



Case Study

2020 EFFIE AWARDS UNITED STATES FINALIST

"CONNECTIONS BUILD US"

With greeting card sales in significant YoY decline, and retail shelf space shrinking, American Greetings blew up the traditional method of marketing cards. We shifted the benefit of card-giving from the receiver to the giver—from "it makes them feel good" to "it makes you feel good"—and tied our dying consumer behavior to a thriving one: wellness. By demonstrating how cards nurture the relationships that make us well, "Connections Build Us" repositioned card-giving as a strategy for wellness, driving relevance, purchase intent, and incremental retail distribution worth \$150M annually.

Competition:
Effie United States

Ran in:
United States

Category:
Marketing Disruptors

Brand/Client:
American Greetings

Lead Agency:
MullenLowe U.S.

Contributing Company:
Mediahub

Product/Service:
Leisure and Entertainment

Classification:
National

Dates Effort Ran:
December 16, 2018 -
January 31, 2019

Category Situation:
In Decline



Executive Summary

The Challenge

Restore relevance to a declining category with a motivating argument for giving cards every day rather than solely on occasions.

The Insight

Good, close relationships are the key to happiness and health.

The Idea

Make “relationship care” (giving cards) a strategy for wellness by illuminating the profound impact it has on how we feel.

Bringing the Idea to Life

“Connections Build Us” demonstrated the importance of card-giving in the context of current wellness behaviors: diet, exercise, and self-care.

The Results

Drove relevance, reappraisal, purchase intent, and increased distribution worth \$150M in annual incremental revenue for American Greetings.

Effie Awards Category Context

With retail shelf space shrinking, and sales in significant YoY decline, greeting cards were dying. So, we blew up the traditional method of marketing cards, shifting the benefit of card-giving from the receiver to the giver—from “it makes them feel good” to “it makes you feel good.”

We tied our dying consumer behavior to a thriving one: wellness. By demonstrating how cards nurture the relationships proven to make us well, we made card-giving a strategy for wellness. Our disruptive approach, “Connections Build Us,” drove relevance, purchase intent, and incremental retail distribution worth \$150M in annual revenue for American Greetings.

State of the Marketplace & Brand's Business

Everybody likes *receiving* cards. But we've stopped being good about *giving* them.

People weren't buying greeting cards like they used to. With so many convenient and free (but less meaningful) social/mobile ways to connect, the paper greeting card category was in severe and consistent YoY decline.¹

And when people stop buying cards, retailers stop carrying them. Declining categories are often deprioritized at retail (in prominence and in-store footprint) to make room for profitable, growing ones. With greeting card retail shelf space downsized 27% from 2013 to 2018, the card aisle was becoming increasingly less visible.² To the consumer, out of sight leads to being even further out of mind.

American Greetings, the leader in paper greeting cards and the champion of "meaningful connections," needed big, bold thinking to reverse this vicious cycle and restore relevance to a category on the brink of extinction.

Strategic Communications Objective:

Restore relevance to a declining category by creating a compelling and motivating argument for *giving* cards.

American Greetings needed a strategic positioning and creative platform that would make card-giving a relevant and important behavior every day rather than solely on occasions like Mother's Day and Valentine's Day, which still held somewhat of a sense of card-giving obligation.

We needed a Hail Mary; a way to make cards relevant by any means necessary. If people had stopped caring about cards, we needed to find a way to attach cards to something they did care about.

It would need to be done on a \$2M paid media budget—a very small sum for an attempt at a national, category- and company-rescuing campaign.

Audience

Aspiring Meaningful Connectors, Adults 25-44 (with a focus on women).

She has good intentions when it comes to giving cards but, too often, life happens, things get hectic, and those good intentions go unfulfilled. Like many of us, she feels busier than ever before,³ as well as increasingly stressed out, burned out, and checked out.⁴

As a result, easier, more convenient methods of communicating prevail. And, consequently, she's one of the 106M of us who are buying fewer and fewer cards per year.⁵

However, what's different about her is that she wants to be the kind of person who goes the extra mile for the important relationships in her life. She aspires to be that kind of person who nurtures her relationships in ways that are meaningful and really count. We could be the brand to deliver her a truly powerful incentive to build connections.

Objectives & KPIs

In increasing order of importance, our objectives were to:

Attach card-giving to an important and relevant cultural conversation.

- Increased brand mentions outside the context of the greeting card category (i.e., beyond card-giving occasions)⁶

Make card-giving a worthwhile behavior. This would be tracked and measured in campaign pretesting by Phoenix Marketing International.⁷

- Increases in "giving cards is important" compared to control campaign (76%)
- Increases in "gives me a new reason to give cards" compared to control campaign (65%)

Increase consumer purchase intent. This would be tracked and measured by Millward Brown Campaign Tracking, comparing aware to unaware.

