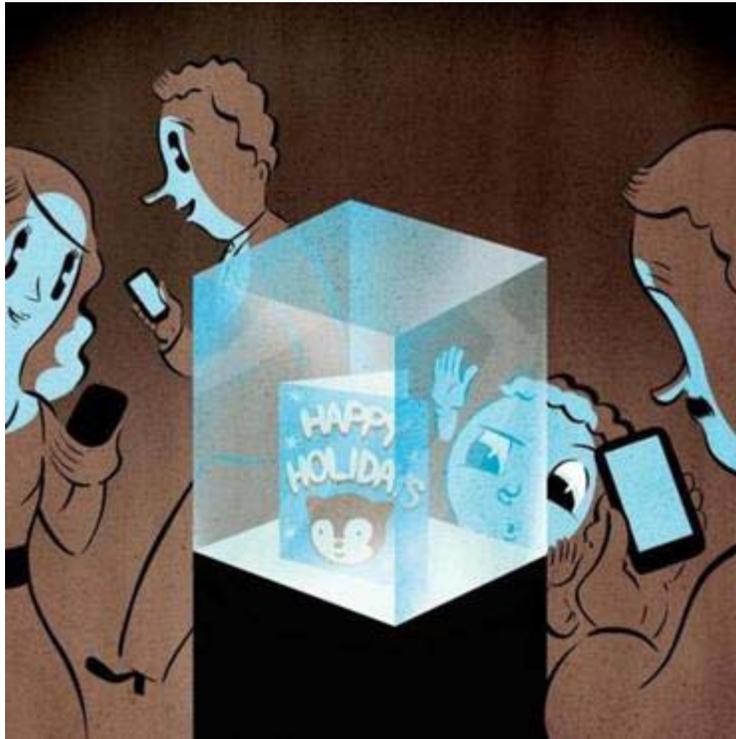


## A holiday letter holdout

*Forget Facebook. There's too much to like about the analog update.*

By **Tim Lehnert**



Every year, my family gets fewer and fewer holiday cards and letters. We once hung a row of them on a string above the fireplace, but now a corner of the mantel suffices. And half of the seasonal wishes we do receive these days are reminders from newspaper carriers about the joys of the season (hint, hint) or solicitations from charities. Like eight-track players and land lines, the holiday missive has become the preserve of cultists, traditionalists, and the out of touch.

I take this hard, because I am one of those out-of-touch writers. Sure, I am part of the “modern” world: I drive an automobile and enjoy talkies, but I have to admit that the letter makes me a throwback, like someone who makes his own shoes or keeps oxen.

The writing doesn't come easy, let me tell you. I am well aware of the typical holiday letter pattern of restrained boast (Kelly's disappointment at getting wait-listed at Georgetown was offset by her early acceptance from Dartmouth), coupled with banal household updates (“Steve has re-sodded the side lawn. Again”) and tales from abroad (“It was our third time in Tuscany, and we're still just scratching the surface!”). Inevitably, along with the breezy news, comes pathos (“Stephanie, our bearded dragon lizard, has been doing poorly; let's hope the new year brings some improvement”). There's a lot there to laugh at.

So, like a boxer, I dodge and I weave in my writing, detailing my kids' activities and milestones, then shifting gears to include family vacations and work news, and finally delivering the haymaker: We got a dog. I close by wishing everyone a "Happy New Year," and that's it. Thanks for reading, drive safely, and we'll see you next year.

I have my fans, for whom I'm grateful, but I know others perceive my efforts as a Sisyphean waste of time. I am also aware that, among my more green-minded correspondents, my epistolary output of paper renders me an environmental criminal on par with BP. Perhaps some carbon credits in my stocking would make things right.

Now that the era of the holiday letter is passing, it's easy to forget its illustrious history. Its popularity reached its apex in the 1980s and 1990s, kind of like Blockbuster, but perhaps the tradition goes back much further: "Thanks to Grog and his new flint arrows, we had a lovely mammoth for solstice! And we've redone the cave, removing some awful paintings the previous owners left behind."

As a mode of communication, the holiday letter blossomed with the advent of the photocopy machine and then the desktop computer – which allowed for the addition of snowman clip art and faux handwriting fonts. The cheery form letter, with its scrawled personalized appendage – "Sorry about those Pats!" or "Is Olivia really a teenager now?" – represented a timesaving device no less ingenious than the microwave. Instead of actually taking the time to write family and friends, it allowed the sender to kill 50 birds with just one stone and a roll of stamps.

But in our current age, people Tweet that they just ate a burrito and craft Facebook updates lamenting a forgotten umbrella. Who needs a yearly recapitulation when you get minute-by-minute ones? Still, I believe the holiday letter serves a useful function: It lets us maintain tenuous contact with people with whom we don't regularly keep in touch (especially those who eschew Facebook). And the qualities that make it so lampoonable – its elevation of the mundane to the newsworthy, its self-congratulatory tone – are muted in comparison with the TMI-fests that are social networking sites.

It's true, the letter does take a lot of work. I have, in years past, threatened to get someone in Bangalore to pump the thing out. The dollar is tanking, however, and so I am maintaining production on American soil.

Instead of outsourcing, I am streamlining operations with some concessions to modernity. A-listers – that is, those friends and family who send me something – will get a stamped envelope delivered by the US Postal Service (whose work I support). Inside, they'll find a real letter with a real family photo. B-listers will receive the same letter via e-mail, but with additional Web-only "bonus" photos. As for C-listers, well, they'll be treated to the cheeriest Facebook status update I can muster.

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