

Why Groundhog Day Cards?

Every year in late January we send out about 650 greeting cards (~275 physical cards and 375 e-cards) to friends, colleagues, associates, suppliers, past present and prospective clients and sponsors. It's a pretty obvious marketing ploy.

As a promotion strategy it meets a bunch of tests: Unique, surprising, use of humour, repetition, subliminal messages, ... Business Schools would surely love to write up the AFS GHD campaigns for a Marketing case study. Psychology Departments too, I suppose.

But why Ground Hog Day? Surely this sort of attention seeking won't be taken seriously.

I had a client tell me this recently and I thought, too many people in organizational life are too tightly wound, especially managers. A sense of humour is actually a management competency, but I'm not sure he gets it.

Groundhog Day is just the opposite. It's supposed to remind us we are human and not to take ourselves so seriously.

But maybe it's me. Despite the evident brilliance in these cards I've also had indications over the years that the receiver doesn't quite 'get it', either in general, or perhaps in particular with a given card. (And if one person gives you feedback you can bet ten others are wondering in silence. Hence this note.)

I have to admit, my sense of humour can be a bit eccentric, if not to say esoteric.

So why Groundhog Day cards.

I've had a fascination with Groundhog Day for as long as I can remember. Though it is a (very) minor event in the calendar of noteworthy dates, it has always ranked high for me; even as a teenager, it was right up there with April Fool's Day! The morning radio always made a bit of a show of it – groundhog sees his shadow: six more weeks of winter! And this was long before Bill Murray's movie, Groundhog Day. (Hey, I'm a lot older than Bill Murray's movie!)

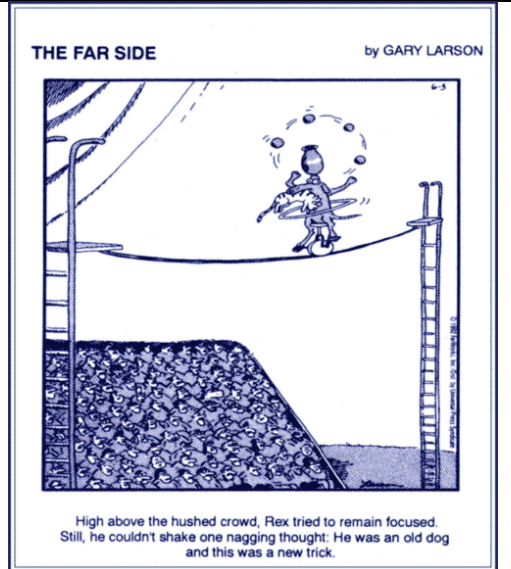
I think it's because I've never been much of a fan of winter and Groundhog Day was a signal that the end was in sight, even if he did see his shadow. (I wonder how many readers have noticed I spell Ground Hog Day, three different ways? I wonder if they wonder whether it's a mistake or purposeful. I then wonder if they wonder why?)

I'm also a bit of a nationalist. (Bill Murray set his movie on Punxsutwamy: I wonder if Dan Ackroyd would have made it in Canada?) So I chose Wiarton Willie as my sacred muse. I suppose I could have chosen Shubenacadie Sam in Nova Scotia or Brandon Bob, but I am a loyal Ontarian. (Apparently Thunder Bay has a local prognosticating

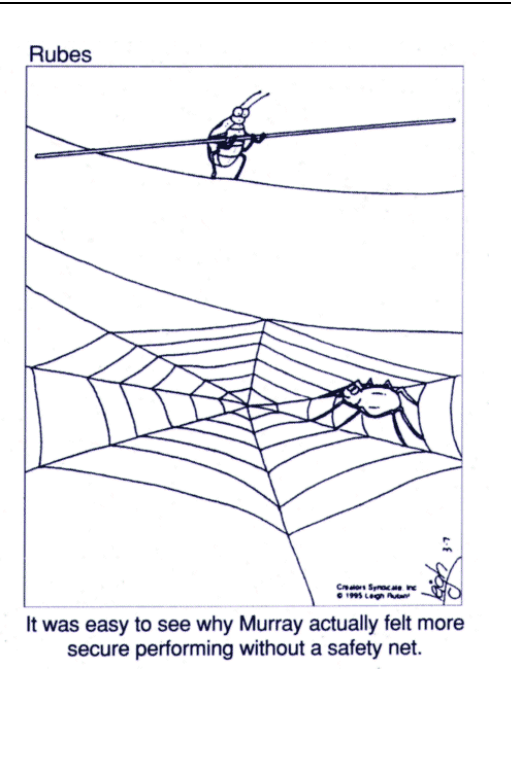
woodchuck but he can't be found on Google.) Wiarton Willi is also distinguished in being albino!

