

WHAT SMALL BUSINESSES ARE DOING WITH GREETING CARDS AND WHY: A NATIONAL STUDY

A multimillion-dollar tradition that
businesses continue to embrace.



Study authored by Stephen J. Lind, PhD
and published by the Greeting Card Association

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study was conducted independently by business professor and researcher Stephen J. Lind, PhD (see more in About the Author). Primary data collection and analysis took place between April and May 2021. During the design of the study, Professor Lind consulted with professionals in the greeting card industry (via Hallmark Business Connections) to ensure that questions were framed in a way that accurately reflected options across the greeting card market. In support of the research, Hallmark Business Connections provided a coupon code to survey takers. Survey takers were informed that they would receive a coupon for taking the survey, but they were NOT told what business was providing the code so as to not impact the data collected. Final drafting of the survey tool, data collection, and data analysis was all conducted independently by Professor Lind with support from his university research assistants. A portion of the research was supported by funding from Washington and Lee University.

After reviewing the study, the Greeting Card Association partnered with Lind to publish the results of the study as a white paper. Lind presented preliminary data from the study's pilot research at the 2020 Association for Business Communication annual conference of academic researchers and then a portion of the final results at the 2022 Greeting Card Association annual workshop and retreat.

The white paper was first published online by the Greeting Card Association in September 2022.

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4 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STUDY OVERVIEW

A personal tradition that has flourished since Victorian timesⁱ continues to stay present in the mailboxes of U.S. consumers not just through the well-wishes of friends and family, but also through the frequent use of **greeting cards (GCs)** by many of the 5.8 millionⁱⁱ **small businesses**ⁱⁱⁱ (SBs) in the U.S.

This report details data from a new national study on the frequency, preferences, and motives behind U.S. SBs' uses of greeting cards during the **winter holiday season (WHS)**.

Nearly 2,000 SBs contributed to the study from a randomized sample across the U.S. Businesses with 99 employees or less, which accounts for 98% of U.S. businesses^{iv}, shared their practices and preferences in an April-May 2021, survey:

Types of questions asked:



Card Sending Behavior

...including questions such as:

Did your business send greeting cards between November and January in any of the last three years?



Card Content

...including questions such as:

What types of content does your business look for in a card? (e.g., traditional, contemporary, neutral/secular, spiritual, etc.)



Audience Profiles

...including questions such as:

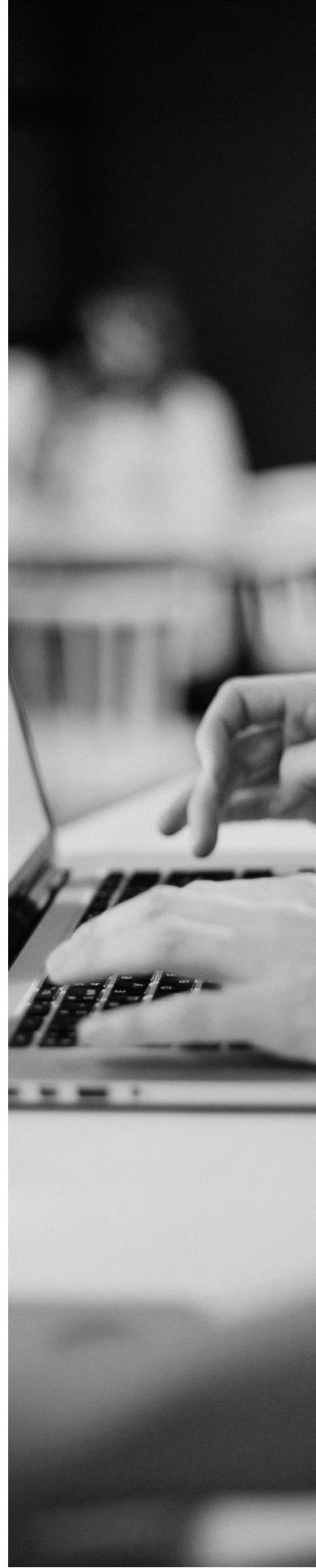
To whom do you send the greeting cards? (e.g., past customers, current customers, potential customers, etc.)



Business Traits

...including questions such as:

Where is your business located? and What industry best describes your business?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY DATA & TRENDS

The nearly 2,000 SB responses yielded significant data with a base margin of error at only 2.9% with a 99% confidence level:

1/3

SBs send GCs during the WHS



SBs spanning entire U.S. send GCs

87%

GCs are physical, not e-cards

<200 GCS

Modest sending rates are most common



Rates to remain constant or slightly grow



GC-sending SBs are face-to-face, online, and hybrid



"Happy Holidays" and "Merry Christmas" are the most preferred greetings



"Traditional/Classic" is more than twice as popular with SBs than "Modern/Contemporary" content tone

~150 MILLION GCS ARE THUS ESTIMATED TO BE SENT BY SBS EACH WHS.

(SB = small business; GC = greeting card; WHS = winter holiday season)

"Christmas" remains a significant driver of behavior and content.

