With Love

Greta Conley

gvc3@zips.uakron.edu

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With Love

Greta Conley

Department of Graphic Design

Honors Research Project

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Approved:

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Honors Project Sponsor (signed)

Brittny DeWerth

Honors Project Sponsor (printed)

Brittny DeWerth

Date: 11.28.20

Reader (signed)

Reader (printed) DONALD FLYNN

Date: 11.30.20

Reader (signed)

Reader (printed) Robert Kelemen

Accepted:

Date: 11/30/2020

Honors Department Advisor (signed)

Honors Department Advisor (printed)

Markus Vogl

Date: 11/30/2020

Department Chair (signed)

Department Chair (printed)

Janice Troutman

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Artist Statement

Greeting cards are an important piece of communication that people don't often utilize as much they can. This paper explores many aspects of these small paper cards including the looks of the current greeting card market, an average consumer's relationship to greeting cards, and how professionals create them. With technology and social media as a distraction, it can be more difficult to remember to send cards, and their great impact can be forgotten. The project got its origins after reflecting upon how much greeting cards have had an impact on my own life and wondering how they affect the lives of other people. All of the research leads up to an investigation and attempt to making a mark in this market. This includes the creation of a line of professionally printed cards designed to encourage the causal exchange of greeting cards with in the local community.
Written communication can be admired for its inherent ability to render a thought into a timeless mark. Instead of verbalizing the information, which can easily get lost in translation or forgotten, a written sentiment is there to stay for the foreseeable future. This can take on many different forms, each one correlating to its own purpose: contracts communicate terms of legal agreements, recipes give instructions for cooking, books detail stories, labels show information about products, et cetera. Although all of these are sufficient ways of using written words, perhaps one of the most intriguing forms is greeting cards. The term can have slightly differing connotations, for the purpose of the research discussed in this paper, greeting cards will be defined—according to Miriam Webster Dictionary—as, “a piece of paper or thin cardboard having any of a variety of shapes and formats and bearing a greeting or message of sentiment.”¹ Any proceeding mention of the term will use this denotation.

With little to no knowledge of the most current greeting card market, the first phase of research began with scouting the greeting card sections of multiple different stores to see what brands, purposes, price and design trends can be found in their offerings. To ensure that a broad and inclusive range of cards were accounted for, this was broken up into two sectors: large companies and local businesses. The large companies surveyed were: Target (Akron, OH), Walmart (Akron, OH), Giant Eagle (Akron, OH), CVS (Green, OH), and Dollar Tree (Akron, OH). For local businesses, the Northside Marketplace (Akron, OH), and Leaf (Akron, OH) were chosen.

For large companies, the first factor taken in consideration was brand. The large companies were dominated by two brands of cards. The first, and overwhelmingly the most prevalent, was Hallmark. This brand took on different forms to fit different audiences at different stores. The Dollar Tree’s greeting card section featured Expressions and heartline, both lines of Hallmark cards. CVS also exclusively sold

Hallmark cards, with lines such as Just Because, and good mail. Offering a similar
Hallmark lineup was Giant Eagle. Although Walmart and Target had the largest
selections out of the five companies from the first sector of research, their offerings
varied greatly. Walmart—though having a large selection cards themselves—was
dominated by American Greetings brand cards and little other representation. Though
notedly, there was a small selection of Hallmark cards. Finally, Target had the the most
diverse selection of individual greeting cards and brands. The store carried brands
such as minted., Papyrus, Spritz, different lines of American Greetings, et cetera.
Overall, from the observations made, it can be established that both American
Greetings and Hallmark are the leading contributors to the greeting card selections in
the large companies sector.

Next, the second sector—local businesses—was surveyed for brand diversity.
Cards by the brand Dippity and Snark were the only ones present at the Northside
Marketplace. At leaf, the selection was much more diverse. It stocked many unique
brands such as R. Nichols, Carina Paper Company, Catherine Greenup Visual, et
cetera. An interesting point to note is that neither of the small businesses that were
visited during the research, carried any of the same brands of cards that were
extremely popular in the larger companies. This may suggest a connection between
small businesses and the support that they give to one another. Emily Marks, owner
and sole designer of the local small business Carina Paper Company², said, “There are
a lot of really great networking opportunities within this space, many people in this
space thrive off community and I’ve found that is easy to achieve if you want it.”³ This,
although telling of her experience, can relate to the small business sector in general

² Emily Marks, “About.” Accessed September 25, 2020,
https://www.carinaevents.com/about.