(Sadly, confused novice recipients of my annual greetings mistake the white Wiarton marmot for a baby Polar Bear!)

My first promotional greeting card, January 1994, had nothing to do with Groundhog Day – though it landed on many people's desks on February 2. I had started AFS Consulting as of January 15 1993 but it wasn't really fully launched and announced until the following year. That first offering was 'borrowed' from the genius Gary Larson of Far Side fame. I thought the message was a perfect metaphor for me in my new venture, even tying in my tight rope logo.



The following January I sent out another notice with the tight rope theme; this too was 'borrowed' from a commercial source. I was not thinking GroundHog Day then but I was conscious that the timing of my promotional was away from the traditional Christmas Card rush. (Why tight rope theme you might be asking? Have you noticed the AFS logo?)



By 1996 I had discovered my cartoonist the very clever Jim Turner of Pixelgraph Studio; and my own creative genius. Because I had established a pattern of releasing my greeting cards post Yule I introduced the groundhog theme in this card but held on to the tight rope idea as well. I called the groundhog George; I don't remember why: Georgie the Gopher I suppose.



GEORGE SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN JOHNNIE'S DARE. NOW HE WAS AFRAID TO LOOK DOWN; BUT IF HE DIDN'T, HOW WOULD HE KNOW IF THERE WILL BE SIX MORE WEEKS OF WINTER?

In 1997 Georgie had become Woody (the woodchuck?).



"Woody, still strung out from the last holiday, longs for six more weeks of hibernation."

In the summer of 1997 I was doing a project for Parks Canada that took me to Tobermory – and you have to go by Wiarton to get there. There is a Wiarton Willie Statue in the town park overlooking Georgian Bay; I had to have a souvenir photo with 'him'. And that became the theme for my 1998 card. (Interesting to note that I have intended to return to Wiarton for a true Groundhog Day pilgrimage on the actual holy day in February. Turns out that is a very difficult challenge – it's a nine hour trip from Ottawa no matter what mode of transportation you choose and winters can be very unpredictable. Still one day...)



Doug Jordan, seeking inspiration and guidance for himself, makes his first pilgrimage to Warton Ontario, July 1997

By 1999 we were getting much more in touch with the true meaning of Groundhog's Day - forecasting spring. We also tied the message on the card with the business offerings of AFS Consulting. Smart. True marketing genius. That's why I'm so rich now.



"YES, WE DO CLIMATE SURVEYS, BUT FOR EMPLOYEE SURVEYS, I SUGGEST YOU CALL AFS CONSULTING"

Turns out 1999 was a tragic year for Wiarthon Willie – he died! The story made CNN and I received emails and condolences cards from around the world! Cynically the Wiarthon Willie Committee made much mileage of the event, and extended it through the year as they launched a nation-wide search for a new albino marmot. As it happens they found three, in Ottawa. The significance of the 2000 Card is now obvious, even though pretty obscure to many recipients that year.



