

The Style Invitational



THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

[to Kitchen Aid food processor customer service rep]
"I have a complaint about your product. It processes food. But aren't processed foods supposed to be bad for you?"

Week 648: Caller IDiot

Not content with a half-page of puerility on Page 2 of the Style section each Sunday, many Invitational readers also wallow in the font of juvenilia known as Below the Beltway. Gene Weingarten's weekly column in The Washington Post Magazine. Every few weeks, when he's run out of anything to say, Gene calls some 1-800 consumer advice numbers advertised on product packages and harasses the poor PR workers with stupid questions. As you can see by the example above, Gene is getting pretty desperate here. Fortunately, he is reputed to be familiar with The Style Invitational, so you can help him out: **Name a product or company and supply a stupid question to ask the consumer hotline person.**

Winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up wins a tapestry wall hanging, contributed by Loser Eric Murphy of Ann Arbor, Mich., depicting a pretty angel holding a candle and feeding (or possibly swatting at) some doves. What gives this fine artwork its Loserly dimension are the slots around the candle, the angel's halo and her swat-hand, into which you insert little Christmas lights (included!).

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Feb. 13. Include "Week 648" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published March 5. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's contest is by Kevin Dopart of Washington. This week's contest was suggested by Russell Beland of Springfield, whose name has been printed more than 950 times in The Washington Post, as opposed to Weingarten's 506 or so.

REPORT FROM WEEK 644

In which we asked for some new events, product tie-ins, etc., to create some interest in the Winter Olympics, which you probably won't be watching starting this Friday. This week was one of those frustrating ones in which a lot of people offered pretty much the same ideas. If the one you sent is practically identical to one included below, you may file an appeal to the Empress; be sure to mail your petition inside a suitcase well lined with that special green Olympic packing material.

- 4 Punitive Luge:** Each country binds one convicted murderer to a sled, has four men push him. The criminal who reaches the bottom fastest wins glory for his country. (Seth Brown, North Adams, Mass.)
- 3 All figure skaters** have to perform their routines in those big Seven Dwarfs costumes. Because let's face it, in terms of future job prospects . . . (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)
- 2 The winner of the bobblehead of Arnold Schwarzenegger in a dress:** The Olympic cauldron will be positioned below the ski jump. Look for height and distance records to be shattered this year. (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)

AND THE WINNER OF THE INKER

1 Carnival biathlon: Each competitor starts with a handful of tokens, wagering at each shooting station for a chance for larger stuffed animals, which must be carried for the remainder of the course. Winner takes the gold medal and the big stuffed giraffe. (Joel Knanishu, Rock Island, Ill.)

HONORABLE MENTIONS

New rules: To ensure security, the following will be banned or eliminated from Olympic venues: sharpened blades and poles, white powdery substances, airborne crystallized material, speeding vehicles and high-altitude staging areas. (Michael Gips, Bethesda)

To improve their credibility and accuracy, all figure-skating judges must score each contestant using the Magic 8 Ball. (Rick Haynes, Potomac)

The figure skaters must wear full pads and helmets, while the hockey players wear the frilly shirts and tight little pants. (Kevin Dopart, Washington; Brendan Beary)

New events: Downhill limbo: Just like normal downhill skiing, but there's a 4-foot-high bar across the finish line. In the second round, the bar gets a little heavier, and a little lower. . . (Brendan Beary)

Die-athlon: Two skiers follow parallel paths and stop to shoot at each other. No silver or bronze medals will be awarded. (Douglas Frank, Crosby, Tex.)

