

Greeting cards – instrument in promoting company image

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to emphasize the more and more eloquent tendency for companies to use religious, traditional holidays (Easter and Christmas) and the events organized upon such occasions in order to promote their image. For this purpose, the greeting cards and presents (either customized or not) sent by companies to their business partners, employees, clients etc. The conclusion of this study is that greeting cards and presents accompanying them represent besides a way of promoting the company's image a mean of reinforcing inter-human relations, in the same time answering to politeness and good manner norms.*

Key words: greeting card, organizational communication, habits and mentalities, image promotion.

For most of us, traditional holidays (Easter and Christmas) represent the most beautiful time of the year. We wait for them impatiently in order to give and receive gifts, and to be with our loved ones. Although for some they don't have the same spiritual content as they used to have, for multinational companies they tend to become more and more an important business opportunity, an acerb competition for conquering market supremacy. Holidays have always been of large social importance. Even in ancient times, commu-

nity leaders used to "get down" among the citizens, both in order to enhance the connections with them, and to show their power and greatness. Today, more and more companies give small parties for their employees at the end of the year or on Easter on the company's expense, and that is precisely in order to enhance socialization between employees. In the search for various occasions for communication, for promoting their image, companies have started to even enter areas which until not long ago used to be a part

of inter-personal communication. Thus, religious or traditional holidays, various names days etc. which not long ago used to be celebrated rather in family or with close friends, have become in the last decay events marking more and more companies' life.

From various commercials with specific message for the holiday, to an entire signaling system regarding the moment in inter-companies communication, these are all means for increasing visibility, to which companies allocate larger and larger resources.

That is why we consider important to bring to discussion a tool used by all company managers but in the same time avoided and minimized in the specialized literature. That is greeting cards – either customized or not – used by companies upon various traditional holidays. For organizations, companies, politeness rules impose for greeting cards to be sent to business partners, collaborators, clients and even employees. Some managers ask themselves if it is useful to send greeting card on birthdays or name days of their business partners or employees. Although this would mean both a financial and time effort, we consider that on a long run the gain for the company is proportional to the investment. Why? Because they represent a way of enhancing employees' loyalty and also of reinforcing the relations with business partners. They allow for positive association by connecting the company's name to festive moments. In this respect, it is important for any company to have a updated data base, in order for the greeting card to not become a communication error.

In order to ensure a better understanding of its function and role in communication, we will recall for a number of milestones in the history of printed greeting card, so that to underline the senses added in current usage,

as mean for promoting a company's image.

It appears that the custom of sending greeting cards is quite old. In ancient China, Chinese used to send greeting cards containing good wishes, on the occasion of the New Year. Ancient Egyptians also were sending small greetings to each other, yet on papyrus. The oldest greeting card dates back in 1400 and was sent on Valentine's Day, but the true habit of sending greeting cards didn't start until in 1800s. It was pretty expensive to send a greeting card at that time, and that is why such was the privilege of the rich. The tradition of Christmas cards originates in England by the middle 19th century.

Predecessors to Christmas cards are considered special letters sent to the loved ones in the eve of winter holidays by the boys who were being educated in internship schools, far from home. These letters, named "Christmas Pieces" were particularly laborious and proved to the parents how well their children had learned to write and draw throughout the school year.

The first mass marketed greeting cards appeared in 1843. The English business man Sir Henry Cole, too occupied in order to write traditional letters to his friends and business partners, asked the well known London artist J.C. Horsley to draw a greeting card which was then printed in black and white and colored by hand. The suggestive drawing was accompanied by the text "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You" (the original is exposed at Victoria and Albert Museum in London). A total of 1000 copies were made and sold by a shilling a piece. The idea was taken over by other traders also, so that by 1860 Christmas cards were produced and sold on a quite large scale.

In the USA the first Christmas and New Year greeting cards were made by a German

lithograph Louis Prang in 1860. They had a simple design and the greeting "Merry Christmas", they were colored and represented scenes from winter tales. As time passed by, the habit of sending greeting cards on various occasions developed throughout the world, becoming a real industry.