³ Emily Marks, email to business owner, September 25, 2020.
and more specifically to the buying experience at leaf, as her products are sold in their store. Overall, there was a larger array of unique, non-national brands in this sector.

Another key factor that plays a part in the greeting card market is purpose. Observing what purposes greeting cards are created for will allow for a greater understanding of the demands of the market and intentions of the customers. Throughout stores in both sectors, some of the most popular themes of card purpose were birthdays, thank you, thinking of you, weddings/marriage, baby, and sympathy. Many of the more expensive and trendy cards also included sayings that did not adhere to a specific category, instead relying on relatability and comedic effect to sway a customer to purchase. These phrases included, “YEP. YOU'RE STILL MY FAV HUMAN”⁴, or, “WE’VE BEEN FRIENDS SO LONG I’VE FORGOTTEN WHICH ONE OF US IS THE BAD INFLUENCE.”⁵ This slight shift in purpose is definitely in the minority of all of the cards that were researched, but it does show that even though the overall market demands “traditional” purposes for greeting cards, there is room in the market for cards without specific purposes. Therefore, it can be deduced that although a typical customer purchases a card for mainstream traditional purposes, there are a portion of customers that buy cards “just because” and do not have wholly mainstream intentions behind all of their card purchasing habits.

Within the seven stores studied in the combined large company and local business sectors, there was extreme diversity within the designs of all individual greeting cards. Although this was the case, there were some design trends that did stand out. One particular trend was that of small-sized or mini cards. Their purposes were rarely those previously mentioned in the popular sentiments and all seemed to convey a positive tone. These cards were only available in select stores in the first

⁴ Olivia Raufman, *Fav Human*, greeting card, 12.7 cm x 17.78 cm (5 in x 7 in), United States.

⁵ Stacey Meacham, *Friends So Long*, letterpressed greeting card, 12.7 cm x 17.78 cm (5 in x 7 in), United States.
sector and they were tied together more by purpose than by visual design. Another trend was gold foiling. This could be seen across both sectors and take different forms, such as an industry standard foiling appearing in cards of nearly all large companies and real gold leafing in the small sector. Gold foiling adds visual interest and a more expensive look to the cards. The final design trend taken in particular interest for this research was a simple one or two color card. Cards following this trend could be seen in both sectors and were often text-heavy. They appeared to be offset print with one to two spot colors, and their design was often bold, simple, and straightforward. With the lack of excessive visual elements, the bold design was often eye-catching and allowed both the design and sentiment to pack more of a punch.

There was not an extremely noticeable difference between the styles of cards sold within each sector or even between each sector. Instead of just the sector or store within the sector determining design style, price was the ultimate indicator. It can be noted that the more expensive a card, the more elevated the design. This conclusion was drawn based on the determining factors that this study will define as “elevated”, possessing one of or a combination of the following traits: higher quality materials, unique designs, and added features (foil, embossing, et cetera). Lower priced cards typically lacked some or all of these traits, while higher priced cards featured one or more of these traits. The least expensive greeting card observed during research was fifty cents, found at Dollar Tree—a sector one store. The most expensive greeting card observed during research was nine dollars, found at leaf—a sector two store. The least expensive cards were found at large companies, but the most expensive cards were found in both sectors.

After establishing a basis for what the current greeting card market looks like, it became imperative to understand more of the customer’s perspective when buying a greeting card. This was done by conducting a survey via Google Forms which gathered
anonymous information from over 190 respondents. The information gathered showed that 42.9% of respondents purchased greeting cards only once every two to three months and over half of all respondents purchased greeting cards twice a year or less. The two main reasons given for lack of purchasing greeting cards are the price of cards and the presence of social media/texting and other ways of sharing the same sentiments. The most popular place of greeting card purchase is Target, with 33% of respondents choosing to shop there. When asked which price range they are most likely to purchase a greeting card in, 48.7% of respondents chose the $2–$4 category, and 34% preferred spending only $1–$2. The final question posed in the survey was if the respondent enjoyed receiving greeting cards. Over 82% of respondents claimed to enjoy receiving greeting cards, while only 15.7% feel indifferent and only 1.6% do not enjoy it at all. This last statistic highlighted an extreme gap: a much lower amount of greeting cards purchased contrasts the very large amount of people who find joy from receiving a card. This comparison, in particular, fueled the fire for the rest of the research project because of its interesting and inconsistent nature.

