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April 15, 2013, 2:48 p.m. EDT

Why Facebook won't kill the greeting card

5 sentiments still best expressed on paper

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By **Quentin Fottrell**

Facebook (NASDAQ:FB) has brought over 1 billion people closer together. But some experts say that sending an online greeting — when a printed card is called for — can drive a wedge between friends.

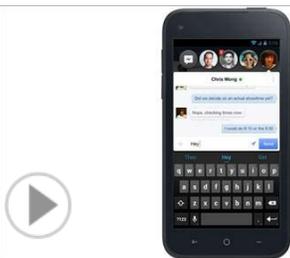


Sales of traditional greeting cards have fallen by roughly 60% over the past decade, to an estimated \$5.4 billion this year — a figure that includes some other printed matter such as diaries. At the same time, the popularity of online cards has surged, with sales of electronic cards — or custom printed ones ordered online — up to \$3.5 billion in 2012 from just \$65 million a decade ago, according to a survey by industry research company IbisWorld. “People are simply sending fewer cards,” says IbisWorld analyst Agata Kaczanowska. On Facebook, meanwhile, tens of millions of birthday and other special occasion messages are sent each day, a spokesman says.

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Even the giants of the greeting-card industry now have e-card options. Hallmark offers a \$12 annual e-card subscription, while American Greetings charges \$20 for a yearly e-card subscription, or \$30 for two years, according to their websites. (American Greetings, the largest publicly traded company in the industry, earlier this month decided to go private after a [decline in revenue](#). And last year, Hallmark closed a Kansas plant where it reportedly made about one-third of its greeting cards.)



Mossberg reviews Facebook home

Walt Mossberg gives his take on the new Facebook Home. (Photo: Facebook)

This has led to a compromise of sorts: Hybrid e-cards that can be composed on smartphones with family photos and sent automatically by post. Apple's Cards app allows users to create personalized cards and invites, which are printed and posted for

But beyond lost profits for the big players, the decline of the traditional card may also be eroding certain social graces, experts say. “We have become more casual in our communications because we have become a much more instant society,” says Chris Young, executive director of The Protocol School of Washington. “A Facebook message or text is fine to say ‘thank you’ for lunch and that you can’t wait for the next time, but there are times when it’s not appropriate.”

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\$2.99 per card in the U.S. Another mobile-to-post app, **Card2You**, charges \$1.99 for cards in the U.S. Of course, they arrive without a signature. "They're useful for travelers who don't have the time to buy a stamp," says **Rick Singer, CEO of GreatApps.com**.

For those who don't mind licking their own stamps once in a while, **here are the five occasions when sending a real, signed, card means the most.**

Wedding anniversary

There's no worse way to say that you forgot your own wedding anniversary than with a hastily composed Facebook message. "While I am all for bailing on greeting cards due to cost, my wife still likes the card," says K. Jason Krafsky, who co-founded the advice site The Social Media Couple with his wife Kelli. "So guess what? She gets a card." But, Krafsky says, the importance of the card varies from couple to couple. "This is one of those discussions every couple needs to have," he says.

Sympathy cards

When a death announcement is posted on Facebook, a "like" is not appropriate, some experts say. "If someone has a family member who dies, and you're really close to them, the poignancy of a handwritten card cannot be overlooked," Young says. Others say this can be a gray area. Daniel Post-Senning, great-great grandson of the grand dame of etiquette Emily Post, says it's becoming common for people to announce a death on Facebook. "If you reply in kind, the condolence police are not going to take you away," he says.

Mother's Day

She went through hours of labor and nine months of pregnancy, and has given more thought to your wants and needs than anyone on the planet — and you don't have five minutes to send her a proper card? "Mother's day is one of those days that clearly deserves licking a stamp," Singer says. The rule does not go both ways, however. "I got an e-card from my mother for Thanksgiving and it was just fantastic," Post-Senning says.

Weddings

"Written invitations literally give weight to the occasion," Post-Senning says. "The medium becomes part of the message, an indication of its significance." However, sending written invitations to big events like weddings and bar mitzvahs also gently suggests that a gift is in order, he says. And when you're the recipient of such a gift, it's only proper to thank guests for gifts on paper, says Ummu Bradley Thomas, founder of the Freddie Bell Jones Modeling & Finishing School in Denton, Md. If you don't buy a greeting card, she says, at least "use your best paper."

Partner's birthday

"We are definitely in a collision course with old traditions and current expectations," Krafsky says. Giving a signed card is imperative. In fact, it's so easy to cause offense, he also sends his wife a Facebook birthday message, posts a greeting on her Timeline and, as if that weren't enough, he tweets about it. "Then, I text her and, even after all that, I look her in the eyes and tell her Happy Birthday," he says. He does, however, stop short of creating a meme and uploading it on Instagram. ■

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