

Sponsor Promotions Popular With Radio Listeners Part I

“First, you buy 2 10¢ packages of *Super Suds* or 1 20¢ Giant Size package.
Then you write a letter 100 words or less on this subject:

“Why I like *Super Suds*..... Why I like *Super Suds*.”

-- Jean Paul King

Lincoln, Me. (DG)—

As I stated in another article, most listeners during radio’s golden age weren’t very fond of radio advertising. However, there were exceptions to this way of thinking. There were radio commercials where the listeners paid close attention with great interest and anticipation. It wasn’t a catchy jingle or clever slogan that intrigued the listeners--- it was the announcer mentioning money and other valuable prizes from a contest.

From time to time, products from *Procter & Gamble, Colgate-Palmolive-Peet, Lever Brothers*, and other large and small companies conducted contests on the radio with valuable prizes to be won.

The 2 most common contests consisted of completing a sentence on why he/she liked the product in a specific number of words (usually 25 words or less), and the finishing the last line of a limerick about the product. The 2 contest formats were easy, but it did require some thought and originality to come up with a quality entry. Even with some outstanding entries, the listeners’ chances of winning a prize were very slim--- but it didn’t stop them from sending in entries with the hope of winning a prize.

I don’t know exactly what was the first contest heard on radio, but the earliest contest I have come across took place in 1935 on the *CLARA, LU, ‘n EM* program over **NBC’s Red Network**. Announcer Jean Paul King described how the listeners could win either a 1935 *Packard* Sedan or \$1000 (extremely valuable prizes by 1935 standards). All they had to do was to write a letter “**Why I like *Super Suds***” in 100 words or less. In order to enter this contest, the listeners had to send in their entries with either 2 10¢ *Super Suds* box tops or 1 20¢ Giant Size *Super Suds* box top. Wait, there is more! In addition to the box top(s), King asked the listeners to include the name of the store where the listeners purchased *Super Suds*, and the clerk’s name who sold the soap. By including this information, the clerk was also eligible in the contest. Instead of announcing the winners on *CLARA, LU, ‘n EM*, King said the contest’s winners were announced on **NBC(Blue’s) HOUSE OF GLASS** in the evening (which I assume was also airing the same contest at the time).

Although the sponsors shelled out cash and merchandise worth thousands of dollars, the contest was a valuable tool for them. It served 3 different purposes:

- 1.) It tested the popularity of the product.
- 2.) It tested the popularity of the radio program that product sponsored.

3.) The contest was an incentive for people to buy and use the product.



It was important for the sponsor to know the product's popularity and the radio program's popularity that product sponsored. A good example on how the sponsor monitored both product and program was a 1940 *PandG Naphtha Soap Contest*.

■ The enclosed magazine ad and radio commercial were from the same contest. To test the popularity of *PandG* in the magazine ad, the listeners sent their entries and 4 *PandG Naphtha Soap* wrappers to this address:

**PandG Naphtha Soap
Dept. MC, Box 25
Cincinnati, Ohio**

At that time, the same *PandG* contest was presented on *THE GUIDING LIGHT*. To test the popularity of both the product and the radio program, announcer Fort Pearson informed the listeners to send their entries and soap wrappers to:

**The Guiding Light
Cincinnati, Ohio**

This contest spanned 6 weeks. To keep the listeners interested, there were winners each week for the contest's duration. On *THE GUIDING LIGHT*'s Friday broadcasts, Pearson announced the winner of the \$1000 1st Prize and the 5 \$500 2nd Prize winners (in order to preserve time, the 60 *Servel Electrolux Refrigerators* 3rd Prize winners weren't mentioned on the air).

Although serial programs featured contests the most, there were some interesting and unusual contests heard on the evening radio programs.

In 1946, *Mollé Brushless Shave Cream* had a very unique contest. Instead of completing a sentence or finishing a limerick about the product, this contest didn't require anything about *Mollé*. Heard on the *MOLLÉ MYSTERY THEATER*, announcer Dan Seymour informed the listeners to write a short story about "My Closest Shave." It was to be a story of an actual experience where the listeners had a close call with danger, embarrassment, failure, or anything unpleasant. Since *Mollé* sponsored this contest, the end flaps from a *Mollé* carton were included with each story. The prizes awarded for this contest totaled \$25,000. For the winning entries, the Grand Prize winner received a \$3500 vacation or cash; 5 2nd Prize winners received a 1946 *Ford* automobile; 10 3rd Prize winners received an *Emerson Tabletop Television & Radio/Phonographs*, and 75 other winners received a small cash prize. Since any man, woman, and child could experience a close call in their lives, the *Mollé* "My Closest Shave" Contest was open to everyone whether they shaved or not— as long as the *Mollé* carton end flaps were included.



There were also contests where the stars and characters from a radio program participated. In this example, the outcome from a 1948 *Parkay Margarine* contest had an impact on the program's story.

