

# Understanding Color in Social Expression

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Greeting cards can be sent through the mail, hand delivered, accompany a present, or contain a gift card. They can express just about any sentiment you could ever imagine, and hopefully communicate the thought better than you could have expressed it yourself. Our complex industry of Greetings consists of two main divisions: Everyday Cards—those cards given on everyday type of occurrences like birthdays, weddings, births, deaths, and illnesses—and Seasonal Cards, which are created for holidays like Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Christmas, Father's Day, Easter, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. The Everyday social expression occasions generate the largest portion of revenue for our industry, but the Seasonal card lines tend to be more complicated and designer-intensive. The number of design considerations for each line of cards is complicated and fascinating and has evolved from a hundred years of traditions and trends. Color is just one of many consumer-driven considerations we use in planning a card line.

## **Everyday Greetings—Trends With Staying Power**

In Everyday cards, color reflects the mood of the card and must be appropriate for the occasion. For example, a birthday card should look celebratory; a feminine card should be visibly feminine; a child's card should have a kid-friendly palette. A wedding card sells best in the palette that you would most expect—whites, off-whites, and a rainbow of pastels. Of all the cards in the Everyday product offering, sympathy cards may have the strictest consumer color preferences, in that the cards must have a quiet, if not serious, feel to them—a perfect example of how the color of the card is driven by mood. With all Everyday cards, the design and color palette for any given card should allow the shopper to recognize the different product lines from a quick glance.

Everyday Greetings has a wonderful opportunity to use the latest trendy color palettes, because Everyday cards are produced more frequently and are printed on an ongoing cycle throughout the year. The designers in this division seek out the newest palettes and apply them where appropriate. When there is an opportunity to utilize the newest color looks, the designer must weigh the new trends against the idea that trendy today can look outdated tomorrow, and our goal is to design cards that will have longevity in the marketplace. How do designers accomplish this? We start with color forecasting from industry groups like Color Marketing Group and The Trend Curve. In addition to consulting these industry forecasts, our designers also evaluate other industries, such as fashion and home décor, to develop a color palette for a product line. For example, if a particular green is seen in apparel, furniture, and leather goods, it will most likely work well as a trend color for Everyday cards. A designer working on a wedding product line would of course look to the many bridal publications for the latest trends in colors for wedding gowns, flowers, cakes and so on. The designer must also

combine these trend colors with a defined and limited palette of secondary processes that we use to embellish cards, such as metallic foils, sparkly glitter, and fuzzy flocks. Secondary process palettes are updated every few years, so as a result of this limitation, most trend colors are incorporated into the litho component of the card.

### **Season Cards: Tradition with Style**

Seasonal cards are produced with a single annual operating window and only have a short opportunity at retail. Seasonal product is steeped in tradition, so the use of trendy colors must be confined within the range of accepted colors for a given season. For example, with Christmas, a designer can certainly apply a green that pushes the traditional palette to the edge of trendy, but not to the point that it looks out-of-place in the Christmas card display. Furthermore, the additional challenge to seasonal product offerings, in comparison to Everyday, is that much of the industry color forecasting is not complete before design execution of a seasonal product line must begin.

At a display level, an Art Director has the responsibility to never lose track of the balance of color within each seasonal line. Ideally, a season display should "sign the season." For example, a busy shopper should be able to spot the Valentine's Day card display right away, and not confuse it with the Everyday Card offerings. A Valentine card display should communicate an overall red feel, with all of its shades of reds, pinks, and fuchsias. Within each season, designers will sprinkle new colors on individual cards, but the Art Director is mindful of maintaining the balance of the overall look of the Season display. Of all the seasons, Mother's Day has the most opportunity to incorporate trends within its palette. One year may find the Mother's Day display bright and saturated, and the next year it's a bouquet of icy pastels, but it will always look feminine and appropriate for Mom. Christmas and Halloween tend to have the least amount of trend variation introduced into the product offering.

What is successful for Hallmark is a careful combination of moving forward with what is new, but not losing sight of what sells and what our customers will accept. We can research the trends and admire what is new and exciting, but we must balance that with our unique industry. With Everyday cards, we must be mindful of trends, but remember that some cards may be out at retail for some time. With Season cards, we may be predicting a new look as much as fourteen months early, and it must still look new and yet "sign the season" when the card finally arrives at retail.

### **The Nuance of Color**

With greeting cards, the goal is to design and apply color to product that resonates with specific customer segments. For certain product lines, our customers have clearly defined expectations—Christmas reds, for example. Reds that shift slightly too warm are viewed as inexpensive or cheap, while a rich red with a slightly cooler appearance is considered high-end and sophisticated. Each season has a signature preference, such as Christmas red, that are incorporated into the palettes of our higher price point product. Though one would think that a beautiful, sophisticated color palette would also do well at a value price, our customer-based experience is that value cards require a color palette

that is more appropriate to the value of the card. A higher price point carries with it an expectation of sophistication and trendiness, and a value price point is targeting a broader demographic, meaning color preferences are less defined.

Figure 1 was developed to better convey some of the relationships between card lines and the amount of color variation allowed for customer preferences and cultural trends. Figure 1 ranks several Season and Everyday card lines by average price point, and also qualitatively assigns a rating for the level of customer-defined color preference and the amount of trend variation experienced over time. The range for the average price point for the product lines selected was \$3.70 to \$1.75. “Preference,” for the purposes of this discussion, means the expectation of the card recipient, so a highly-defined set of preferences equates to a tighter tolerance for our color reproduction workflow, which also represents those lines with the highest degree of difficulty during execution. “Trend variation” is the amount of color variation that our card lines must provide to match the preferences associated with a given product offering over time.

Product Line	Category	Preferences	Trend Variation	Rank
Mother's Day	Season	High	High	1
Valentine's Day	Season	High	Med	2
Father's Day	Season	Med	Med	3
Wedding Anniversary	Everyday	Med	Med	4
Feminine Birthday	Everyday	High	High	5
Christmas	Season	High	Low	6
Masculine Birthday	Everyday	Med	Med	7
Easter	Season	Med	Med	8
Anyone's Birthday	Everyday	Med	High	9
Lifelines/Religious	Everyday	Med	Low	10
Baby	Everyday	Med	Med	11
Halloween	Season	Low	Low	12
Thanksgiving	Season	Low	Low	13
St. Patrick's	Season	Low	Low	14

Figure 1. Color Preference and Trends rating for various card lines.

Figure 1 summarizes several relationships that are commonly understood about the social expressions customer. These relationships are summarized as follows:

**Generalization of Color Preferences for Social Expressions**

- Season Cards tend to have a higher customer expectation for color than Everyday
- Cards that target women have a more clearly defined color expectation than cards that target men. This is true in both Season and Everyday cards.
- Color preferences for cards increase as the age of your audience increases.
- The average price point of a card correlates to quality expectations of the card.

### **Generalization of Color Trends for Social Expressions**

- Color trends are easier to incorporate and more prevalent in Everyday Cards.
- Color trends in Everyday cards relate more to their suitability for the occasion than to the price point.
- Younger audiences tend to prefer trendier palettes.
- Less serious cards, such as Humor, tend to be trendier also

### **Author Biography**

Becky received her BFA in Advertising Design and Illustration from the Ringling School of Art. Her tenure within the social expression industry has spanned more than 30 years, including positions such as Illustrator, Designer, Graphics Art Director, and Program Director. Becky is currently a Senior Art Director for Hallmark Cards, Inc.