After looking at greeting cards from a customer's perspective, the next step of the process was to delve into the creative process behind these professional cards. In order to attain insight into the interworking of both sectors—local businesses and large companies—two interviews were conducted at both of these levels. Representing the local business sector is Emily Marks from Carina Paper Company. For large companies, Amanda Puleo, a University of Akron graduate who is currently working as a Product Designer at American Greetings. The overall process differs greatly because Carina Paper Company is a small business run by Emily, herself, and American Greetings is a much larger company. When asked about her design processes, Emily explained how she had freedom to find a style of cards that she wanted to create by experimenting to find her own voice to incorporate into her products. The design
process is very personal for her; when asked where she gets her creative inspiration, she responded, “From my life as a mom and wife. I clearly know who my ‘ideal client’ is and consistently work towards that in all of my designs based on my own life.” To contrast this form of self-directed greeting card creation, Amanda Puleo explained that designing at American Greetings is part of a cross-functional conversation that includes, marketers, copywriters, editorial members, et cetera. Because this process has so many working parts, she explained that a difficult part of the design process is, “not always having the final decision in your piece or concept.” Because Emily Marks, like many other small business owners, has to wear the hats of all of the previously mentioned areas of American Greetings, she does not have to worry about the lack of control that a corporate designer like Amanda faces. There are pros and cons to working in both settings. Collaboration that large companies provide can lead to more interesting and inclusive solutions to design problems, but surrenders, in some cases, an artist’s ability to express the ideas and concepts they desire to. In many cases, there is not a right or a wrong, it just depends on if a large company or small business is better for the artist as an individual. As Emily stated, “everyone has to decide how ‘big’ they dream their business to be. For me, I don’t want a million dollar business I want a company I can manage myself.”

Having completed the research phase by discovering information about the current greeting card market, customers who buy greeting cards, and designers behind the creation of these greetings cards, it was time to begin creating a line of greeting cards. The preceding research was used as a base to begin this process. When looking into the current market, brands, purposes, prices and design trends were taken into consideration. In order to have a product that is able to compete in such an

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6 Emily Marks, email to business owner, September 25, 2020.
7 Amanda Puleo, Instagram message to designer, October 13, 2020.
8 Emily Marks, email to business owner, September 25, 2020.
environment, the same factors needed to be examined in relation to this project in addition to setting a target audience, which will also help to set the tone of the project.

The target audience for this line of greeting cards is younger women from the ages of 18–30. The ideal customer will be a modern, feminine woman with a sense of lighthearted humor, care for others, and a spunky style. She will care about the aesthetics of products she chooses to purchase and will be plugged into various forms of social media. She will also value a connection to her community and support small businesses that reside in it. Establishing a target audience was important in this project because it is important in the real world. Amanda Puleo explained that, “in the world of working for a consumer, you always have to do what’s best for the consumer and create what is needed.” If a designer doesn’t understand their consumer, there is no way that they can design to accurately suit their needs. Specifically choosing a target audience may be an ideal situation, but because it is was an option for this project it was a clear and easy choice to ensure the authenticity and passion behind the designs.

Once the target audience was defined, it was time to begin brainstorming the designs. The first step taken in this process was narrowing the purpose of the cards into a few specific topics. As research of the current market shows, there are a few main categories of cards. These categories are what the market demands, so it was prudent to include cards with sentiments that align with these themes. On the contrary, according to survey results, people enjoy receiving cards, yet cards are not sent out enough to meet this need. What new occasion do people need to send cards? Maybe, not one at all. To encourage and promote the causal sending of greeting cards, more everyday, non-occasion specific cards were also a focus of this line of greeting cards. The list of themes that were chosen to be represented in this line of cards are birthday and thank you, to satisfy the traditional themes, while a majority of the articles

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contained motivational and encouraging sentiments. After a broad list of themes were chosen, word maps were drawn and sentiment-specific mood boards were created while also taking in consideration the sentiments that were seen in market research. The final list of ten sentiments was then chosen: you go girl, thanks for being an awesome human, hi, I really like you, I am so proud of you, I’m suuuuuuuuper grateful for you, Happy Belated Birthday (I’m not even going to pretend I remembered), what’s up buttercup, you’re a dime, hey I miss you, and hooray. These sentiments were all chosen to be relatable, fun, and to especially promote the casual exchange of cards.

