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Column

GP Mentor

HOW NOT TO DO HOLIDAY MARKETING

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MID -- Small to Moderate Firm Issues

SOL -- Sole Practitioner Issues

Maybe it's because the holidays are different. Maybe it's that people are afraid of losing business during the holiday season. Maybe it's too much hooch in the eggnog. Whatever the cause, the holidays bring out some of the worst marketing mistakes I've ever seen.

Bad marketing isn't just ineffective. It can actually do damage to your image, reputation, and cash flow. So, when it comes to holiday marketing, let me paraphrase the advice they gave little Ralphie in the movie *A Christmas Story* when he asked for an official Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot range-model air rifle: "Careful kid, or you'll shoot your eye out."

Now, most lawyer holiday marketing involves greeting cards or events. So, most of the mistakes will fall in those areas.

Mistake #1: The contrived connection. Every year, I see ads suggesting I should come in for my "Christmas oil change" or that I should get a "holiday termite inspection." These ads aren't fooling anybody. They are merely contrived attempts to stay relevant during a time when people's minds are on other things. And they inspire more eye-rolls than purchases. As lawyers, we have to be careful because the holidays often have nothing to do with our services.

Mistake #2: Competing with the holidays. The holiday season is a busy time. People are busy shopping. They have parties to throw and parties to attend. A person will be invited to an event for just about every social, religious, and family circle he or she belongs to. As a result, the holidays are often the worst time to host an event that could be seen as optional. So, if your marketing plan involves hosting public seminars or events, then you probably want to avoid competing with the holiday season.

Mistake #3: Spoiling the spirit. Holiday cards pose a special difficulty for a few reasons. First, there is the question whether to send a card celebrating a specific holiday (e.g., "Happy Hanukkah" or "Merry Christmas") or to send a generic card with a nonspecific message (e.g., "Happy Holidays"). Although the best approach is to know your audience well enough to send the card appropriate to each person's traditions, you definitely want to avoid sending a card that is overtly religious and aimed at the wrong religion. You certainly don't want to create the impression that the recipient is someone you consider to be an unwelcome outsider or someone practicing the wrong religion.

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You can err on the other side of the spectrum, too. In an effort to avoid appearing dogmatic, many firms will send out greeting cards that contain holiday themes but avoid any religious connection. This can backfire, however, because those symbols and themes are often sacred.

Many times, you will see someone refer to Christmas as “X-mas.” I think this is a mistake. There aren't a lot of people who would be offended by the full word “Christmas” but would let you off the hook because you used an “X” instead. However, there are many Christians who would be offended by the replacement.

The need to respect sacred symbols carries over into greeting cards that try to mix legal practice areas with holiday themes. Santa getting into a fender-bender is okay, but Joseph and Mary fighting over a paternity test is not.

Mistake #4: Robo-caring. This one may be a personal pet peeve of mine, but I know I'm not alone. Every year I get a few cards where the signatures were printed on the card by the printer. Nothing says “you don't matter” like sending me a card that was intentionally designed to avoid any human involvement in the process. I'd rather see a group photo with no signatures at all. But, really, if the purpose of the card is to send me a bulk-printed specimen of your penmanship, don't bother. You might as well address the card to “current occupant.”

Mistake #5: Doing nothing. With all the potential minefields, many lawyers decide to sit on the sidelines rather than risk offending anyone. However, that's a mistake, too. The holidays are a great time to make a real and lasting human connection with people. In fact, if that's your goal, you pretty much don't need to worry about making mistakes.

Footnotes

- a1 In addition to practicing estate planning, David Hiersekorn (david @privatecounsel.com) runs LawyerMarketingMachine.com and helps attorneys become master marketers. In 2012 he was named by Infusionsoft as a “Top 10 Ultimate Marketer” and the professional services “Industry Innovator.”

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