



## Q: Can holiday cards be effective for law firms?

**A:** I think that they can be considered one more nice way to stay in touch, to send a friendly communication to a large number of clients and prospects all at once. Of course, I said that they *can be* effective, not that they typically *are*.

Anyway, as most of us have experienced, the annual law firm Holiday Card distribution is an institutional nightmare, a complex organizational challenge that would require FEMA's assistance to handle successfully.

OK, perhaps that was a bad example.

Holiday cards pose complex issues of database management and client ownership for lawyers, combined with the logistical questions of who signs which card(s). Through hard work and discipline, these are mightily overcome, only to become one of a dozen bland, lookalike cards depicting non-threatening images like pine trees, ice skaters, snow-covered skylines, ambiguously decorated snow men, or handicapped children's artwork which are then sent to dead former clients. All in the name of strengthening client relationships?

Done well, the cards should reinforce your firm's unique brand message, or at least stand out somehow, so they don't get immediately tossed as one of a dozen generic cards popular clients receive every single day from late November through early January.

### **Glance, toss.**

Glance, toss.

Glance, toss.

It helps if you have a strong brand message, or at least an interesting look. For example, at Ungaretti & Harris way back in 1994, we mailed Thanksgiving cards, just to say "Thanks" to our clients and contacts -- really just to have an excuse to send the cards in mid-November, to beat the year-end rush. And because that was the first time a firm had done that, we even persuaded some publications to write about it.

The point is, the card represents your firm and your practice. Don't rub clients' noses in your firm's complete lack of creativity by doing the same tedious thing as everyone else. Find a way to stand out.

And if your lawyers can't be bothered to sign the cards personally, don't send them. Nothing says "I care about you and deeply value your business and our relationship" like a generic, unsigned card with the firm's name foil-stamped on them. You ever get one of those from your accountant? Don't they make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside?

I always get that special feeling, knowing that he took the time out of his busy schedule to have his secretary include me on the same mass-mailed distribution as hundreds or thousands of others just like me. Oh, if he'd only send me a calendar with his firm's name printed on it, then I'd know for certain that he's going to do his absolute best for me next year.



I just got one from my best friend, a terrific lawyer I've known for 30 years. We shared our first beer together. He was the best man at my wedding. He held my first son within minutes of his being born. I send him lots of business. The card, a snowy Chicago skyline wished me "Happy Holidays from [his law firm]" and, nearly illegibly, scrawled simply, "Dave." No note. I'm going to have to talk to him about this. *Again.*

I know he's really busy but, frankly, I think those types of mailings do more harm than good. Few people have ever said, "My lawyer didn't wish me a generic "Seasons Greetings" this year; I'm taking my business elsewhere!"

I think the right way might be to have every lawyer be responsible for their own clients. Make a selection of different cards available, so you don't have to worry as much about who signs which card, sending multiple copies of the same card to the same client, or dedicate an entire large conference room and countless lost billable hours to a wasteful week of frenzied card signing.

Finally, while I know this whole rant is making me sound like Scrooge, I've never been a big fan of cards the promise that "In lieu of a personal gift to you, we're making a donation in your name to the following charity(ies)." In my actual name? Does that mean I have to pay taxes on that money? Did they ask me whether I'd prefer receiving the cash? Or at least help select the charity? And because they never tell you how much they're donating; everyone I've quizzed about this assumes that they've taken this approach because it was cheaper. And generally, from my experience, they're right.

For all these reasons, I've historically eschewed e-cards as another lazy way to avoid the hard work of doing it right -- masked behind the message of being either (a) creative, (b) technology-oriented, or (c) environmentally conscious.

Today, though, I think the tide has turned, and there have been some very creative cards. It IS better for the environment, but because it's cheaper, easier, and less labor-intensive, it's still viewed as taking the easy way out. In other words, if you can design a truly unique and memorable card and your lawyers will sign each one by hand with a personal note, then by all means, do *that*. It's worth it. Clients will call and relationships will be strengthened. You'll occasionally get new work from it.

If you can't or they won't, then save yourself the time, money, and aggravation. Don't send a bad snail mailing. Either (1) avoid the entire exercise and spend your time on something that might work, or (2) simply recognize that it's not going to create the same impact as a personalized, hand-signed card, and develop a creative e-card that gets noticed, remembered, and supports your brand. It's not quite as good, but it's better than nothing. And a really good one can be memorable and create a positive impact.

At least that's how I see it.

Seasons greetings,

Ross