

## Humbug to Holiday E-Cards



BY HEATHER SUTTIE

*Nothing says client care less than an impersonal electronic greeting card. In the e-mail age, what the dickens are we to do?*

### MARKET

**T**his is the season to be frenzied. Or at least so it seems at this time of year. Traditionally, we find ourselves caught up in high-level contact mode due to the annual silly season that will soon be upon us.

With this in mind, is there any advantage in being yet another participant in the lemming-like madness of joining an already swollen-to-bursting roster of law firms spam-blasting clients and contacts alike with perhaps the most impersonal of all electronic cannon fodder — the holiday e-card?

For years, this annual “damned if you do; damned if you don’t” quandary over holiday e-cards has been the topic of much debate for lawyers and marketers alike, and it’s a problem for which no one has yet found a fail-safe solution.

Perhaps the main point to consider is that, irrespective of the calendar, client communication is at the heart of the matter, and relationships, whether personal or business, need to be nurtured all year round.

The impetus for communicating with clients during the holiday season is usually one of two reasons, and sometimes a combination of both: first, to thank them for their business, and second, to remind them that you’re there to do their work. Either reason is acceptable provided that the communication is welcome and includes a personal touch.

Since the advent of e-mail, many firms have jumped on the electronic holiday greeting-card bandwagon. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it does leave a lot to be desired in terms of providing the personal touch.

MacPherson Leslie & Tyerman LLP is a law firm based in western Canada that is attempting to come to grips with how to tackle the problem. Having been with MLT for 34 years, managing partner Donald Wilson, QC, says the firm has been sending traditional holiday cards for as long as he can remember.

While the firm has also been sending e-cards since 2008, his view is that electronic cards and the process around them are impersonal. He describes it as a “non-thinking” exercise and points out that this type of automation may create a perception that other matters the firm handles for clients are also processed

in a non-thinking manner. He says sending a holiday greeting by e-mail is acceptable only when it contains a message tailored to the person on the receiving end.

While MLT expects to continue with e-cards this year, firm-branded printed cards will not be sent. Instead, lawyers have been encouraged to purchase cards of their own choosing that they can personalize with a handwritten message.

### EEK-CARDS

There is also cost to consider. Generally speaking, a firm with more than 100 lawyers tends to budget in the neighbourhood of \$30,000 for holiday greeting cards, both print and electronic. Firm-branded cards can easily be the biggest expense, costing \$20,000 and up depending mostly on design and the number of cards to be printed. Postage is a related factor, with irregular shape or oversize cards costing more to send by mail than regular-size cards. As for producing an e-card, this may cost anywhere from \$3,000 to \$10,000 or more depending on the complexity of design elements and programming.

This year’s budget for e-cards at US firm Barger & Wolen LLP is \$0. Heather Morse-Milligan, Director of Marketing, says her firm isn’t doing them. While she acknowledges that a well-produced e-card can create profile for the firm (and be tracked for results), not many firms do electronic cards well. “Most are flat and generic,” says Morse-Milligan. “I would presume that few firms are tracking the ROI, and are using the e-cards as a quick and cheap version of a holiday greeting.” She points out that, regardless of whether an e-card is produced well or not, “what is missed in either version is the personalized message from the attorney.” And as she wryly observes, “Nothing says ‘I care’ like adding your clients’ names to a mailing list.”

While there’s certainly a cost to connecting with clients, it’s important to remember that without them there would be no revenue and no one to thank for it — but is the holiday season the best time to do this? Expressing gratitude to clients, contacts and those who have provided referrals need not be a year-end thing. In fact, it should be a year-round thing. The difference is akin to someone who nurtures the relationship with their

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significant other on a regular basis, rather than someone who rarely expresses affection operating under tremendous pressure to deliver an enormous demonstration on an anniversary.

### It's Not Magic

Practising law and managing client relations are not mutually exclusive tasks. In fact, thanking a client, contact or referral should be the first order of business before diving into a file. This can be handled easily and quickly by making a phone call or sending written communication. The advantage is that, by being in touch right away, you can create an opportunity for further two-way communication while demonstrating your gratitude and good manners.

For those who may not have been in touch regularly with clients or who may have forgotten to express gratitude over the course of the year, the holiday season provides a last chance. With this in mind, it might be astute to consider that, while it's likely your firm's electronic card will land in your client's e-mail inbox, it's also likely to be deleted. Therefore, it will behoove you to be in touch with clients yourself and send a greeting that includes a personalized message.

"Most firms, and lawyers, look at holiday cards as a burden. They are not," says Morse-Milligan. "Holiday cards are another

touch point opportunity for attorneys to reach out and connect with clients. Most attorneys will not take advantage of this."

The key to differentiating yourself by making a connection is adding the personal touch, says Morse-Milligan: "Whatever you do, personalize it. Make sure the client knows that you picked out the gift. That you signed the card. While we're all looking for a 'special' card to send, concern yourselves with a 'special' message."

Or as Don Wilson suggests, "Even a phone call means way more than receiving a sterile, antiseptic card." He also notes that with respect to treating clients well by adding a personal touch, "There's no real magic to it."

And there you have it. All the holiday electronic and traditional cards, fruit baskets, bottles of wine and what-have-you can easily be replaced by the type of magic that only results from personally nurturing client relationships all year round. ■

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