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We Woof You a Merry Christmas And a Happy Mew Year

Holiday Cards for Pets Give Fido a Chance to Speak; Tip: 'Avoid Drooling' at Dinner

By Ellen Byron

Updated Dec. 17, 2010 11:21 a.m. ET

Laura Henderson's Christmas card photo shoot required professional lighting, multiple poses on the living-room couch and a pile of dehydrated chicken-strip treats.

A close-up headshot of Fozzy, Ms. Henderson's flat-coat retriever and border-collie mix, is featured on the 100 cards she sent to friends and relatives this month.

HOLIDAY CARDS TO -- AND FROM -- PETS



Fozzy, a flat-coat retriever and border-collie mix, is featured on the 100 cards Laura Henderson sent to friends and relatives this month. BARK PET PHOTOGRAPHY

"People who know us know how central Fozzy is in our lives," says Ms. Henderson, a 39-year-old fund-raiser for nonprofit organizations in San Jose, Calif. Fozzy included her own greetings to recipients' pets, even cats, Ms. Henderson says. "I use my left hand so it looks like she did it," she says.

Dogs and cats are joining in the annual ritual of sending season's greetings. Card makers are rolling out designs that enable people to send cards from their pets to commemorate nearly every occasion that humans do.

"Pets have become important spokespeople for us within our families," says Rochelle Lulow,

creative director of editorial at American Greetings Corp. "They get to see and hear what everyone is doing and have their own thoughts as well, we'd like to think—that's what these cards express."

A new American Greetings card this year reads "Meowy Christmas—It only takes a moment to meow, 'I love you,' but I'll take nine lives to show you how much!" Another reads, "You're the one who fills my empty bowl, who always has time to throw my ball and who scratches behind my ears," illustrated with a picture of a ribbon-tied bone.

"They are saying what we want to hear," says Ms. Lulow. "We like to think that's what they're thinking and what they'd like to tell us."

There are also cards to send to pets, such as the one from Hallmark Cards Inc. that says, "For a great cat." Inside is the sentiment: "This Christmas, hope all your favorite dreams come true!"

Get-well cards for dogs to send to one another are big sellers at Godfrey's-Welcome to Dogdom boutique in Mohnton, Pa. "We have a play park here so dogs really get to know other dogs," says store owner Barb Emmett. "If a dog is injured or sick they like to send cards to each other."

Thank you cards are also popular. "The dogs send them to their groomer, trainer, veterinarian and sitter, especially during the holidays," says Ms. Emmett. "I have a selection of Mother's Day and Father's Day cards from the dog, but I want it to be bigger next year."

The etiquette specialists at online stationer Tiny Prints usually handle calls about how to properly address wedding invitations. But lately, the company is fielding calls from pet owners seeking advice on appropriate ways to include animals in their holiday cards.

"We recommend putting the dog or cat name in parentheses to be playful," says Anna Fieler, Tiny Prints' vice president of marketing. But if the pet "has been a member of the family for a long time, many people don't feel the need to qualify it and just list the pet's name."

Addressing cards to a recipient's pet can ease the potential minefield of mixed families with multiple surnames, Ms. Fieler says one customer recommended. "Pets don't have last names, so it can divert any tension."

Tiny Prints started carrying pet-specific greetings after noticing customers adapting human cards for their dogs and cats. Now, the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based company sells pet birth announcements and party invitations. Valentine's Day cards from pets are in the works for next year.

Dog Speak Cards, based in Wilmington, N.C., sold out its holiday cards in November, says Connie Hillmann, owner and assistant to the CEO, which is her dog, Kirby. The "Holiday Tips from the Dog" card includes advice like "act like you enjoy kissing the relatives" and "avoid drooling during Christmas dinner."

Some 50% of Dog Speak's cards are written in the voice of a dog, including misspellings like "happee birfdaaa." Ms. Hillmann says the company's sales have doubled in each of the five years she has been in business.

Creating personal pet cards often includes ambitious costuming. Sandy Groth of Dorchester, Wis., spent three weeks sewing elf and Santa garb for her three cats, but they refused to wear the suits with attached booties. Now, with Christmas fast approaching, 55-year-old Ms. Groth is paring down to elf and Santa hats instead. "I'm at my wits end," she says.

Ms. Groth's horse will wear the same costume as last year. "He doesn't mind reindeer antlers," she says.

Bark Pet Photography in Los Angeles tries to give dogs a minimal look during its "Howliday" photo sessions. "We avoid the dog in a basket with elf ears on," says co-owner and photographer Kim Rodgers. "We prefer to focus on the personality instead."

Hallmark also encourages pet costumes by including photos of them in the sample designs on its website, where consumers create their own cards. Dressing up pets sometimes brings advantages beyond humor. "Pet costumes can help incorporate interfaith families—maybe a dog or cat has a menorah on its head," says Olivia Cytrynowicz, editorial director of Hallmark's personalized greetings.

Hallmark's pet cards, which include greetings like "Happy Mew Year," and "Merry Yips-mas," try to avoid overly serious or sentimental messages, she says. Still, the company sells one signed "Love," followed by a cat paw print.

Some can't resist bragging just a bit in a Christmas letter. Bean, the 15-month-old golden retriever of Jim and Michelle Drager, who own a strategic-planning firm in Morgantown, Pa., sent his own Christmas letter to the other seven members of his litter who now live with their respective owners.

Highlights of Bean's year: jumping in the snow, learning to swim and hunting for pheasants. "I still have a rug fetish and I chew every corner," Bean confessed. "It keeps the humans from buying a new one."

The letter includes an update on family. "Michael and Megan (my human siblings) are doing great! Mommy Michelle and Daddy Jim can't believe they are growing up and are so proud of them." Bean added to his canine clan that he hopes "Santa Paws brings you all that you wish for this year." He also asked them to keep in touch.

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