- Sending time shows centrality of Christmas holiday for winter cards: Only 16% report sending cards before Thanksgiving and 64.3% specify the few weeks before Christmas.^v
- Greeting verbiage shows continued embrace of the holiday: Nearly half (47%) of SBs report "Merry Christmas" as a preferred greeting/wish content.

Yet "Christmas" can have diverse meaning, both secular and sacred.

GCs are a place in which SBs are keeping the language of "Christmas" salient across the U.S. At the same time, the majority of SBs do not see GCs as a means for overtly expressing spiritual meaning. "Neutral/secular" content is prioritized by 31% while "religious/spiritual-faith" content is prioritized by 14%.^{vi}

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Relationship maintenance is at the heart of SB use of GCs.

- Nearly all (91%) of GC-sending SBs send them to current customers.
- “Clients with files” based SBs (e.g., insurance companies) send GCs at significant higher levels than impromptu “walk-in” businesses (e.g., coffee shops).
- “Relationship-building” and “showing gratitude” are the most common reasons SBs report for why they send GCs.



While SBs that send GCs routinely praise the relational benefits of the practice, the vast majority of SBs do not use any available methods to track or measure the impact their GCs have.

Two-thirds of SBs do not send GCs. Core themes are consistent across rationale.

While approximately one-third of SBs send GCs, that also means that two-thirds of SBs have chosen either actively or passively to not send GCs as part of their SB practices. SBs that do not send GCs report four common reasons:



TIME



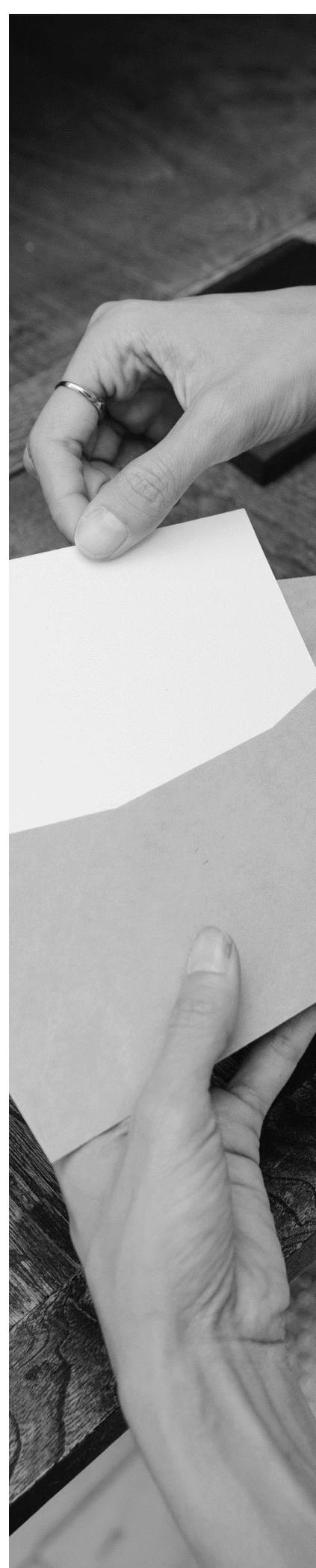
COST



**UNKNOWN
VALUE**



**CUSTOMER
TYPE**



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The data collected from this new nationwide study suggests four key insights into the practices of SBs related to the WHS and the use of GCs.

For small businesses, greeting cards are...

1 SUBSTANTIALLY USED

SB GC use is significant. The sustained send rates, including through and beyond a pandemic, suggest this is a business communication practice that will continue to be a viable and important part of the commercial landscape for the foreseeable future.

2 RELATIONAL

Commercial relationships are real relationships, even if meaningfully different from personal ones. This means that GCs hold real potential for generating goodwill, loyalty, and affinity. The differences, however, also suggest that the commercial motive, mass production, and one-way sending are challenges that SBs must keep in mind.

3 CLASSICALLY INFORMED

Classic Americanized aesthetics continue to be relevant in holiday-oriented commercial practices. Continued use of “Merry Christmas” verbiage and traditional seasonal tone suggest that any so-called “culture war” has not pervaded SB WHS outreach activities. The GC medium itself is a traditional choice, and within this commonly used medium, traditional aesthetics remain popular, even if not the only style of interest. This suggests that while innovations may still hold value, modern attempts at breaking form for the sake of breaking form should not be expected to be inherently valuable.

4 UNEXHAUSTED

From increasing tracking measures to integrating systems that allow for efficient annual sending, SBs have lots of room to grow and refine their GC sending practices and perspectives. There exists significant room for producers and consultants to advise in these matters. Additionally, both the relational interest and the core concerns by non-senders offer significant opportunity for GC suppliers and retailers to improve and reframe their products and services to SBs.

The greeting card industry is a multi-billion-dollar global social phenomenon with more than a billion cards purchased in the U.S. during Christmas alone. This includes cards purchased by small businesses seeking to capitalize on an existing or possible relationship with their customer base. Yet, little is known about how small businesses strategically approach the use of greeting cards. This white paper outlines how greeting cards are a pervasive and potentially powerful business communication artifact. It reports the results of a nationwide survey of U.S. small businesses that collected data on the scope and content of professional greeting card use. The results indicate that small businesses across the U.S. are meaningfully engaging greeting cards during the winter holiday season as a business communication tool rich in symbolic and relational potential.



