Birthday greetings are good for business

by Michael Stetz

The call came in the morning of my birthday. Had to be Mom, I figured. Mom always calls on my birthday.

Or maybe it was one of my two brothers, or my best friend from Baltimore.

BUSINESS BIRTHDAY GREETINGS - These days, some companies are doing a better job of remembering and sending birthday wishes than family and friends. CNS Illustration by Cristina Martinez Byvik. Or maybe still it was my buddy Jeff, from work, who never calls on my birthday, but remembered this year and decided to give me a call. The big lug.

I picked up the phone.

I said hello.

And indeed it was somebody calling to wish me a happy birthday.

The president of the car dealership from which I bought my car two years ago had thought to send me a recorded birthday wish.

He beat Mom to the punch but, then again, I was her second-born child. And I did drop a load of cash on that car.

Go figure.

These days, some companies are doing a better job of remembering and sending birthday wishes than family and friends.

Of course, they're using computer programs and other high-tech wizardry to make sure the message is sent on time. Mom still just uses the calendar she gets every year from the grocer, usually featuring something like "Birds of the Chesapeake."

Plus, the companies have added motivation to remember your big day: They want to keep you as a customer.

My wife proved even more popular than me. She had a birthday two days before mine and got cards from Southwest Airlines and Banana Republic. Banana Republic chipped in a $15 gift card. I only got her a lousy 12-pack.

Thanks, Banana Republic. Thanks a lot.

"It's just another way for us to connect with our customers," said Kris Marubio, a Banana Republic spokeswoman.

Birthday greetings are automatically sent to those who use Banana Republic credit cards, Marubio said. The birthday information is gleaned from the application. People seem to like the little thought, she said. About one-third of the coupon offers are redeemed.

David Grundstrom, president of Marvin K. Brown Auto Center, in San Diego said his company started the birthday policy a couple of years ago.

Mass media is growing more fragmented, Grundstrom said, meaning big ads aren't as effective. With this approach, the company is certain to reach the people it wants, particularly loyal customers.

I've got to say, the birthday wishes from the companies aren't bad. They don't give you cards with bad jokes about the maladies of aging, such as balding, growing waistlines, erectile dysfunction, wrinkles ... BEING ANOTHER YEAR CLOSER TO DEATH.

The card from Banana Republic says, "Close your eyes and make a wish." Inside, it continues, "We had a feeling you'd want one of those."

I'm tearing up.

Frequent shoppers at ACE Hardware get greetings and a coupon - for $5 or $10 - on their birthdays, too.

"We've had people say that nobody else remembered their birthdays, but then this showed up," said Michael Moore, marketing manager for the store in San Diego.

Personally, I'm a little bummed that Southwest remembered my wife's birthday but not mine.

What, the company likes her better?

Customers who are members of Rapid Rewards - the airline's frequent flier program - get the cards, said Chris Mainz, a spokesman. I told him I'm a Rapid Rewards member, too.

The airline has nothing against me, Mainz assured. Apparently, the airline sends the birthday cards to people who have reached a certain threshold with miles.

So I'm going to start booking the family flights.

I'm not getting any younger.

I need all the love I can get.

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