to receive winnings. They take your money and never send your "winnings".
- **Do not believe everything they claim.** Just because they claim to be endorsed by a government agency or well-known organization does not mean they are. Government agencies will not endorse a contest or promotion. Also, just because an organization is named in an offer does not mean that they are part of that offer.
- **Your caller ID can deceive you.** Scam artists often use spoofing to hide their phone numbers. Spoofing is when a scammer uses electronic devices or internet technology to make your caller ID show a different phone number or name than is calling. Scammers can call from anywhere in the world and make it appear that their number is in your area.
- **Beware of "Urgent" letters.** Do not be fooled by solicitations that urge you to act immediately. The scammers want you to make a quick decision and send them

money before you realize it is a scam.

Remember, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is.

Disclaimers

Some contests include the phrase “void in Wisconsin.” This means that for one reason or another; the promoter is not making the contest available to the residents of Wisconsin. It does not necessarily mean that the promotion is illegal in Wisconsin.

Other promotions include the phrase “void where prohibited by law.” Regardless of this disclaimer, if a promotion is actually being conducted in violation of Chapter 945, the disclaimer will not protect the promoter from potential liability. Prizes won in such illegal lotteries are subject to forfeiture.

Foreign lotteries

U.S. postal regulations prohibit the mailing of lottery information. This includes offers to purchase foreign lottery tickets from Canada, Germany, Australia or other countries. Playing a lottery in a foreign country by mail is illegal. Further, any unsolicited notification of prize awards in a foreign country is a scam.

Criminal penalties

Those who enter lotteries which violate the gambling statutes could face potential criminal liability for aiding and abetting the conduct of an illegal lottery.

Prizes won in a lottery conducted in violation of state law are subject to forfeiture in an action brought by the Attorney General or a district attorney.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the:

**Bureau of Consumer Protection
2811 Agriculture Drive
PO Box 8911
Madison WI 53708-8911**

**E-MAIL:
DATCPHotline@wi.gov**

**WEBSITE:
datcp.wi.gov**

(800) 422-7128

FAX: (608) 224-4677

TTY: (608) 224-5058