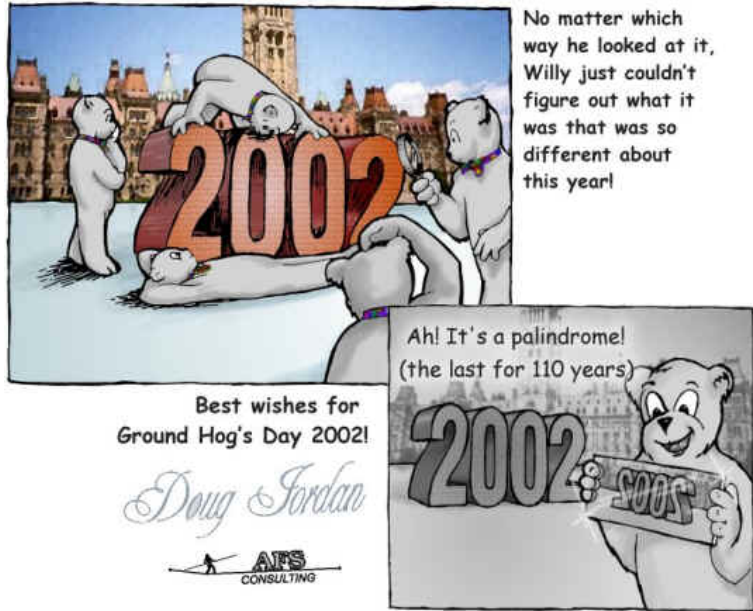
OF COURSE, IF THE CITY FATHERS HAD DONE SUCCESSION PLANNING, THEY MIGHT HAVE AVOIDED THESE COSTS

The 2001 card played on the naïveté of the novice prognosticator, Willi Junior, up against the savvy American, Punxsatwany Phil!

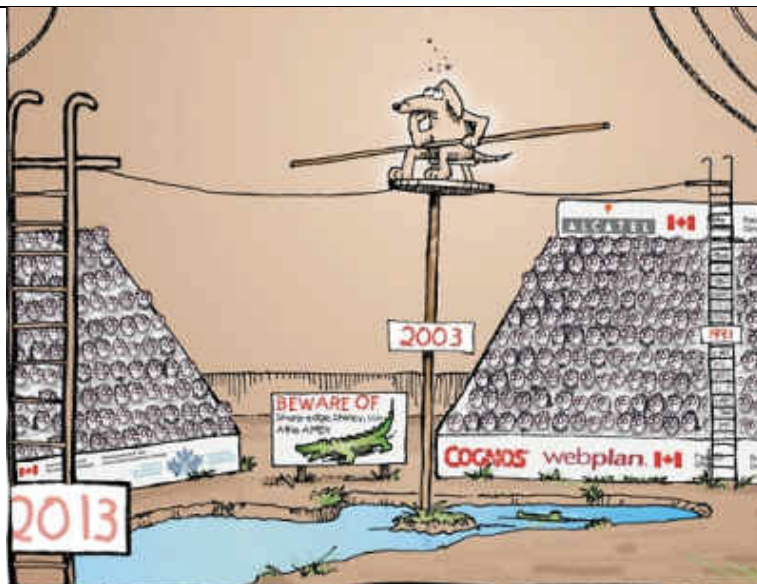


YOUNG WILLY, NAIVE ABOUT THE COMPETITION MAKES A FATAL ERROR!

2002 saw a completely new idea as well as insight into the idiosyncratic mind of Doug Jordan. For a long time I have been fascinated with palindromes; 2002 (and maybe even February 2, 2002) makes a fine a palindrome. Here are a few other examples: kayak; 'Able was I ere I saw Elba' (Napoleon's lament!).



In 2003 AFS Consulting celebrated its 10th anniversary. This brought us an echo of Gary Larson's 'old dog, new tricks' cartoon. I needed to do a little reflecting.