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A Massive Industry

Crossing the boundaries of the personal and the professional, even the sacred and the commercial, greeting cards continue to play a prominent role in modern social America. Each year, more than 6.5 billion cards are purchased, the sales totaling between \$7 and \$8 billion. Purchasing is ubiquitous across households—nine out of 10—and generations, with millennial buyers spending more on cards than the baby boomer generation, though baby boomers purchase more by volume. While birthday cards make up over half of the total cards purchased, Christmas cards make up the largest seasonal segment at upwards of 1.6 billion units purchased annually, followed by a distant 145 million cards for Valentine’s Day.^{vii} According to the US Postal Service, while personal letter and invitation mailing has declined in recent years, total holiday greeting card units sent have been on the rise, increasing 3.8% between 2016 and 2018.^{viii}

Amidst these stacks of personally sent cards are masses of cards also sent by businesses, seeing the potential in the medium. Yet so little is known about such professional uses of greeting cards. This study offers foundational knowledge on greeting cards as business communication media and artifact. This white paper presents data from a nationwide study, with analysis propelled by existing literature on personal greeting cards and professional assessments of direct mailers.

Greeting Cards as Meaningful Objects

It is little surprise to find that greeting cards retain deeply personal potential as a medium, given that their very design is often based on an open space that encourages senders to pen their own unique message. As reported by the Greeting Card Association, “75% of consumers who send holiday cards say they do so because they know how good it feels when they receive a holiday greeting.”^{ix} This meaningfulness is historically situated, with cards as objects functioning in nuanced ways in different contexts. Current card practices draw on various historical eras, including for example the Victorian tradition of viewing cards as an opportunity to bring aesthetic beauty into middle-class domestic spaces^x or the mid-century development of exclusive licensing agreements to adorn greeting card companies with pop culture characters.^{xi}

“75% OF CONSUMERS WHO SEND HOLIDAY CARDS SAY THEY DO SO BECAUSE THEY KNOW HOW GOOD IT FEELS WHEN THEY RECEIVE A HOLIDAY GREETING.”

Greeting card creators are successful, Barry Shank argues, when they “speak the emotional truth of the mainstream American culture,” allowing the sender to create an emotional connection with the recipient.^{xii} As Emily West has explained, this is

10 INTRODUCTION: PREVIOUS RESEARCH

quite the feat for the card manufacturers, given the irony of mass-producing objects that generate idiosyncratic personal sentimental connections.^{xiii} Of course, who sends them and when is determined by a sometimes murky set of social norms, such as whether one should or should not send a card based on whether sender A received a card from potential recipient B the previous year, especially if potential recipient B is higher status than A and did in fact send a card the previous year.^{xiv}

Direct Mail as Valuable Channel

Significant study has previously been devoted to the postal activities of businesses, seeking to use a variety of direct mailers in order to drive increased profits. From politics to preventative healthcare, the value of direct mail variations has garnered interdisciplinary scholarly attention. One political study has suggested, for example, that assessments of how much it costs to produce behavioral change via direct mail requires keeping in mind that direct mailers may only change the behaviors of recipients who were not already in a category of low-likelihood of action.^{xv} Another study out of the preventative healthcare field, then, demonstrates how financial incentives embedded in a medical direct mailer can significantly increase participation in the mailer's proposed action.^{xvi}

According to the Data & Marketing Association, direct mail has been found to boast as high as an astounding 5% response rate for a prospect list, compared to only 1% for email or social media. The direct physical mailer number may jump as high as 9% when directed at a particular household list.^{xvii} Studies in neuroscience suggest practitioners trust these striking figures, based on how consumers process messaging coming in through diverse channels. According to a joint study between the Canada Post and strategy firm True Impact Marketing, with guidance from Copenhagen Business School's Thomas Ramsøy, "Direct mail requires 21% less cognitive effort to process than digital media (a score of 5.15 vs. 6.37), suggesting that it is both easier to understand and more memorable."^{xviii} When combined with figures on just how crowded the average work email inbox is on a daily basis—an estimated 126 emails received per day^{xix}—scholars can understand why industry experts continue to tout the value of direct mail, even with its significantly higher production and dissemination costs than digital alternatives.

A Focus on Small Business Winter Holiday Cards

With all of the prior knowledge about the perceived values of greeting cards and the proven returns of direct mailers, questions yet remain at the intersection of the two. The questions at this intersection are perhaps even more potent when considered in light of the lucrative \$1 trillion Christmas commercial season^{xx} that offers businesses questions surrounding both cultural card norms and an aggressively competitive commercial landscape. Because their greeting card practices likely differ from large and conglomerate businesses, and because their margins likely make a failed outreach investment more risky, this study is particularly interested in how the more than 5.8 million small businesses across the U.S.^{xxi} attend to this intersection.^{xxii}

This study then seeks to answer previously unexplored questions surrounding how U.S. small businesses approach greeting card opportunities during the winter holiday season. The primary guiding questions for the survey research presented here include:

- 1) WHAT PERCENTAGE OF U.S. SMALL BUSINESSES SEND GREETING CARDS DURING THE WINTER HOLIDAY SEASON?**
- 2) WHEN SENDING CARDS, WHAT TYPES OF CARD CONTENT DO BUSINESSES CHOOSE?**

Answers to these questions hold the potential to provide the foundation for not only future nuanced studies, such as targeted effectiveness studies, but this foundational study also provides immediately valuable actional insights for consultants, retailers, and small business practitioners who have no data on whether or not greeting cards are a commonplace in current business practices and what the norms surrounding them are.