The advertisement is for a contest titled "Name 'The Great Gildersleeve' Mystery Baby". The main headline reads "WIN A NEW '49 FORD IN PARKAY MARGARINE'S \$50,000 CONTEST". Below this, it says "20 FORDS - 721 prizes in all!". A speech bubble from a woman says, "Help! Good winning name for this baby girl - and \$1000 in 55¢ margarine!". The ad shows a green 1949 Ford car with people inside. A red starburst says "1000 tickets for Ford". Below the car, it says "20 FORDS! 4 every week for 5 weeks!". The bottom section lists "721 WONDERFUL PRIZES IN ALL!" with a list of prizes: 1st Prize: \$1000; 2nd Prize: \$500; 3rd Prize: \$250; 4th Prize: \$100; 5th Prize: \$50; 6th Prize: \$25; 7th Prize: \$10; 8th Prize: \$5; 9th Prize: \$2.50; 10th Prize: \$1.25; 11th Prize: \$0.625; 12th Prize: \$0.3125; 13th Prize: \$0.15625; 14th Prize: \$0.078125; 15th Prize: \$0.0390625; 16th Prize: \$0.01953125; 17th Prize: \$0.009765625; 18th Prize: \$0.0048828125; 19th Prize: \$0.00244140625; 20th Prize: \$0.001220703125. There is also a "CLIP COUPON NOW." section with a "Parkay" logo and the slogan "Sand red and flap".

The contest was set up on *THE GREAT GILDERSLEEVE*'s first broadcast of the 1948-1949 season. It began with Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve finding an abandoned baby girl in his car. No one knew the identity of the baby or who left her in Gildersleeve's car. This began a series of episodes concerning "The Mystery Baby"--- and a contest. *Parkay* conducted a contest for the listeners to help Gildersleeve name "The Mystery Baby." Since the listeners couldn't see what The Mystery Baby looked like on the program, announcer John Wald described what she looked like on the *Parkay* commercials. In the *Parkay* magazine ads, there was a picture of Gildersleeve holding the baby. The contest spanned 5 weeks with weekly winners on each *GREAT GILDERSLEEVE* broadcast during the 5 week period. The prizes given away each week consisted of a 1949 *Ford Automobile* for the 1st Prize winner; a *Cory Coffee Maker* for 4 2nd Prize winners; a *Toastmaster Toaster* for 4 3rd Prize winners; a *General Electric Table Radio* for 8 4th Prize winners; and \$10 for 12 5th Prize Winners. Unlike the *PandG Naphtha Soap*

Contest mentioned earlier, this contest also had a \$1000 Grand Prize given to the best overall entry of the contest. That entry would be the baby's name on the program.

The naming of "The Mystery Baby" wasn't the first contest of this kind. A similar contest took place on Bob Hope's *PEPSODENT PROGRAM* in 1940. The baby in question wasn't mysterious, and it was a real live baby. The listeners had to come up with a name for the baby daughter of announcer Bill Goodwin (no relation). In doing this, the *Pepsodent Company* offered cash prizes to 1367 winners, including \$5000 for the best entry and \$1000 for 2nd Prize. The listeners submitted the name along with a carton from any 1 of 3 *Pepsodent* dentifrice products--- *Pepsodent Tooth Paste*, *Pepsodent Tooth Powder*, or *Pepsodent Liquid Dentifrice*. At this time, it isn't known what the winning name was, and if Goodwin and his wife used that name for their daughter.

In 1944, the makers of *Swan Soap* wanted to make sure every radio listener knew about the "Name Mama Swan" contest. Instead of 1 program, the contest was presented on 2 programs. During the daytime, announcers Paul Luther and Grace Russell described the details of the contest on the *BRIGHT HORIZON* serial program on CBS. In the evening, the contest was also presented on the *GEORGE BURNS & GRACIE ALLEN SHOW*, also on CBS. In addition to coming up with a name for Mama Swan, the listeners had to complete the sentence "I like *Swan Soap* better because....." in 25 words or less. If that sounds like a lot of work for the listeners, the Grand Prize of \$100 a month for life (or \$20,000 in a lump sum) made that extra work well worth it.

Contests on the radio weren't necessarily reserved for just 1 product. In 1949, the *Colgate-Palmolive-Peet Company* sponsored the “\$100,000 '49 Gold Rush Contest” for 6 of the company's cleaning and soap products. The products participating in this contest were *Fab, Super Suds, Vel Powder, Palmolive Soap, Ajax Cleanser, and Cashmere Bouquet Soap*. The commercials for this contest were heard on all radio programs that sponsored any of the 6 products. It was also a contest that the number “49” had a definite meaning. In 25 words or less, the listeners completed the sentence, “I like *Colgate's* (name of product) because.....” Instead of a specific product, the listener selected 1 of the 6 *Colgate-Palmolive-Peet* products mentioned. The winning entry of this contest won a nice sum of \$49,000. The other prizes consisted of \$4900 for the 2nd Prize winner; \$490 for 49 3rd Prize winners; and \$5 for 4900 4th Prize winners.

Contests were fun to participate, but it was also something the listeners took very seriously. *Radio Guide* magazine had a special feature of the latest contests heard on the radio and instructions on how to enter those contests. From time to time, the magazine also featured articles on tips for creating winning contest entries.

With the huge piles of box tops, wrappers, cartons, and other product stuff, the sponsor discovered their contests were extremely popular. The opportunity for the listeners to win large sums of money and merchandise was too good to pass up. In Part II of this series, we will explore another popular advertising promotion, the premium offer.