

KH2D's Tips For Successful CW Contesting

CW Equipment:

An automatic device, preferably with memory is a must for CW contesting. Before the contest starts, it is imperative to load the memories and properly adjust the speed of the device.

Use of an automated device also eliminates sending mistakes, which can be embarrassing during a contest. Try and think of EVERYTHING you will need to send during a contest and make sure it's programmed into a memory.

CW Equipment Adjustment

Adjusting automated CW sending devices can be tricky, but if you follow this simple equation, you will minimize the problems in doing so. First, tune around on any HF band where you can find stations who are sending CW. Listen until you find a station who is sending at the MAXIMUM speed you can copy. Then, with your automated device in the 'off the air' mode, emulate that station and determine the speed at which he is sending CW. The number derived is your BASE CW SPEED number.

Once your BASE CW SPEED number has been determined, the proper sending speed for you to use during a contest

is found using a simple formula:

$$(\text{BASE CW SPEED}) \times (2.3) = \text{CONTEST SPEED}$$

Yes, I know you can't SEND that fast MANUALLY, but don't worry, during the contest you will be using ONLY the memories in your automated sending device so nobody will know. Yes, I know you can't COPY that fast either, but don't worry, during a contest there are many tricks to get the other station calling you to slow down, which we will cover later. To be successful at CW contesting, you MUST realize that EVERYBODY in the world copies CW faster than you do, but unless you appear to be as fast as they are, you have no hopes of winning a CW contest.

Fine Tuning Your CW Equipment

If you are fortunate enough to own an automated sending device with the capability of programmable speed changes, you should by all means program the speed of all the mundane stuff (like the words 'TEST', '599', and 'K') to approximately 86 words per minute. You will save many milliseconds during the contest by doing this, and you will impress many other people with the automation capabilities of your station. Don't worry about speed changes confusing anyone Remember, you MUST realize that EVERYBODY in the world copies CW faster than you do.

Computer Equipment

It's 1998, and if you don't have a computer in your shack, you shouldn't be thinking about CW contesting. Why? Simple. We have already established the fact that CW contests are run at CONTEST SPEED, and that everybody in the world can copy CW faster than you can.

You will most definitely need a computer and some software to take care of the more mundane tasks associated with CW contesting, like figuring out what country or zone the guy you just worked was in because you couldn't copy the exchange at CONTEST SPEED. If you don't have a computer, go get one.

EQUIPMENT SUMMARY: Always send very fast. The faster you call CQ, the more other stations will call you because they think you are a REAL contest station. Use your equipment to it's fullest capacity. Never forget that everyone else in the world can copy CW much faster than you can.

Now that we have our CW equipment properly set up, lets move on to operating skills. These, I feel can be addressed best with the good old FAQ format of questions and answers.

Frequently Asked Questions About CW Contesting

HOW DO I FIND A FREQUENCY TO CALL CQ ? Tune around until you can't hear anything on a particular frequency for at least 30 milliseconds. Then press the 'CQ CONTEST' button on your keyer. If you hear other stations when the CQ CONTEST message is finished, simply press the button again. Continue to do this until other stations begin to call you, no matter how long it takes. NEVER NEVER NEVER send 'QRL?' before CQ'ing. REAL contest stations never do that.

Don't spend a minute listening to make sure that a frequency is clear before you CQ, that is a major waste of time. If you wound up on a frequency that already had somebody calling CQ, no problem. CQ DUELING is just a part of contesting. If the other guy is serious about contesting, it will only take you a few minutes to make him go away. Save that frequency in memory. It's your home CQ frequency. If you QSY to work multipliers, always go back it again.

THE STATION CALLING ME IS SENDING TOO FAST. WHAT SHOULD I DO ? Press the button for the memory containing 'AGN ?'. Do this repeatedly, and sooner or later, the calling stations ESP filter will kick in and he will slow down. If he doesn't have an ESP filter, than he will just go away and leave you alone so you can work somebody else. If he doesn't go away, just press the button you have programmed for 'SRI QRN QRZ TEST', which will get rid of the most persistent high speed callers.