Survey Methodology

To generate insights into small business use of seasonal greeting cards, a survey was sent between April and May 2021, to a random sample of U.S. small businesses with 99 employees or less. While the U.S. government agency, the Small Business Administration, categorizes any business with less than 500 employees as a *small business*, this study uses the more nuanced definition that divides small business at 99 or less employees from *midsized businesses* beginning at 100 employees. Sub-100 small businesses account for an estimated 98% of U.S. businesses^{xxiii}. According to the U.S. Census Bureau^{xxiv}, there are more than 5.8 million in the U.S.

The sample was randomly generated from a national business database. There were 1,950 small business respondents that answered the survey. The base margin of error on the study was thus only 2.9% at a 99% confidence level.^{xxv} Surveys were sent entirely through email,^{xxvi} with a total response rate of 10.8%.^{xxvii} Responses were incentivized through a retail coupon and raffle entry offer. Results were anonymized except for when respondents voluntarily provided follow-up information.

The survey consisted of 36 total questions focused on pre-COVID (2018 and 2019) and pandemic-era (2020) greeting card activity as well as projections post-COVID. Questions were tested and then refined for effectiveness after an initial pre-test. Questions were divided across four categories:

1) GREETING CARD BEHAVIOR

Such as, "Did your business send greeting cards between November and January in any of the last three years?"

2) GREETING CARD CONTENT

Such as, "What types of content does your business look for in a card?" with a range of content options including "Traditional/classical," "Modern/contemporary," "Religious/spiritual-faith," and "Neutral/secular."

3) AUDIENCE INFORMATION

Such as, "To whom do you send the greeting card?" with a range of multi-selection content options including "Past customers," "Current customers," and "Potential customers."

4) BUSINESS TRAITS

Such as, "Where is your business located?" and "What industry best describes your business?"

Greeting Card Behavior

According to the survey results, greeting card use by small businesses remains strong throughout the U.S. One third (33.9%) of U.S. small businesses reported sending greeting cards during a winter holiday season from 2018 to 2020. Pre-COVID levels were expectedly higher, with 20% fewer reported sending in 2020 compared to the nearly equal levels in 2018 and 2019.

Cards sent are predominantly physical cards sent through the mail (87.6%), though many businesses report sending e-cards as well, with a total of 29.5% reporting using e-cards either independently or in conjunction with physical cards. Few businesses deliver cards in-person by hand (15.3%), while the majority use the postal system (86%).^{xxviii}

Card-sending small businesses spanned the entire U.S. zip code range as well as brick-and-mortar and online store styles. Stores that are “mostly face-to-face (or brick-and-mortar)” report sending greeting cards at a significantly^{xxix} higher number than not (23.9% vs. 18%). Nonetheless, greeting card sending was evident across all store types, with 43.2% of card senders being mostly or entirely face-to-face/brick-and-mortar businesses, 34.1% being mostly or entirely online, and 12.3% of senders being roughly 50/50.^{xxx}

**1/3 OF SMALL BUSINESSES REPORT SENDING GREETING CARDS
DURING THE WINTER HOLIDAY SEASON; THESE NUMBERS ARE
PROJECTED TO REMAIN STEADY.**

Reported social media use was higher than greeting card sending rates, with 48.7% of small businesses reporting that they post a seasonal message on social media during the winter holiday season.^{xxxi} Despite some non-sending businesses reporting in the “Why not” question that they instead post messages digitally, whether or not a business posted seasonal messaging on social media did not have a statistically significant relationship to whether or not they reported sending greeting cards.

The number of cards sent by each small business remains modest. When asked to report the quantity of cards typically mailed, the vast majority (72.8%) reported sending between 1 and 199 cards during the winter holiday season, and the median number reported was 50-99. One-third of card senders (35.8%) report sending 1-49 cards, one-third (37%) report sending 50-199 cards, and one-fifth (20.6%) of card senders sending 200-999 cards. The remaining businesses report sending 1,000-24,999 cards.^{xxxii}

The businesses project that these numbers are likely to remain steady, if not slightly anticipated to grow: 10.9% anticipate cutting back, 14% anticipate increasing their card use, and 65.9% expecting their use of greeting cards to stay roughly the same (9.1% reported that they did not know). Those who sent cards in 2020 were statistically less likely to report anticipation of cutting back (4.2% for 2020 senders compared to 12% and 8.3% for senders in 2018 and 2019).^{xxxiii}

Why Send

“Relationships” and “gratitude” terms were the most common themes invoked when explaining why the business sends greeting cards. This attention to maintaining relationships and expressive thanks for what the business already has is consistent with the data indicating who the businesses send cards to; Nearly all (91.3%) of greeting card sending small businesses send them to current customers, while only 65% send to former and 39% to potential customers.