Old biathlon: Skiing and shooting. New biathlon: Skiing and doing shots. (Bode Miller, La Dolce Vita, Italy) (Brendan Beary)

The Athlon: All the excitement of the biathlon at half the cost. (Marc Naimark, Paris)

Ice Brawling: Hockey with all the boring parts removed. (Seth Brown)

Mouth-to-Mouth Speed-Skating Relay: Stick the metal baton to your tongue and go. The "handoffs" will be ethpethially exhiting. (Kevin Dopart)

Extreme curling: This already exciting sport is taken to the nail-biting limit when the ice in the path of the slowly sliding rock is cleared by high-tech vacuum cleaners. (Kyle Hendrickson, Frederick)

Bobsledding: The 275-pound weight class. (Douglas Frank; Bill Davis, Canton, Ga.)

Global Warming Biathlon: Contestants start out skating, end up swimming. (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)

Snow Calligraphy, sponsored by Bud Light: Contestants drink a pitcher of beer and spell their names. And since it's an international competition, names must appear in both Roman and Cyrillic alphabets, plus Japanese kanji. (Brendan Beary)

Protest filing: A competition among coaches. Points awarded for Speed of Objection, Clarity of Protest and Degree of Hissy Fit. (Stephen Litterst, Ithaca, N.Y.)

Slush funding: In a demonstration sport, Alaska's congressional delegation competes to see who can throw the most money at tiny, ice-bound villages. (Peter Metrinko, Chantilly)

Suburban pentathlon: The 50-meter driveway shovel, the windshield scrape, finding lost keys in deep snow, the car dig-out and the 100-meter ice walk in dress shoes. (Martin Bancroft, Rochester, N.Y.; Andrew Hoenig, Rockville)

Men's Piste-Off: Points awarded for size of the hole created in the snow, depth of the hole, and style points for an attractive color pattern around the edge. (Harvey Levy, Kibbutz Kalila, Israel)

Ski-binding: Well-conditioned athletes in Lycra are bound with leather straps and then must struggle to free

themselves. No actual competition involved, but traditionally one of the most watched events, especially the pairs category. (Peter Metrinko)

Ads and sponsors: Team U.S. Curling Association: "Hey, ladies, come see a man with a broom in his hand!" (Andrew Hoenig)

The U.S. Figure Skating Team, sponsored by Botox: "It takes more than ice to freeze a smile." (Kevin Dopart)

The U.S. Luge Team: The two-man luge: It's rugged. It's intimate. And their pants couldn't be any tighter. Don't miss those wild rides down Brokeback Mountain! (Jay Shuck, Minneapolis)

The biathlon, brought to you by Fox News Network with host Bill O'Reilly: Fair and Balanced In-Your-Face Coverage of American-Bred, Rifle-Toting Marksmen Whipping the Elastic Girly Pants off Bands of Incestuous European U.N. Suckup Cowards. (Robin Grove, Woodbridge)

Opening Ceremonies: Hillary Clinton carries the U.S. flag, having been dubbed our official Ice Maiden. Finalists follow, including Martha Stewart, Omarosa and Nancy Grace. (Jean Sorensen, Herndon)

Opening Ceremony: Arrival of the Olympic Snowball, which started out from Athens as a 50,000-pound block of ice. (Martin Bancroft)

Closing Ceremonies: All the athletes gather around the Olympic cauldron and blow it out on the count of three. (Dave Prevar)

Next Week: A Hearty Har-Har, or Love's Labored Losers

Music

Il Divo: Simon Says Opera, but the Ear Says Awful

By DANIEL GINSBERG
 Special to The Washington Post

Il Divo, the vocal quartet whose new album, "Ancora," sailed to the top of the pop charts last week, says it sings popular songs in a classically inspired operatic manner.

If only. The group's sold-out concert Friday at DAR Constitution Hall showed the group quick to hijack the accoutrements of opera but possessing none of the tonal splendor and precision essential to the art. The concert was a schlocky, cloying and highly contrived display with an unvaried sound and stage act that could make any music lover turn away in embarrassment.