WHEN SHOULD I CALL CQ ? Always. REAL contest stations don't tune around. They just sit in one spot and call CQ for 48 hours. Never mind where you are. Somebody will call you, sooner or later. You must establish your importance by planting your feet firmly on a frequency and calling CQ.

HOW LONG SHOULD THE PAUSE IN MY KEYS BE BETWEEN CQ's ? Lucky you. No more formulas, I have already figured this one out for you. It takes me exactly 2 seconds to send my call at 28 words per minute (KH2D – four characters). So you should program the pause to at least 2.1 seconds, which will give you 1/10 of a second to listen for me calling you before you start CQ'ing again. Don't worry about the guys with six character call signs, they aren't real contesters anyway - real contesters only have 3 or 4 letter calls.

IF I ONLY CALL CQ, HOW DO I GET MULTIPLIERS ? Easy. Most stations in rare locations are never serious contesters. They just get on so they can give out multipliers to the serious contesters in Japan or California. If they were serious, they would be CQ'ing, not calling you. When somebody you need for a multiplier calls you, you just ask him to QSY to four or five other bands, and then when that's finished you return to CQ'ing on your established home frequency. Be persistent when QSY'ing people. Beg if you have to. Get nasty. Do whatever it takes. Never mind the guy doesn't have an antenna for 160, insist he goes to that band to try with his 40 meter antenna. This system has been proven to work by many Caribbean contest expeditions.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF THE GUY I JUST WORKED STARTS TALKING TO ME AT CONTEST SPEED ? Simple. Just hit the button for the memory you have programmed to '73 QRZ TEST'. Real contesters don't ragchew during contest time. They contest.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF THE SAME STATION CALLS ME SIX TIMES IN THIRTY MINUTES ON THE SAME BAND ? Work him six times. Just don't put him in the log the last five. Never fail to realize that if he called you six times, he probably can't copy your callsign, he doesn't know who he is calling. He is just trying to help out by giving people contacts. Don't send 'QSO B4'. That will only confuse him. Just send his report and '73'. He'll be back in ten or fifteen minutes - repeat above procedure.

I'M TIRED OF CQ'ing. NOW WHAT CAN I DO ? Well, that happens to even the best contester. When your rate drops below 10 or 15 contacts an hour, it's not unusual to get a little bored. Some things you can do are take the family out for dinner, go cut the grass, or clean the swimming pool. These are, believe it or not, contest related activities. When your buddy up the road asks you "HOW'D YOU DO IN THE CONTEST, OM ?" and you find out he beat you by 800,000 points, you can always respond with "WELL, I COULD ONLY OPERATE THREE HOURS, I HAD TO TAKE THE FAMILY OUT TO DINNER, CUT THE GRASS, AND CLEAN THE SWIMMING POOL". If you have decided you want to tuff it out, you need to discover the second form of contesting, which we call SEARCH AND POUNCE.

HOW DOES THE SEARCH AND POUNCE THING WORK ? Basically, you just tune up and down the bands looking for other stations calling CQ, and you call them. Start at the top or the bottom, and work your way up or down the band. Don't forget to check way up above the RTTY frequencies, a lot of the

Super Contest Stations hide up there while they are eating lunch, so they can have one hand free for a baloney sandwich.

I HEAR SOMEBODY CQ'ing BUT I CAN'T COPY HIS CALL. WHAT SHOULD I DO ? Press the button with your call programmed into the memory keyer. Hopefully if he answers, you can recognize the first few letters of your own call. Note the time he worked you - after you have worked him, you can listen to him work other stations for 10 minutes and figure out what call to log. Even if nobody else is calling him, you can figure his call out by listening to him CQ. The computer will figure out the exchange for you.

I JUST TUNED TO A FREQUENCY AND SOMEBODY JUST STOPPED SENDING. WHAT SHOULD I DO ? Press the button you have programmed for '?'. Most stations in a CW contest who aren't working anybody will repeatedly call CQ, with a three to five second pause between CQ's. It's totally unrealistic for anyone to expect that YOU would wait 4 seconds to hear his call again, your time is much too valuable for that. Sending the '?' makes the other station realize that a REAL contest station has just shown up on his frequency, and will force him to manually originate another CQ call, saving you a few seconds of your valuable time. (NOTE: Don't try this trick with KH2D. If you '?' KH2D and then call him the next time he CQ's, he'll get your call wrong six times and it will take you 3 minutes to work him. Much faster for everybody to wait the extra 3 seconds.....)