**THE VAST MAJORITY OF SMALL
BUSINESSES DO NOT USE ANY
AVAILABLE METHODS TO TRACK
OR MEASURE THE IMPACT
THEIR GREETING CARDS HAVE.**

The rationales for why businesses send greeting cards, however, are anecdotal and not formally assessed. The vast majority (89.6%) of small businesses do not use any available methods to track or measure the impact their greeting cards have.

Why Not Send

While one-third of small businesses send greeting cards during the winter holiday season, a sizable number across the U.S., two-thirds of businesses do not. Those small businesses were asked why not. Tagged for common themes, the data collected indicated four primary, recurrent reasons that small businesses cite for not sending cards:

1) TIME

Expecting greeting cards to require a significant time investment each year, small businesses regularly report being too busy and not having the bandwidth to send cards.

2) COST

The financial expense of sending greeting cards is perceived by many small businesses as unaffordable. Those that do not send cards regularly invoke budgetary prioritization as a reason.

3) UNKNOWN VALUE | NO VALUE

A lack of definitive return on investment and/or an explicit belief that there was none was regularly cited as a reason not to invest in the practice.

4) CUSTOMER TYPE

Some businesses reported a perceived poor fit in customer type as why greeting cards would be inappropriate, e.g., government contract clients.

While the topics of digitization making physical messaging outdated and secularism turning away any holiday-oriented outreach may be more common in mainstream conversations, the data does not support this as primary concerns for small businesses. Outdatedness and religious anxiety were infrequent in the cited rationale of small businesses, accounting for less than two percent each of all total reasons not to send. It is also worth noting that faith-based concerns were not monolithic, referencing multiple vantage points, including being concerned that the business wanted to say “Merry Christmas” but couldn’t, as well as others wanting to avoid a Christmas-oriented practice that could alienate clientele.

Greeting Card Content

While the winter holiday season offers diverse occasions and celebrations in U.S. culture, the majority of cards sent by U.S. small businesses are sent in clear relationship to Christmas. This can be seen in the timing of sending (only 16% report sending cards before Thanksgiving and 64.3% specify the few weeks before Christmas).^{xxxiv} The verbal content businesses reported as preferred (see Figure 1) likewise confirms that small businesses commonly associate their winter holiday greetings choices with Christmas in particular: Nearly half (47%) of small businesses report “Merry Christmas” as a preferred greeting/wish card content that they use, outpaced only by “Happy Holidays” at just over half (51.6%). Season’s Greetings is the third most popular wish used (44%). Non-Christian holidays are represented minimally in small business approaches to winter holiday greeting card use, such as in “Happy Hanukkah” (6%) and “Happy Diwali” (1.7%) greetings.^{xxxv}

Small businesses also report common preferences in their cards’ tonal content (see Figure 2). More than half (59.6%) report preferring “Traditional/classic” content, more than twice as much as those who prefer “Modern/contemporary” content (25.6%). While “Christmas” verbiage preferences and seasonal recognition has its inherent roots in religious traditions, the majority of businesses do not report explicitly looking for content that actively embraces religiosity or secularism. Only 14% prioritized “Religious/spiritual-faith” content and 31.3% prioritize “Neutral/secular” content.^{xxxvi}

Figure 1: What describes the greeting/wish of the greeting card? (Select all that apply)