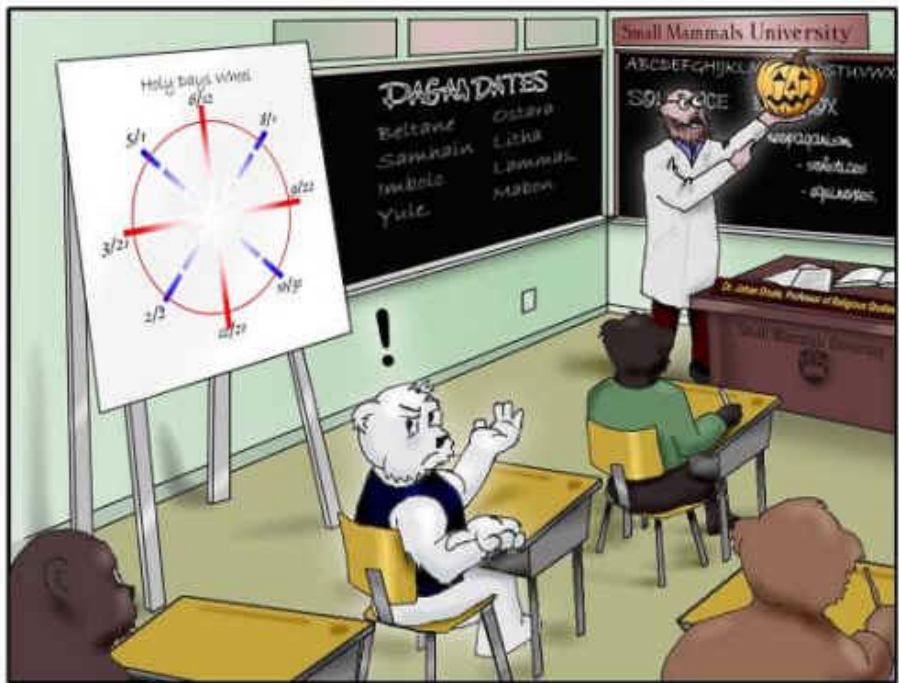
"High above the hushed crowd Rex paused to reflect. After 10 years in the game he now realized, he may be an old dog, but he had learned some new tricks: Keep moving, and ... Don't look down!"

And then we come to the evil marmot, based on the true account of the death of two of the albino groundhogs, apparently from flooding of their artificial habitats.



WHEN SUCCESSION PLANNING FAILS!

2005 is the most educational card in the series. Here I begin to expose my religious roots and try to get the faithful reader to realize GroundHog Day is an ancient rite, much older than Bill Murray, or even the Wiarnton City Fathers. Even the Christian celebration of 'Candlemas' on February 2 is a borrowing from pagan traditions of England and northern Europe. This piece also brings into focus the joke of the groundhog and his shadow: either way, it will be six weeks until March 21!



"Suddenly it dawned on young Willy - Ground Hog Day may not be the most significant event in the year."

2006 was an election year in Canada. In this cartoon I got to tweak the noses of the Liberal, NDP and Green Parties, and at the same time, ironically, belittle Willie's forecasting ability.



WILLIE'S CONFIDENCE IS SHAKEN TO THE CORE...
HOW WILL ANYONE EVER TAKE HIS SPRING PREDICTION SERIOUSLY?

Tragedy struck again in 2006 – Willie Junior died, obviously prematurely. Or, was it another cold case? In any event it gave us the opportunity to celebrate death and rebirth, endings and beginnings. (There's even a very obscure insider reference on Willie II's tombstone.) With this card I also sought to promote AFS Consulting as a provider of change management services.



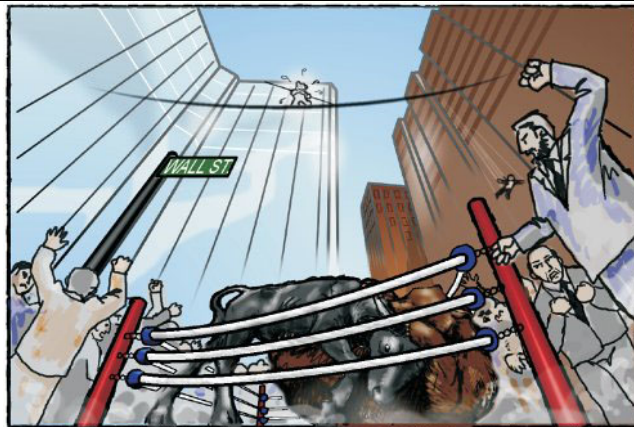
"Still in denial over the loss of his friend, Rex resists the call of the new prognosticator."

With young Willi III now in the role, the 2008 card seems to reflect the career angst of an entire Gen Y, maybe. Edgy, sexy, even bordering on political incorrectness (evil cigarette), this is the new age of aggressive marketing. (Was that also the year of the 'wardrobe malfunction'?)



It being his first year on the job, Young Willie, III, is uncertain which February holiday he's supposed to be celebrating.