As it is known, in our country the first illustrated greeting cards occurred in the second half of the 19th century. In developing the cards industry an essential role was played by "private enterprisers", who introduced a significant number of illustrated greeting cards in the postal circuit (especially on Christmas, Easter and New Year). However, time has transformed greeting cards in a genuine epoch document, remaining an open window towards the world of knowledge. We are in the 21st century, the century of mobile telecommunications, fax, Internet, and classic correspondence by means of letters and greeting cards has unfortunately become unfashionable. Who today has the pleasure of writing down on a piece of paper a few greeting words for the loved ones and then of taking it to the postal office? Maybe only our grandparents, who don't know how to use the Internet and who are still living with the nostalgia of the times when sending a greeting card meant correct wording, choosing the right word, because they were out in the view and anyone could read them. The material support of the greeting card determines a way of writing, so that the freedom of expression, independency of the rhetoric plan should be reconsidered.

Nowadays, a few tens of billion greeting cards are sold each year worldwide and that given the fact that the ever growing offensive from the electronic version is becoming obvious.

As a general tendency we can say that printed greeting cards are becoming more and more the advantage of organizational communication, whilst its electronic form seems to gain land on the level of inter-personal communication.

In the following we will try to discuss the reasons for such tendency.

Printed Greeting Card versus Electronic Greeting Card

According to statistics, during the past years the evolution of printed greeting cards sales has registered a transformation emphasizing the change of the greeting card's statute as inter-personal communication tool.

For instance, the manager of a well known book shop in Bucharest said in an article published in *Ziarul Financiar* that last year on Christmas 10,000 greeting cards were sold, out of which most of them were purchased by companies. This shows that in inter-personal communication greeting cards are more and more replaced by SMS, MMS or e-mail, sometimes accompanied by images. We live in the speed century, in the era of advanced technologies, so that Internet has become a daily instrument, almost indispensable relating with time and space.

We can notice that in our country also more companies are using the electronic version of greeting cards (either customized or not), also known as e-cards, because the offer is really diversified and attractive, because they are usually for free and comfortable to use. Situations however exist in which companies forget to send greeting cards and they choose in the last minute the electronic form – better than nothing.

The question is why most companies still prefer the formula of printed greeting cards. There are at least two answers for this question:

First of all, politeness norms impose for printed greeting cards to be sent by post or courier, and using more comfortable means, for instance e-mail or fax is perceived as a symbol of lack of respect.

Secondly, transmitted in physical form, greeting cards become a way of making the company's identity elements visible. Bearing the company's logo and colors, besides its protocol function the greeting card also has the function of providing a way of recalling or reminding the brand's name in positive associations with the holiday's feelings. In other words, we are referring to its company image promotion function, corresponding to a general tendency by which greeting cards have become rather a brand communication tool, than as shown in its history, a tool of inter-personal communication.

That is why most companies are printing special editions of greeting cards the design of which is ordered to more and more numerous advertising agencies. These agencies are receiving an increasing number of orders for greeting cards in "business class", of a more elegant tone, with quality finish lines and special colors, which brings them out of anonymity.

The problem occurring is that of choosing the visual elements, representing the key of the greeting card. In this respect, we can notice two major tendencies:

The first one is the one by which the company makes a choice regardless the type of holiday (Easter or Christmas), elements which are very close to its identity. This is the case of companies using as key image of the greeting cards the logo or colors represent-

ing them. The only interventions recalling the context of offering the greeting card are a number of formal referrals. For instance, on Christmas the greeting card shows the logo transformed into a globe, and in the case of the Easter greeting card – by the presence of cuts suggesting the form of an egg. This type of greeting cards is gaining more and more land on the market.

The second refers to greeting cards that are extremely focused on the religious context and which only tangential get in touch with brand identity elements. This is the case of a greeting card of a profoundly religious nature sent by a well known institution on Easter last year, printed on manually made special paper. The greeting card presented the image of Jesus Christ, actually representing an icon.

Another greeting card of this type, sent by the state president on the Easter also a few years ago represented a glass icon, entitled "Jesus agony", today one of the valuable pieces of the Brukental museum in Sibiu.

The problem with sending this kind of greeting cards is very delicate, because the rapport between the receiver and the greeting card is extremely special, dictated by its content. If most usual greeting cards are thrown away after a while, such greeting cards impose a certain attitude arising from our religious belief.