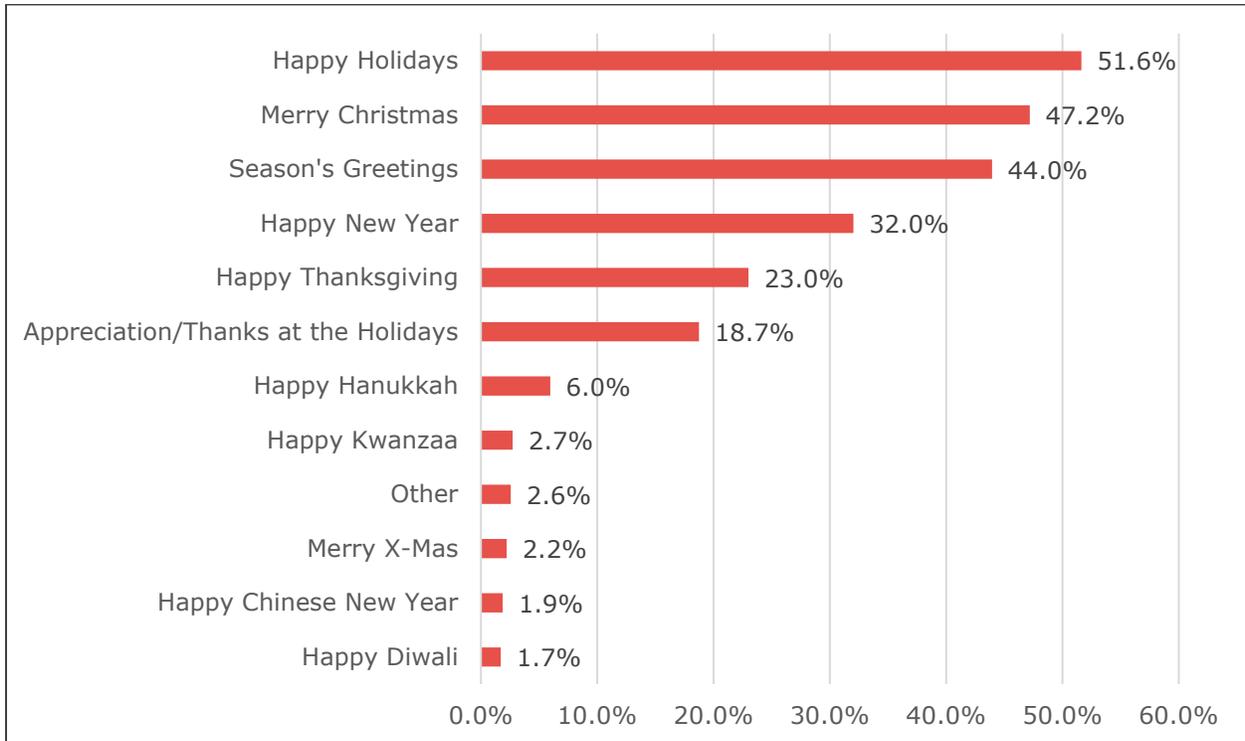
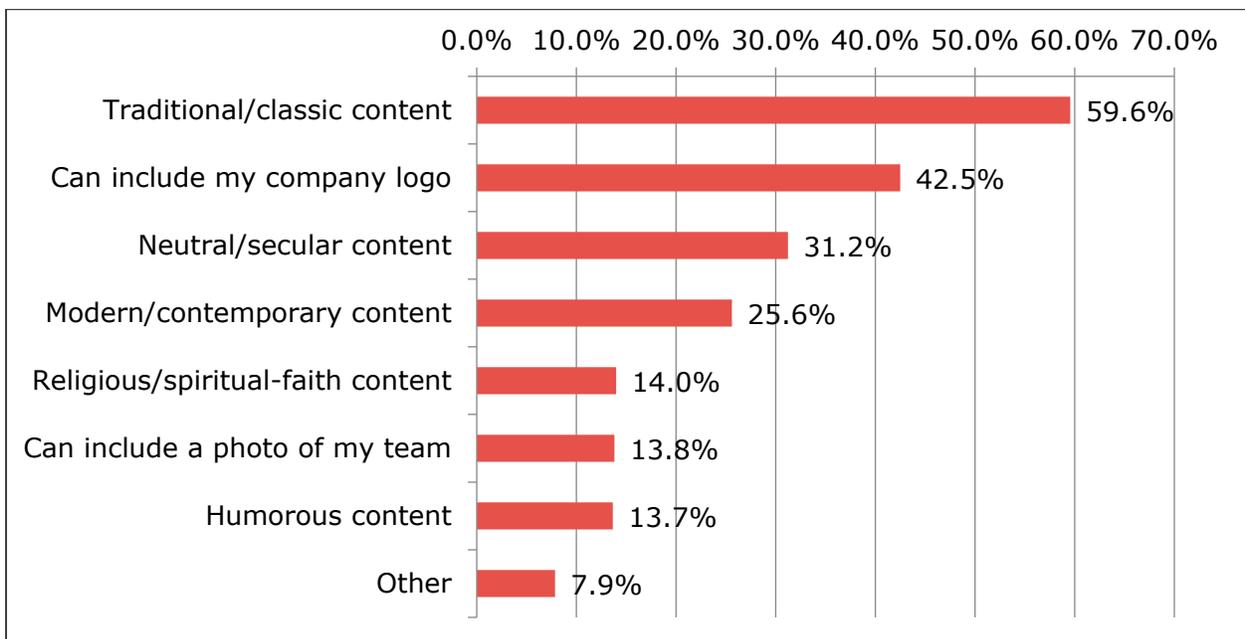


Figure 2: What types of content does your business look for in a card? (Select all that apply)



Audience Information

Nearly all (91.4%) of small businesses sending greeting cards send them to current customers. Past customers are the second largest group of recipients, receiving cards from nearly two-thirds (65%) of small businesses, while less than half (39%) of small businesses report sending cards to potential customers. While reported target audience, including current/past/potential customers, did not typically result in a statistically significant change in preferred greeting card content, businesses that reported sending cards to “friends and family” had a significantly higher likelihood of also indicating a preference for “religious/spiritual-faith content” over “neutral/secular content.” By contrast, businesses reporting sending cards to “referral sources” were more likely to indicate a non-religious content preference, with a significantly higher likelihood to send cards with a “Happy Holidays” wish compared to “Merry Christmas.”

Businesses that self-describe as having “clients with files,” such as an insurance business with individual client policies, report sending greeting cards at significantly higher levels (48.3%) than not (31.6%). Businesses with “walk-in customers,” such as a coffee shop, do not have a statistically significant difference in sending rates (13.5% send while 14.9% do not).