This collection of pretenders is the creation of the insulting "Amer-

ican Idol" judge Simon Cowell, an impresario whose previous credits include promoting WWF superstars and such insipid "reality" shows as the short-lived "Cupid." Seeing the success of proto-opera crossover singer Andrea Bocelli, Cowell schemed up the idea of gathering a bunch of handsome and youthful mini-Bocellis. To the blind Italian singer's lonely love-lorn stage persona, Il Divo puts on a "We are so suave, we just love you" act that unabashedly feeds cartoonlike and debasing national stereotypes.

The quartet played to the audience with blatantly choreographed smiles and backslaps. The American tenor David Miller came off as clean cut and earnest, while the French pop singer Sebastien Izambard slathered on his mysterious *je ne*

sais quoi quality. Spanish baritone Carlos Marin, who seemed so in love with his deep voice that he would hug and caress it all day if he could, was the comely Mediterranean Man. And then there was good-looking, long-haired Swiss tenor Urs Buhler.

Besides the tuxedos, about the only things that called opera to mind were the fake-marble columns and stage, an attempt to evoke classical elegance and symmetry. A traditional orchestra off to one side of the stage struggled to be heard against the thwacks and warbles of the electric guitar and drum-laden band on the other side. Cowell's clangorous gang seemed to think that performing music in a romance language actually makes it more artful.

The quartet sang numbers like "All by Myself" and "Feelings" with amplification (an opera no-no), showing little breath support, vocal purity or character. In the mid-ranges, the singers' voices were grainy and lusterless and sounded merely loud at the upper reaches. Miller was the only one who at times even mustered a little golden tone. The musical scoring was monotonous, with each singer predictably taking a couple lines on his own before they all sang a grand climax at full throttle.

The swooning audience lapped up every minute of all this. Young and old alike swarmed the stage for autographs and handshakes in the closing sets, and one member of the audience threw purple thong underwear at the performers.



"Feelings," no, no, no: From left, David Miller, Carlos Marin, Sebastien Izambard and Urs Buhler of Il Divo perform in New York last month.

The concert highlighted the dangers of the whole idea of crossover music, the well-intentioned genre meant to bring listeners into the classical music realm and vice versa. After these two hours, a newcomer

would still find an opera performance completely foreign. Il Divo took the substance of a rich, beautiful genre and turned it inside out, leaving you with a bitter aftertaste. Il Divo? *Quattro formaggi.*

TODAY'S HOROSCOPE | Holiday Mathis

Aries (March 21-April 19)
 The spirit of competition rages, and you'll be excellent when the pressure is on. The afternoon presents a conflict, probably involving a Taurus or a Virgo. Do a thorough diagnosis of the problem before you take any steps.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
 "To thine own self be true" is your motto. Too much coddling of others isn't good for your soul. Try balancing your attention between what you want and what they want.

Gemini (May 21-June 21)
 Most times, when you "score," it's because you set out to do so—you have a goal in mind. Today, you could accidentally get your proverbial ball in the right place to make points.

Cancer (June 22-July 22)
 Freud said that all people who are in love are crazy. If you're not in love, the stars say that it's about time you fell again. One affectionate, "insane" act could be the trigger that makes you topple.

Leo (July 23-Aug. 22)
 If you're not dressed for the day yet, wear your equivalent of a costume and cape. Perhaps a power suit? At least put on some lucky shoes. It's on you to be guardian, protector and superhero for the meek.

Virgo (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)
 For all your masterful attempts at organization, logic and control, there is still a wild gypsy in your soul who wants to be free—of possessions, psychic bonds and other people's definitions. That's the part of you who comes out today.

Libra (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)
 There is a very good reason why you can think faster than you can talk. You'll discover it this afternoon

when you get into a position to win or lose someone's esteem. Thinking twice or three times before you utter a word is advised.

Scorpio (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)
 Visualization will reap results. Picture yourself doing what you always wanted, often. Maintain your focus and be ready to trade up to a new and better you. Time is on your side.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)
 Your strength of spirit is high, and the eight-ball is nowhere in sight. Don't be afraid to squeeze every drop of life from daily activities. Grab all the gusto.

Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)
 Your happiness depends on discovering the most loving way to arrive at the end of the day. You have a way with this. Your kindness and appreciation of others is not going to go unnoticed.

Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)
 You have a unique opportunity for expression. Don't get caught up in measuring yourself with someone else. Be willing to be bigger and better than the old you. You will surprise yourself.

Pisces (Feb. 19-March 20)
 People who love you may talk about nothing but the weather around you. You're learning to look under the surface of the words. Emotion is the most powerful communicator.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAY (FEB. 5): You work to achieve a certain goal, and many of you will have it within the first two months—but you'll find the real benefit is not having the "thing" but the expansion of your spirit that has occurred. Family wounds heal in March. June brings a proposal. Financial opportunity in October is golden. Ties with Gemini and Libra are tight.

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ASK AMY

Dear Amy:
 My 24-year-old son has been spending a lot of time with his almost-18-year-old half niece (my husband's granddaughter by his previous wife).

These two seem to be only with each other and have no other friends. He has his own place. She lives at home, but she spent this last Christmas and Thanksgiving with him, not her parents. This young woman has always been strange and uncommunicative since she was a child. Neither one has had a boyfriend or girlfriend before.

When I have questioned the situation, they have responded with nasty letters or e-mails, saying that I am sick and twisted to think there is a romantic relationship here because they are related. We have tried to talk to her parents to say this is an inappropriate and unhealthy relationship, but they have ignored our requests to meet with them.

Please advise us on how to deal with this. This has been going on for about 18 months.

Concerned Mom

I'm not quite sure what your concerns are, because I would imagine that the young woman's parents should be the truly "concerned" ones. Their daughter, after all, is a "strange and uncommunicative" minor who is in a relationship with a man several years older than she.

Are you worried because these two are genetically related? If so, your worries may be overblown.

According to Robin Bennett, senior genetic counselor at the University of Washington Medical Genetics Clinic in Seattle, "The genetic relationship between these two is about the same as for first cousins. The risks are much lower than people perceive. In general, the risk factor is just a few percentage points higher than anyone's genetic risks to have significant problems. If this couple is worried about having children together, they should meet with a genetic counselor." (State laws vary in terms of the legality of marrying a relative, however—in some states it is illegal.)

Your son is a grown man. You can't prevent him from having whatever sort of legal and consensual relationship he chooses to have. However, if your son sends you rude communications accusing you of being sick and twisted, then he needs to learn how to communicate respectfully with you.

Stop asking your son to define this relationship. It's time for you to accept the fact that you don't know what's going on and wouldn't be able to control it even if you did.

Dear Amy:
 I'm an 18-year-old bisexual female. I'm dating a wonderful guy, and we've been together for more than a year.

Recently, I found out that he cheated on me with a mutual friend. Both of them were drunk and regret it deeply. They only shared a kiss, but he felt horrible about it and felt compelled to tell me about it.

Naturally, I was angry with him and told him that we should take a "break." It was one of the most miserable weeks of our lives.

A few days ago, we decided to get back together. While we were apart, I started getting closer with a friend of mine who I have had a crush on. She is funny, smart and very attractive.

The day after my boyfriend and I got back together, she confessed to me that she had liked me for a long time. Now I don't know what to do! Do I leave the man who hurt me to pursue a crush? Or do I stay with the one I love and allow the crush to pass?

Torn in Two

I believe that at least one episode of "Friends" was devoted to this basic plot line; you just need to decide whether you are playing Ross or Rachel.

If you want your relationship with your boyfriend to succeed, then you need to commit to it, regardless of whatever other temptations you face (so does your boyfriend, by the way). Crushes tend to be temporary in nature. If you leave them alone, they eventually pass—only to become memories that briefly flicker to life at college reunions.

Write to Amy Dickinson at askamy@tribune.com or Ask Amy, Chicago Tribune, TT500, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611.

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