

Greeting a recession? Why not send a card?

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Mar 04, 2008

What's the best way to express loss?

Why, through a card, of course.

What if it's the loss of consumer confidence or a slippage in home prices, still appropriate?

"You really need to know your recipient," said Sarah Gronberg, a spokeswoman for Hallmark Cards Inc.

Whether it's a sympathy note or a card for Easter, the fourth most popular season to exchange greeting cards coming later this month, Americans may likely be tightening their purse strings. Will the \$7.5 billion generated by greeting cards annually hold steady? Could those purchases resurrect sluggish retail sales?

"Greeting cards are really pretty inexpensive," said Barbara Miller, spokeswoman for the Washington, D.C.-based Greeting Card Association. Even in a slow economy, "there's no particular dip in sales."

In fact, she added, cards may get a boost: "People may substitute a card for a gift."

"I think cards are making a turnaround," said Kristie Lee Wagner, owner of the card and stationery shop Anjenu in Chicago's Wicker Park. "Letter writing is becoming more popular and thank you notes have never gone out of style."

Wagner carries more boutique-y, handmade cards with less sappy verbiage and more room for personal expression. She said she's had to coach more than a few customers in the art of letter writing, as it takes some practice to get back into it.

"There's a lot of crossing out and starting over," she laughed. "Especially with men."

While cards may be cheaper than, say, a bouquet of flowers, they are still getting pricier. Hallmark cards range in price from 99 cents to \$4.99, with the majority of sales hovering in the \$2 range, Gronberg said. The more expensive cards tend to have a few more bells and whistles and are becoming increasingly popular.

"We're seeing a demand for innovation," she said. "Sound cards, **lenticular cards**, cards that move."

Lenticular cards?

"They're similar to a really advanced holograph," she said. So, bend the card slightly and it will appear to play a few seconds of video. "We do reflect what's going on in culture."

Technology is booming but the economy is waning and that is seemingly a recipe for Americans to close their wallets and perhaps send a few more electronic cards, an industry that sprouted up alongside electronic invitations and, well, electronic mail. They may be more impersonal but they don't involve the whims of the U.S. Postal Service and its ever-climbing postage rates.

However, Gronberg declared, "they play a different role than greeting cards. . . . They're good for things that you might not traditionally buy a card for." Such as a sibling who has a big job interview coming up, or the secondary and tertiary circle of friends on Valentine's Day, she said.

"They are very, very different kinds of cards," said Miller. "One rarely substitutes for the other."

Moreover, the card folks say, increased use of e-cards actually has bolstered sales of traditional greeting cards. For every e-card sent, there are 20 paper cards in the mail, Gronberg said, implying that that ratio continues.

The most recent report of the largest publicly-held greeting card company tends to confirm that the business is healthy. Cleveland-based card-maker American Greetings Corp. saw a 24 percent bump in earnings in the nine months ended Nov. 23, 2007 to \$67.4 million from \$54.6 million in the year earlier period. Unit volume rose 8.1 percent in the same period in 2007, whereas it fell 11.5 percent in 2006.

According to the Greeting Card Association, the average person receives 20 greeting cards a year, and nine out of 10 people prefer a mailed greeting to an e-mailed one. It's not a terribly surprising statistic, but it belies the notion that people might opt for cheaper modes of communication in times of economic distress.

However, with an average card price hovering around the \$5 mark, consumers are inclined to shop carefully. Anjenu, in Wicker Park, has been open since September of 2006; it was a seemingly risky business move. Not only did Wagner have to compete with the big wheels in the industry but with the public's obsession with expedience, ease and expenses as well.

"When I first opened, I definitely looked at these trends," she said. "E-mail is not going away."

Apparently letter writing isn't either. According to Wagner and the Greeting Card Association, people are tired of the same old thing when it comes to mailed correspondence – and aren't afraid to pay the extra bucks to make it personal.

"The fear of recession didn't stop people from sending their holiday cards," she said. "People still want to communicate in that way."

Birthday cards have the lion's share of the market at 60 percent of everyday cards purchased. Anniversary comes in at 8 percent and get-well cards at 7 percent.

Gronberg said that Hallmark has seen increased demand in humor cards in the past couple of years. The company has a department that constantly studies trends, be they hot colors in Paris or sociological and anthropological cultural shifts. If Americans are getting worried about what is coming down the pike with the economy, it might be worth it to send a funny Easter card along and make someone's day.

"There's something about receiving something in the mail," Wagner said. "When you see that colored envelope, you still think it's something special."

And boy, do we need it.