The next step in the card creation process was to establish the overall tone and design style that the cards would take on. Because the sentiments portrayed a casual and fun tone, the designs needed to match. A trend of cards seen in research—ones possessing one or two spot colors and simple bold designs—was taken in particular interest when establishing a visual style. These cards were created from the beginning with the intent of being offset print to pay homage to the more traditional form of printing as opposed to the more modern digital printing. The offset printing method would also lend itself to this simple style of design. When choosing a color, a few factors needed to be considered; it must appeal to the target audience, be eye catching and match the sentiments that were chosen. Although a few colors were considered, the ultimate choice was a combination of 100% black and PMS 1625 C, as well as tints of both. The restriction that the two spot colors added allowed for a simple design, yet ensured that every use of color had a purpose. In addition, the use of tints gave slightly more freedom and expanded the palette. After going though rounds of sketching for each card design, digital proofs were created. The digital files also went through revisions until they were finalized. Another element of technical design to be considered was the size of the cards. Each card was designed to fit either brown craft paper envelopes or white miniature envelopes that were purchased from Hollo’s
Papercraft. The choice of creating miniature cards was motivated by seeing the novel idea in stores—especially CVS, as they had the largest selection. The final dimensions of the cards was as follows: regular sized cards are 5.5 inches by 4.25 inches and miniature cards are 2.5 inches by 3.5 inches.

When all of the designs were completed, it was time to start production. After contacting three separate printing companies—and being encouraged to print the project digitally—there was one company that was willing to help take on the project. Located in Cleveland, Ohio, Foote Printing was the printing company chosen to offset print the greeting cards. Conversing with the company, especially with co-owner Michael Duhr, was a learning experience. It gave more insight into what a professional printer needed from a customer and how the process of production from a designer’s perspective. Foote Printing needed information about the type of paper (300 lb white stock) and colors chosen as well as dimensions and dieline. An initial PDF of the designs was sent via a link on their website. After some conversation, a digital proof from the company needed to be approved before beginning production. Overall, the Foote Printing was an extremely helpful and integral part of making the project come to life. The experience was invaluable to a student designer's knowledge of design in a more real world context. Rather than simply printing in labs at the university or going to FedEx, using a professional printer taught real world communication skills.

Once the cards were picked up from the printers, they were packed up in cellophane bags and delivered to their exhibition location—Artisan Coffee Shop. This location was specifically chosen for two reasons. First, it is a small and local business. This helps to support the small businesses in the community. Artisan is not a company that specifically has to do with greeting cards, but small businesses supporting each other is an important aspect in their wellbeing. This was mentioned previously in a quote by Emily and noted in the products that leaf chooses to sell in its storefront.
Second, by frequent observation, it was determined that this location is a prime spot for individuals that fall into the defined target audience. While the greeting cards were up for exhibition, they were also offered for sale there. Pricing of the cards, $3.50 for single cards and $6.00 for a four pack of miniature cards, was directly and simultaneously informed from both the results of the survey given and information gathered during market research.

Another way the cards were presented for a more digital approach to an exhibition was on Etsy. The cards were each photographed in multiple angles on black backgrounds to allow the cards to have enough contrast with the background and then listed for sale under the shop name somprintedgoods. The initial plan for the project was to establish an LLC in conjunction with the project. After looking into this, it was clear Etsy shop more than adequately met the needs of the project for the length of exhibition and beyond for further sale. In addition, the commerce site’s values clearly aligned with the goals of the project, “In a time of increasing automation, it’s our mission to keep human connection at the heart of commerce.”\(^\text{10}\) Due to the social and economic climate that the project was being completed in—for personal and economic reasons—it was decided that for the time the establishment of an LLC was not the best-fitting choice.

In conclusion, this research project bridged a gaping hole from design school to reality. By conducting research to gain a greater understanding of current greeting card markets, attaining information about buying habits of consumers, learning how working designers from both sectors of businesses function, utilizing a professional printing company, and setting up the finished product to be sold in multiple locations, a start-to-finish view of the greeting card market was established. The lasting and intended impact of designing this line of cards was to encourage people—especially those who

fall into the target audience—to continue to stay connected by sending greeting cards. As indicated by the previously mentioned survey, people enjoy receiving greeting cards, but they aren’t being sent frequently enough. Hopefully by viewing this project’s exhibition, it can be a reminder to counteract the majority’s actions and make someone’s day by writing a greeting card and signing it with love.
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Project Photos Continued