- Exceed CPG category norm (+3.1ppt) for purchase intent⁸

Prove the value of American Greetings to retail partners. Distribution and retailer relationships are the lifeblood of any CPG business, but particularly in the greeting card category where brand is not a major driver of choice.⁹ The more stores your product is sold in, the greater the opportunity you have to make sales.

- Drive incremental distribution and revenue

Sourcing:

1. IBISWorld 2019.
2. IBISWorld and CoStar Group 2019.
3. Harvard Business Review, 2016.
4. Gallup, Survey of the American Workplace, 2017.
5. U.S. Census Data, 2015-2016.
6. Crimson Hexagon, Brand Mentions, 2018.
7. Phoenix Card Evaluation Research, 2018.
8. Kantar Millward Brown's Brand Lift Insights, 2019.
9. American Greetings Sales and Marketing Team, November 2018.

Insight

Good, close relationships are the key to happiness and health.

Cards are one of few products designed exclusively to be given. But the altruistic benefit of making others feel good wasn't working anymore. So, we made a conscious decision to break category tradition and shift the benefit of giving cards from the receiver to the giver—from "it makes *them* feel good" to "it makes *you* feel good."

Because feeling good today is paramount. In response to record-setting stress levels, Americans invest significant time, energy, and money in their wellness—a \$4T category with no shortage of diet, exercise, and self-care trends—from the tried and true to the downright out there.¹ We're clearly searching for something. Turns out, we're looking everywhere for it but the most important place: each other.

An 80-year-long study on adult development from Harvard University found that the single biggest predictor of overall well-being (health and happiness) is the quality of our relationships.² The key to wellness is not within us. It's between us.

The role for American Greetings and the relevant argument for card-giving was compelling: as a more meaningful form of connection,³ cards build and nurture the relationships that make us well.

Sourcing:

1. Global Wellness Institute, 2017.
2. TED 2015.
3. American Greetings Consumer Insights, 2018.

The Big Idea

Make "relationship care" (i.e., giving cards) a strategy for wellness by illuminating the impact it has on how we feel.

Bringing the Idea to Life

"CONNECTIONS BUILD US"

Our disruptive strategic positioning (card-giving as a strategy for wellness) required an equally provocative creative platform, which we summarized with the thought-provoking end line: "When we build connections, connections build us."

Making a credible case for this new strategy for wellness meant showing it in the context of dominant, mainstay wellness behaviors that people currently accept and adopt like diet, exercise, and self-care.

Our 2019 effort focused on exercise.

With the \$30B U.S. fitness industry growing 3-4% annually for the last 10 years, exercise is one of the most popular strategies for improving wellness.¹ So we seized the opportunity to puncture the belief that "fit equals healthy," and opened minds to a new form of strength.

In our social film, "True Test of Strength," elite athletes were challenged by celebrity trainer Cesar Amolia and Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Robert Waldinger to test "the next big thing" in heart health. But rather than cardio or calisthenics, the real test was to simply honor their significant relationships with a card. Watching these elite athletes push through our different kind of workout proved that true strength is as emotional as it is physical, and that relationship strength is as important (if not more) as logging hours in the gym.

We launched when people were especially primed for our message: the new year.

We launched our film during the new year when people actively re-evaluate their routines and seek new ways to improve their well-being. In fact, we learned that 42% of people reported making wellness a priority for 2019.² With our budget of just \$2M, leveraging this moment of further heightened wellness relevance was a no-brainer.

We gave people the opportunity to practice relationship care, for real.

The full film, as well as cutdowns, drove to an experience we developed and offered in partnership with the YMCA called "Greeting Cardio"—a four-week relationship care class. Each class explored the different significant relationships in one's life—from the strong to one's in need of nurturing—through facilitated workshops and card-writing exercises. It was a real workout. Emotional, and worth it.

We leveraged like-minded partners to amplify the conversation.

We amplified the campaign overall with celebrity spokespeople who authentically connected with our message. NBA champion and mental health advocate Kevin Love, Olympic gymnast Nastia Liukin, and other notable wellness influencers spoke on social media genuinely about the powerful impact of relationship care in their lives and on their well-being.

We extended the platform to a wider audience with evergreen #ConnectionsBuildUs messaging:

- Drove efficient reach through pre- and mid-roll video with partners like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TradeDesk.
- High-impact, programmatic contextual digital placements on wellness-oriented sites like WebMD and Healthline.
- Sustained well-being messaging through drumbeat paid and owned social posts.
- Added credibility with custom content created in partnership with wellness publishers like mindbodygreen and SHAPE.