I HEAR A GUY CQ'ing. HE'S 40 OVER S9. HE WON'T ANSWER ME. HE WON'T ANSWER ANYBODY ELSE. WHAT SHOULD I DO ?
Wait about three minutes until he comes back from the bathroom, then call him again.
Practice copying his call until he gets back.

I DON'T LIKE THIS SEARCH AND POUNCE THING, IT'S TOO MUCH LIKE WORK. WHAT ELSE CAN I DO ? Well, we already talked about equipment, but since you already have the computer, you can just add the packet cluster interface, the CAT interface for your radio, and a rotor interface and you can turn search and pounce into point and click. Software is available that you can use to let everybody else do the searching for you..... they search..... you pounce. And you don't even have to worry about copying the callsigns any more. Almost as much fun as the W7PHO Family Hour.

I'VE GOT A LOT OF CONTEST EXPERIENCE, I WON THE DELAWARE QSO PARTY. WHAT'S NEXT FOR ME ?

That little island in the Caribbean, what else. But before you hop on the plane, here are a few tips for island contesting:

1. Always try and get on the island and operational a few days before the contest. Work as many people as you can before the contest starts. The pileup during the contest will be big anyway, and if you can eliminate the casual ops who need you for a new one before the contest, you won't have to deal with them while all the fun is going on.
2. Use the 47.75/.25 rule. CQ for the first 47 3/4 hours. Then use the last 15 minutes to look for all the multipliers you didn't work, especially those little islands out in Pacific, because those guys gave up calling the Caribbean years ago. You really don't need them anyway, you can work EU and NA until you turn blue, so why waste more than 15 minutes on them.
3. During the last fifteen minutes of the contest, if you do happen to hear a Pacific station calling CQ and you work him, ask him to stop what he is doing and QSY to other bands with you. Tell him to hurry, because the contest is almost over. Don't take no for an answer, be persistent. Get nasty if you have to. You reserved the last fifteen minutes specifically for working multipliers, and he has no right to screw up your plans.
4. If someone makes the mistake of calling from the Pacific for 30 minutes at their sunrise, trying to get you off the side of your antenna while you run Europe, and finally does get thru, don't let them get away until you have told them what bands/times/frequencies they MUST show up on to give you some more mults. Ask them if they have any friends on other islands they could call on the phone and get them up on frequency for you. Grasp the opportunity of the moment and use it.

5. If you happen to make the mistake of realizing the band is open to Asia, work only JA's. Never ask the JA's to hold still to see if anyone else you might need for a mult is calling you. Stations in the Pacific and Asia just love to sit in pileups with 3,000 JA's for an hour. You are enhancing their contest enjoyment. If one does happen to get thru the JA pileup, don't let them get away until you have told them the what bands/times/frequencies they MUST show up on to give you some more mults. Ask them if they have any friends on other islands they could call on the phone and get them up on frequency for you. Grasp the opportunity of the moment and use it.

Well, that's about all I can think of to help you be successful in CW contests. I have a long list of things that you can do to make testers unhappy, but I don't think I want to pass them out to the general public. Not yet, anyway

There is one other thing, it's kind of a personal secret that somebody told me about years ago. I met a guy one time, from another country, who was a famous tester, and he was teaching me some Asian methods for tuning my ESP filter.

Being in Guam for as many years as I have been here, I have learned a lot of things I would never have found out about in the Western world. Some are hard to understand or to believe, unless you have really seen them in action.

Many Asian cultures have superstitions not understood by most Westerners. My friend stressed to me the importance of pre-contest mental conditioning, and the utter importance of a good luck charm that is always present while testing. At first, I thought praying to the propagation Gods, conditioning my mind, and having a good luck charm were silly, but then I tried it

The results were unbelievable !! Anyway, I guess I'll let my secret out, with the hopes that contest scores around the world don't skyrocket like mine have if everybody tries it.....

73, and see you in the next contest, OM

73, Jim KH2D

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