A Substantial Practice

This study sought to answer two fundamental questions, beginning with quantifying how many small businesses in the U.S. send winter seasonal greeting cards. As this study reveals, the centuries-old tradition of sending greeting cards is alive and well across U.S. professional culture. In an era celebrating and often necessitating the impact of social and digital media, it is important to recognize that one-third of small businesses in the U.S. are still embracing the tactile tradition of physical greeting cards sent by post. The sustained sending rates, including through and beyond a pandemic, suggest that this is a business communication practice that will continue to be a viable and important part of the commercial landscape for the foreseeable future.

Extrapolating from the results of this study, one can estimate that nearly one hundred fifty million greeting cards are sent each winter by close to two million small businesses across the U.S. The ripple effects across the economy are massive, from print shop demand to postal revenue – estimated in the tens of millions of dollars. Of course, sustainable (or lack thereof) practices will likewise have impacts across the environment at this scale.

THE RIPPLE EFFECTS
ACROSS THE ECONOMY ARE
MASSIVE, FROM PRINT
SHOP DEMAND TO POSTAL
REVENUE.

A Relational Medium

Commercial relationships are real relationships, even if meaningfully different from personal ones. This means that greeting cards, even when sent commercially, hold real potential for generating goodwill, loyalty, and affinity. The differences, however, also suggest that the commercial motive, mass production, and one-way sending are challenges that small businesses must keep in mind in order to produce intended results.

The relational value of the medium is historically rooted and idiosyncratic, as noted by the previous research into the meaningfulness of sending and receiving greeting cards. Social media is often a space that businesses now look to achieve bonds through interpersonal interactions^{xxxvii}. Greeting cards appear to run alongside these efforts, not in competition with them, according to send rates identified in this study. The broader context and activities included in a business's relationship creation and management should be kept in mind when assessing the likely impact of sending seasonal cards. Greeting cards are a vehicle for crafting, evoking, and reinforcing an emotional relationship between sender and receiver, but commercial realities, previous relationship, cultural associations, and aesthetic tastes, among many other factors, will influence the impact over the intention.

A Classically-Informed Practice with a Resilient Aesthetic

The practice of sending greeting cards is not a uniquely American tradition, but traditionalism does drive many American business greeting card choices. As Graves^{xxxviii} has demonstrated, American business direct mail can often reveal traditional American cultural notions, such as the value of anecdotal and interpersonal identification in persuasive messaging. If a reader personally connects with something, it has the potential to sway their future actions and beliefs.

Greeting cards demonstrate the commercial power of traditional Americanized iconicity to connect and move. These holiday icons, from scenes of winter wonderlands to horse-drawn sleighs and Christmas trees, certainly have multicultural roots but have also found their own rhythms within American business and social culture. The tactile greeting card with a preference for traditional design sent en masse by businesses serves as a reminder that the classic visual and verbal sensibilities remain symbolically valuable for businesses in the winter holiday season. This does not, of course, exclude the value of the modern and the innovative but rather points to the resilience of the classic.

As business practices interact with broader cultural trends, this study of particular direct mail practices offers insights into American commerce's approach to sensitive subjects like faith around the holidays. While only a minority of businesses reported seeking out cards with explicit faith-based messaging, the number of businesses purposefully seeking out explicitly secularized content was also only a minority percentage, even if twice larger than religious messaging responses. This pushes back against the polemical notion of a "war on Christmas" invoked annually by news



media and politicians. ^{xxxix} Perhaps even more telling from this study is the ubiquity of pro-Christmas verbiage. “Merry Christmas” remains one of the most preferred phrasings for greeting cards sent by small businesses. Given that 93% of Americans report that they celebrate Christmas,^{xl} the commonality of “Christmas” iconicity – both secular and sacred – used to reach customers is perhaps consistent with general population sentiment. The diversity of faith across the U.S. will also continue to make broader language important in the greeting card offerings, which is consistent with the findings in this study on “Happy Holidays” and “Season’s Greetings” popularity – two phrases that are also not mutually exclusive with faith-based celebrations. It will also continue to make it important for suppliers to provide options for non-Christian faith and cultural messaging, such as culturally appropriate phrasings to celebrate Diwali, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa.

An Unexhausted Landscape

From increasing tracking measures to integrating systems that allow for efficient annual sending, small businesses and providers alike have lots of opportunity to grow and refine their greeting card practices and perspectives. Greeting card providers, communications consultants, and internal marketing specialists have meaningful roles to play in developing more technological infrastructure behind these practices so that the relational and financial returns on investment can be maximized. With almost no businesses measuring the impact of their greeting cards, immense opportunities exist for integrating QR codes, digital coupon links, interactive social features, and more. Of course, small businesses should also keep in mind the tension that too much overt technologizing can have with the traditional meaningfulness of greeting cards.



Greeting card suppliers likewise have an unexhausted landscape of opportunity, from reaching the two-thirds of the market that do not participate to offering new products and services to existing senders. New products and services may be directed at the primary reasons businesses choose not to send, such as creating and promoting efficiency and cost-saving measures. They may also promote alternative sending times during the winter holiday season. While the symbolism of greeting cards is high during that season, there may be peripheral timeframes that could be pursued. New products may also draw on the traditional components of the medium that have made it powerful interpersonally, such as handwriting machinery to add the personalized touch, affordable customizations to allow for bespoke messaging and visuals, and stunning design innovations to promote using the card as decoration instead of discarding it.