In respect with the greeting cards' text, there are some companies and even institutions which take upon a neutral form, so that various religious groups would not be damaged by the Christian content of the greeting cards. Thus, the formula of Merry Christmas or Happy Easter has been replaced by Happy Holidays. Under this circumstances, we must recall that a few years ago the White House officially announced that it renounced the

traditional greeting of Merry Christmas, replacing by a more general (formal) formula Happy Holidays.

However, we consider that the greeting cards referring to the Easter or Christmas (as theme) produce more joy, have a larger impact over those receiving them, because as we all know, Easter and Christmas, at least in the case of the Romanians are the most important religious holidays. Nonetheless, regardless the chosen greeting card, the tone, the addressing manner (the second person in singular or politeness plural) are different from one addressee to the other, depending on the business relation between the two parties.

Also, there should be remembered that these printed greeting cards should be signed by hand by the one sending them and that they should even have a few words written by hand, so that to make communication closer and to eliminate the series sensation; even the address on the envelope should be written by hand, avoiding the printed labels. Time might be saved by such, but potential business partners can be lost.

Another tendency that can be noticed in the companies' communication on holidays is that of giving "weight" to the greeting card by adding customized presents or promotional materials. Generally their content is decided by the communication department of each company, depending on its specificity and marketing strategy, as approved for that respective period. Usually, a budget is established within the limits of which presents to be customized are selected. One can even speak of a number "fashion" trends that existed on the Romanian market in respect with types of materials selected by companies. While a decade ago writing objects, calendars represented favored presents, nowadays due to the occurrence of more spe-

cialized companies a wide variety of such objects accompanying the greeting card can be noticed. Lately, the habit also occurred of offering baskets with traditional products, specific to the respective holiday (pound cakes, ginger bread, red eggs, Easter cake, chocolate bunnies, flowers, pine trees, customized labels wine bottles etc). Last year's "fashionable" present for foreign partners was the "Romanian Spirit" box, containing CDs with songs from the Romanian culture and a small bottle with our traditional drink.

In the same time, in other countries the practice exists of offering baskets with olive oil, cheese, etc. elements which in our country are considered to be of a too personal nature and which are therefore hardly assimilated to the promotional or traditional presents.

We find it relevant to emphasize some potential mistakes or communication errors in case a certain company decides upon making presents which do not correspond to the relation habits in that respective country. Also, over-appreciation of the present accompanying the greeting card can lead to rejections, refusal. Not-customized presents, very expensive presents or on the contrary ones without esthetic value can damage the relation with the addressee and that is why it is very important for the company's managerial team to make the best decisions and even to include the objects accompanying the greeting card in the company's communication strategy.

In this respect, organizing the process of purchasing and distributing the greeting cards and the presents accompanying them should be started two or three months in advance, because many agencies providing such presents often finish their stocks long before the holidays. Also, free days marking the religious holidays are most times the rea-

son why sending the greeting cards must be scheduled so that the said to reach their addressee before the short vacations for holidays.

It is known that the courier market has strongly developed in Romania and that more and more companies call for these companies' services in order to send presents to the employees, clients, business partners etc. The first step to these measures is communicating with the courier company, in order to establish the details regarding the quantity and type of deliveries, packaging modality. Moreover, the sender should choose adequate packages, because many gifts call for special attention.

Either sent personally, by courier or by post, greeting cards and presents accompanying them should achieve their purpose aimed by the communication specialists, namely of best portraying the company, its values and not least, of answering to the addressees' tastes. Also, there should not be disregarded the fact that politeness rules impose that for any received greeting card, one should answer either in written or by phone.

Traditional holidays are also a good occasion for large companies to organize events

in order to collect amounts of money for charity purposes and to which usually there are invited TV stations, journalists, VIPs. In the end, this is also about promoting the company's image.

In February 2008 the problem was raised of regulating the tax on promotional materials, which would lead to a change in the policy of offering presents accompanying greeting cards. This will be finalized when the process of regulating is finished on a national level, and financial departments will consider their budgetary consequences. The practice on a global level has demonstrated however the importance of these presents in the companies' communication and consequently we do not believe that these legislative measures will influence the amount or frequency in making holiday presents.

In conclusion, there can be said that printed greeting cards sent upon religious holidays are becoming more and more a way of promoting companies' image, while in the same time they are a way of strengthening inter-human relations, due to the fact that they have an important role in reflecting our beautiful feelings, without excessively subjecting such to modernization.

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