Sourcing:

1. "The Six Reasons the Fitness Industry Is Booming," *Forbes* 2018.
2. *YouGov Online Survey Commissioned by American Greetings, 2018.*

Investment Overview

Paid Media Expenditures: September 2018 - August 2019

👉 \$1-2 million

Paid Media Expenditures: September 2017 - August 2018

👉 \$1-2 million

Budget

- 👉 Compared to other competitors in this category, this budget is less.
- 👉 Compared to prior year spend on the brand overall, the budget this year is less.
- 👉 Compared to its top competitor, Hallmark, American Greetings had a small budget with which to impact change. With limited dollars, it guided media toward areas that require lower investment and still capture a large percentage of our target's time. So, we leveraged our spend to create cultural relevance and break into the newsfeed to inspire behavioral change within our budgets, a task that Hallmark was not able to accomplish with \$36M.¹

Sourcing:

1. *Hallmark Competitive Media Spend, Kantar 2019.*

Owned Media

Owned media from American Greetings included 3 emails, an animated infographic series that lived at americangreetings.com and social channels, as well as a dedicated campaign landing page.

Sponsorship

This campaign included a sponsorship of the YMCA where we gave people the opportunity to practice relationship care with cards through our Greeting Cardio classes.

Communications Touchpoints

Branded Content

Direct

👉 Email

Interactive/Online

👉 Brand Website/Microsite

👉 Digital Video

👉 Display Ads

Mobile/Tablet

👉 Messaging/Editorial/Content

PR

Sampling

OOH

👉 Event

Search Engine Marketing (SEM/SEO)

Social Media

Sponsorship

Results

This effort led to more than a campaign. It was a transformational first step in turning around a brand and category. By attaching a dying behavior to a thriving behavior, this creative strategy:

Attached card-giving to an important and relevant cultural conversation: wellness.

- +582% YoY increase of American Greetings mentions around wellness/well-being¹—a dominant cultural conversation that, prior to our campaign, had nothing to do with greeting cards.
- +5ppt lift in American Greetings message association with wellness.²

Made card-giving a worthwhile behavior.³

“ Giving cards is important	76%	92%	+16ppt
	Control	Exposed	Lift
“ Gives me a new reason to give cards	65%	72%	+7ppt

Increased consumer purchase intent 150% above the CPG category norm.⁴ This was tracked and measured by Millward Brown Campaign Tracking, comparing aware to unaware.




Proved the value of American Greetings to retail partners, resulting in the win of a sales contract worth over \$150M in incremental, annualized revenue with the world’s largest grocer and second-largest overall retailer in the U.S.: Kroger.⁵

- Exclusivity of the wellness positioning and the “Connections Build Us” platform was a core part of this deal.
- American Greetings secured 100% of the Kroger retail business, unseating competitor and 79-year Kroger partner, Hallmark. This means that only American Greetings product will be for sale in all 3,000+ Kroger stores. This expansion of the Kroger relationship represents a 75% increase in incremental distribution and a +14% lift to AG distribution overall.
- This contract will translate to \$150M in incremental annualized revenue for American Greetings. Contracts of this magnitude are multiyear.

In the end, we proved that when we build connections, connections build us. And not only that, but business, too.

Other Contributing Factors

 None

It had to be our “Connections Build Us” platform that drove the results.

It wasn’t seasonality. Efforts were not focused on a holiday or “card-giving” moment. Instead we repositioned card-giving as an everyday strategy for wellness—something nobody else had done.

It wasn’t other marketing efforts. There were no other American Greetings efforts in-market while the campaign was live.

It wasn’t rock-bottom margins that drove the contract win worth \$150M in incremental annual revenue. Given greeting card category decline, retailers hold all of the leverage in a contract negotiation. As such, most deals are hammered out over relinquishing points of margin. But the fact that Kroger’s terms specified exclusivity of the wellness positioning meant American Greetings held an asset of value at the negotiating table: the “Connections Build Us” platform.

Sourcing:

1. *Crimson Hexagon, Brand Mentions, 2019.*
2. *Millward Brown Brand Lift Study, fielded 1/2/19-2/28/19.*
3. *Phoenix Card Evaluation Research, 2018.*
4. *Millward Brown Brand Lift Study, fielded 1/2/19-2/28/19.*
5. *American Greetings Sales and Marketing Team, August 2019.*



EffieWorldwide

348 West 57th Street, Suite 131

New York, NY 10019

Email: cases@effie.org

Tel: 212-913-9772

effie.org effieindex.com



Effie Worldwide

Leading, inspiring and championing the practice and practitioners of marketing effectiveness globally.

©2020: The information available through effie.org is the property of Effie Worldwide, Inc. and is protected by copyright and other intellectual property laws. This brief may be displayed, reformatted and printed for your personal use only. By using effie.org and/or by downloading case histories from it, you agree not to reproduce, retransmit, distribute, sell, publicly display, publish or broadcast the information to anyone without the prior written consent of Effie Worldwide, Inc. Effie® is a registered trademark/service mark of Effie Worldwide, Inc.