

Why Groundhog Day Cards?

Every year in late January we send out about 650 greeting cards (~275 physical cards and 375 e-cards) to friends, colleagues, associates, suppliers, past present and prospective clients and sponsors. It's a pretty obvious marketing ploy.

As an advertising device it meets a bunch of tests: Unique, surprising, use of humour, repetition, subliminal messages, ... Universities would surely love it for Marketing case studies.

But why Ground Hog Day? Surely this sort of attention seeking won't be taken seriously.

I had a client tell me this recently and I thought, too many people in organizational life are too tightly wound, especially managers. A sense of humour is actually a management competency, but I'm not sure he gets it.

Groundhog day is just the opposite. It's supposed to remind us we are human and not to take ourselves so seriously.

I've also had indications over the years indicating that the receiver doesn't quite 'get it', either in general, or perhaps in particular with a given card. (And if one person gives you feedback you can bet ten others are wondering in silence. Hence this note.)

I have to admit, my sense of humour can be a bit eccentric, if not to say esoteric.

So why Groundhog Day cards.

I've had a fascination with Groundhog Day for as long as I can remember. Though it is a (very) minor event in the calendar of noteworthy dates, it has always ranked high for me; even as a teenager, it was right up there with April Fool's Day! The morning radio always made a bit of a show of it – groundhog sees his shadow: six more weeks of winter! And this was long before Bill Murray's movie, Groundhog Day. (Hey, I'm a lot older than Bill Murray's movie!)

I think it's because I've never been much of a fan of winter and GroundHog Day was a signal that the end was in sight, even if he did see his shadow. (I wonder how many readers have noticed I spell Groundhog three different ways?)

I'm also a bit of a nationalist. (I always considered it a sell-out that Bill Murray, a Canadian, set his movie on Punxsutwamy.) So I chose Wiarton Willi as my sacred muse. I suppose I could have chosen Shubenacadie Sam in Nova Scotia or Brandon Bob, but I am a loyal Ontarian. (Apparently Thunder Bay has a local prognosticating woodchuck but he can't be found on Google.) Wiarton Willi is also distinguished in being albino!

(Sadly, confused novice recipients of my annual greetings mistake the white Wiarton marmot for a baby Polar Bear!)

My first promotional greeting card, January 1994, had nothing to do with Groundhog Day – though it landed on many people’s desks on February 2. I had started AFS Consulting as of January 15 1993 but it wasn’t really fully launched and announced until the following year. That first offering was ‘borrowed’ from the genius Gary Larson of Far Side fame. I thought the message was a perfect metaphor for me in my new venture, even tying in my tight-rope logo.

The following January I sent out another notice with the tight-rope theme; this too was ‘borrowed’ from a commercial source. I was not thinking GroundHog Day then but I was conscious that the timing of my promotional was away from the traditional Christmas Card rush.

The following year I had discovered my cartoonist, the very clever Jim Turner of Pixelgraph Studio, and my own creative genius. I introduced the ground hog theme, but holding on to the tight rope idea as well. I called the groundhog George, I don’t remember why; Georgie the Gopher I suppose. In 1997 Georgie had become Woody (the woodchuck?).

In the summer of 1997 I was doing a project for Parks Canada that took me to Tobermory – and you have to go by Wiarton to get there. There is a Wiarton Willie Statue in the town park overlooking Georgian Bay; I had to have a souvenir photo with ‘him’. And that became the theme for my 1998 card. (Interesting to note that I have intended to make a second pilgrimage to Wiarton, but it must be on the true holy day in February. Turns out that is a very difficult challenge – it’s a nine hour trip from Ottawa, no matter what mode of transportation you choose, and winters can be very unpredictable. Still, one day...)

By 1999 we were getting much more in touch with the true meaning of Groundhog’s Day – forecasting spring. We also tied the message on the card with the business offerings of AFS Consulting. Smart. True marketing genius. That’s why I’m so rich now.

Turns out 1999 was a tragic year for Wiarton Willie – he died! The story made CNN and I received emails and condolences cards from around the world! Cynically the Wiarton Willie Committee made much mileage of the event, and extended it through the year as they launched a nation-wide search for a new albino marmot. As it happens they found three, in Ottawa.

The significance of the 2000 Card is now obvious, even though pretty obscure to many recipients that year.

The 2001 card played on the naïveté of the novice prognosticator, Willi Junior, up against the savvy American, Punxsatwany Phil!

2002 saw a completely new idea as well as insight into the idiosyncratic mind of Doug Jordan. For a long time I have been fascinated with palindromes; 2002 (and maybe even

February 2, 2002) makes a fine a palindrome. Here are a few other examples: kayak; 'Able was I ere I saw Elba' (Napoleon's lament!).

2003 brought us an echo of Gary Larson's 'old dog, new tricks' cartoon. I was celebrating the 10th anniversary of AFS Consulting and needed to do a little reflecting.

And then we come to the evil marmot, based on the true account of the death of two of the albino groundhogs, apparently from flooding of their artificial habitats.

2005 is the most educational card in the series. Here I begin to expose my religious roots and try to get the faithful reader to realize Groundhog Day is an ancient rite, much older than Bill Murray, or even the Warton City Fathers. Even the Christian celebration of 'Candlemas' on February 2 is a borrowing from pagan traditions of England and northern Europe. This piece also brings into focus the joke of the groundhog and his shadow: either way, it will be six weeks until March 21!

2006 was an election year in Canada. In this cartoon I got to tweak the noses of the Liberal, NDP and Green Parties, and at the same time, ironically, belittle Willie's forecasting ability.

Tragedy struck again in 2006 – Willie Junior died, obviously prematurely. Or, was it another cold case? In any event it gave us the opportunity to celebrate death and rebirth, endings and beginnings. (There's even a very obscure insider reference on Willi II's tombstone.) With this card I also sought to promote AFS Consulting as a provider of change management services.

With young Willi III now in the role, the 2008 card seems to reflect the career angst of an entire Gen Y, maybe. Edgy, sexy, even bordering on political incorrectness (evil cigarette), this is the new age of aggressive marketing. (Was that also the year of the 'wardrobe malfunction'?)

Then the Great Recession of 2009! Willi goes to the big smoke and finds out how frightening life in the city can be; even more so when you read about it in the papers.

2010 brought a new twist. I had thought of putting Willi on a park bench, cup in hand, as an out-of-work prognosticator, but I thought my faithful readers would think that a cliché and are already tired of the Great Recession! Instead I returned to my spiritual roots and the idea that there are other pagan days in the calendar. I wonder how many people actually made the effort to look up Lamas in wikipedia?

And to reinforce that idea, I issued my first mid-summer card, to refresh the AFSC presence, and celebrate Lamas Day, or Civic Holiday, or Simcoe Day, or Col. By Day.

The 2011 card is a result of a very loyal reader's idea: he thought those various prognosticating marmots were in cahoots, a veritable cartel of spring forecasters. So I put Punxsutawney Phil, Shubenacadie Sam and Warton Willi on the same card, cooking their

spring prognostications, and risking exposure for their conspiracy, assuming Julian Assange ever gets out of jail.

Maybe there's a Lamas Day follow-up in here somewhere too...

Remember, the genius of advertising is not to be clever, necessarily, but to be repetitive!