From its aesthetic height in the Victorian era to the modern digital age, sending greeting cards is a practice that endures, and it is one that small businesses have chosen to embrace. Small business use of greeting cards, especially during the winter holiday season, comprises a substantial subsection of the greeting card and commercial direct mail industries. The practice also has significant room to grow and evolve. Commercial greeting card use draws heavily on the interpersonal traditions dating back centuries, rooted in meaningful exchanges designed to build, reflect, and enhance interpersonal relationships during the holiday seasons. Because of this, businesses and providers could benefit from paying particular attention to protecting critical relationship-centric elements of the practice. Because of the obvious commercial incentives, increased attention to tracking and measurement also holds great potential for businesses. Likewise, the data collected in this new national study suggest great opportunities for providers to craft stronger messaging on time efficiencies and cost reductions available. As the data here has indicated, these evolutions are likely to aid a market already proving its staying power across personal and commercial lines of culture.





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NOTES

- ⁱ Zakreski, "The Victorian Christmas Card as Aesthetic Object."
- ⁱⁱ "Number of Firms, Number of Establishments, Employment, and Annual Payroll by Small Enterprise Employment Sizes for the United States and States, NAICS Sectors: 2017."
- ⁱⁱⁱ Defined as having less than 100 employees
- ^{iv} "Facts & Data on Small Business and Entrepreneurship."
- ^v MOE 4.1% at 95% confidence level.
- ^{vi} MOE 4.1% at 95% confidence level.
- ^{vii} "Greeting Cards – Info to Know."
- ^{viii} Mazzone and Rehman, "The Household Diary Study: Mail Use & Attitudes in FY 2018."
- ^{ix} "Greeting Cards – Info to Know."
- ^x Zakreski, "The Victorian Christmas Card as Aesthetic Object."
- ^{xi} Lind, *A Charlie Brown Religion*.
- ^{xii} Shank, *A Token of My Affection*, 12.
- ^{xiii} West, "Expressing the Self through Greeting Card Sentiment."
- ^{xiv} Kunz, "Social Class Difference in Response to Christmas Cards."
- ^{xv} Miller, Reynolds, and Singer, "Mobilizing the Young Vote."
- ^{xvi} Slater et al., "Coupling Financial Incentives With Direct Mail in Population-Based Practice."
- ^{xvii} "ANA/DMA 2018 Response Rate Report: Performance and Cost Metrics Across Direct Media."
- ^{xviii} "A Bias for Action," 17.
- ^{xix} "Email Statistics Report, 2015-2019."
- ^{xx} Broom, "Christmas, by the Numbers: 5 Facts about Holiday Season Spending."
- ^{xxi} "Number of Firms, Number of Establishments, Employment, and Annual Payroll by Small Enterprise Employment Sizes for the United States and States, NAICS Sectors: 2017."
- ^{xxii} This study relies on the quantifying of firms used by the U.S. Census Bureau. Popular news outlets often cite the Small Business Association quantifying of 31.7 million small businesses "2020 Small Business Profile.", but that number uses a much larger and looser definition than is appropriate for the study here.
- ^{xxiii} "Facts & Data on Small Business and Entrepreneurship."
- ^{xxiv} "Number of Firms, Number of Establishments, Employment, and Annual Payroll by Small Enterprise Employment Sizes for the United States and States, NAICS Sectors: 2017."
- ^{xxv} This MOE is for all required questions. Respondents were allowed to skip select questions, resulting in variable MOE. All MOE's that diverge from the base are noted.
- ^{xxvi} Special thanks to student research assistants Emily Moran, Andrew Tartakovsky, Shannon Wright.
- ^{xxvii} Response rate was calculated based on emails that were actually opened, as indicated by the survey software, excluding emails that bounced back as undeliverable or that were never opened. Total number of emails sent was 105,914. A total of 84,880 emails were never seen because of Spam filters, were bounced as undeliverable, or were never opened for other unspecified reasons.
- ^{xxviii} MOE for this data point is 4.1% fat 95% confidence level.
- ^{xxix} All statistical significance reported is at: $p = .05$ at 95% confidence level.
- ^{xxx} MOE 2.6% at 95% confidence level.
- ^{xxxi} MOE 4% at 95% confidence level.
- ^{xxxii} MOE 4.1% at 95% confidence level.
- ^{xxxiii} MOE 4.2% at 95% confidence level.

- xxxiv MOE 4.1% at 95% confidence level.
 xxxv MOE 4.1% at 95% confidence level.
 xxxvi MOE 4.1% at 95% confidence level.
 xxxvii "Do Organizational Personification and Personality Matter?"
 xxxviii "'Dear Friend' (?)"
 xxxix Olsen and Morgan, "Happy Holidays."
 xl Saad, "What Percentage of Americans Celebrate Christmas?"

This study was human subject research "exempt."

Some of the icons used in this white paper were [collected](#) via the [icons8](#) library.

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