Then the Great Recession of 2009! Willi goes to the big smoke and finds out how frightening life in the city can be; even more so when you read about it in the papers.



"It began to occur to Willi that people expected more than a Spring forecast!"

2010 brought a new twist. I had thought of putting Willi on a park bench, cup in hand, as an out-of-work prognosticator. However, my faithful readers already tired of the Great Recession! needed a fresh idea. I returned to my spiritual roots and resurrected another pagan day in the calendar. I wonder how many people actually looked up Lammas in wikipedia?



"As pagan holidays go, Willie figured this mid-winter one was no picnic."

Best wishes for Ground Hog's Day 2010!
(only 6 weeks till Spring; 6 months till Lammas!)

Doug Jordan

And to reinforce that idea, I issued my first mid-summer card, to refresh the AFSC presence, and celebrate Lammas Day, or Civic Holiday, or Simcoe Day, or Col. By Day.



"Willy began to think the mid-summer holiday was no picnic either!"

Best wishes for Lammas Day:
Only six more weeks of Summer
(and six months till Groundhog Day!)

The 2011 card is a result of a very loyal reader's idea: he thought those various prognosticating marmots were in cahoots, a cartel of spring forecasters: Punxsutawney Phil, Shubenacadie Sam and Wiarton Willi on the same card, cooking their spring prognostications, and risking exposure for their conspiracy, assuming Julian Assange ever gets out of jail.
 (This card is best read full screen.)



**Best wishes for Ground Hog's Day 2011
 (only 6 weeks 'till Spring; 6 months 'till Lammas!)**

The Lammas Day follow-up was equally obscure.



Again this year, Willi finds the midsummer holiday is no picni

Best Wishes for Lammas Day 2011

Doug Jordan

In the summer of 2011 Doug Jordan found himself in Wiarthon again, and true to his faith, paid a visit to the Wiarthon Shrine. And here is the evidence in the 2012 GHD Card. But be careful of faith wherein photoshop may be in play.



In July 2011 Doug made his second Pilgrimage to Wiarthon. He didn't see the little marmot; but he felt his presence.

Best wishes for Ground Hog's Day 2012!

Doug Jordan

For Lammas Day 2012 I wanted to build on the 'religious icons' theme and encourage faithful readers to remember Willie, even in August. This card shamelessly borrowed an idea from the Non Sequitur comic strip <http://www.arcamax.com/thefunnies/nonsequitur/>. I don't remember who Wiley Miller used as his third down-and-out icon, but it certainly was not Wiarthon Willie. (I thought my cartoonist, Jim Turner, did an excellent job of this rendition.)



CELEBRATING THE MID-SUMMER HOLIDAY IS ONE SMALL WAY TO KEEP WILLIE IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS.

Best Wishes for Lammas Day 2012

Doug Jordan

The 2013 card brought two messages, or maybe more: Another decade celebrating AFS Consulting in business, and perhaps another milestone. My purpose was really only the former – taking stock after 20 years, but many readers thought I was predicting my own retirement.

Nonsense! Or?



It turned out that the winter of 2013, despite so-called climate change, was particularly harsh and seemed never ending. I began to receive threatening emails asking for my or Willie's head over his spring prognostication (does anybody actually pay attention to what Wiarthon Willie says? never mind what Doug Jordan says?) and I was obliged to send out a mass email retractor, 'Tragedy Comes to Wiarthon':

Dear 'Friends'

I'm sure all of you are interested in the latest developments out of Wiarthon.

Embarrassed by his false prediction of an Early Spring, Willie at first tried to put on a brave face of it:



But, as this wretched spring continued and he faced unrelenting disdain from his legions of [former] followers, Willie finally succumbed to his remorse:



Or did he?

The Lammas Day follow-up was a vague attempt to dispel the rumours of Willi's (or AFS Consulting's) demise, somewhat like Mark Twain. People loved it, even if they didn't really understand. I think the reference to Twinkies was a bit of trivia that escaped most. Sherlock Holmes, maybe. But I felt a reference to the resurrection of Jesus as the Comeback Kid was likely to be a bit too provocative, even for me.



2013 did see a renewal of sorts for AFS Consulting. We had been engaged in a major Harassment Investigation and decided this should form a new service offering. So the 2014 card both sought to dispel the idea of imminent retirement and announce the new practice. Another Marketing coup!

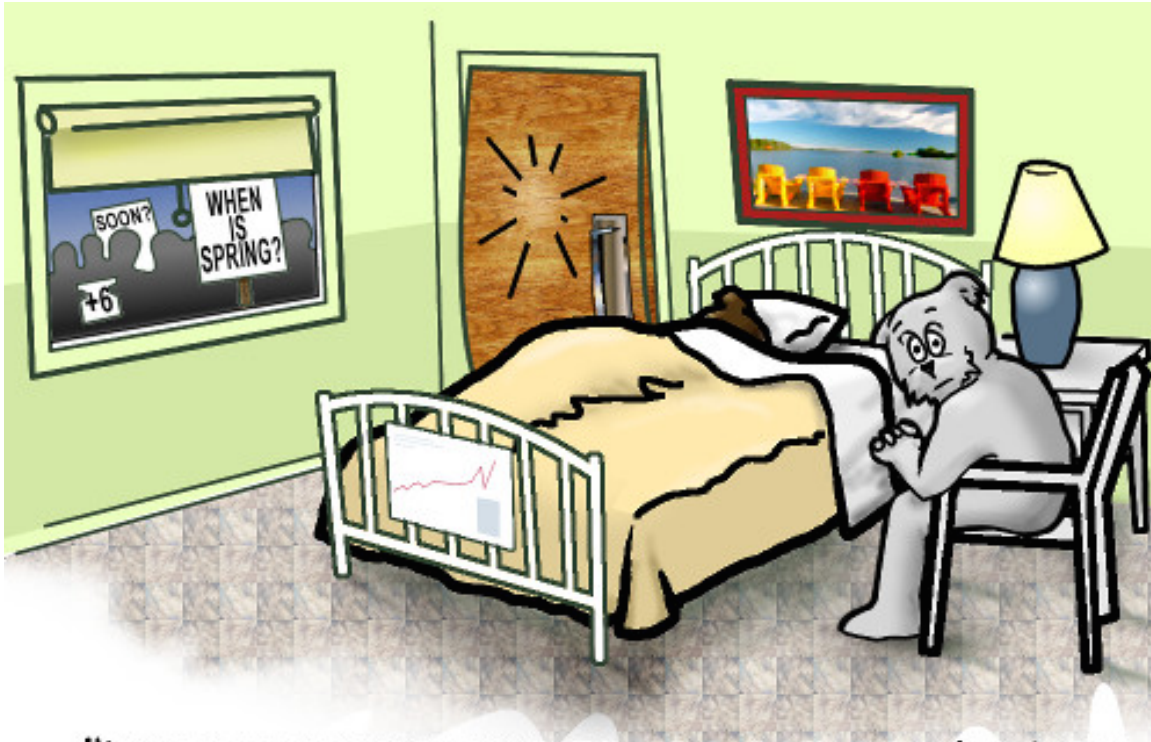
(The insider joke in this card are the kids, which my 7 year old granddaughter got right away, her 5 year old cousin had to be told.)



And the Lammas Day follow-up:



SIX MONTHS LATER, WILLIE IS STILL TRYING TO SORT THE KIDS OUT!



"WILLIE BEGINS TO REALIZE THE GRAVITY OF SIX MORE WEEKS... OF ANYTHING!"

The 2015 GHD Card is somber, some would even say dark. Humour with a message; even dark irony can be funny. Most regarded it as a lament for the long and dreary winter of 2014; and dread for a 2015 repeat. That was my intent for the casual reader. But for my more astute followers, or those who know me a bit more intimately, there is awareness that these GHD cards are sometimes (all the time?) autobiographical, at least to some degree. The 'hidden message' in this year's card is that Willi's spouse is suffering with a serious disease, the future of which is uncertain. In these circumstances the wait for Spring is the least of Willi's, or Doug's, concerns. The reader is now in suspense for what news Lammas Day 2015 will bring, or Groundhog Day 2016.

Remember, the genius of advertising is not to be clever, necessarily, but to be repetitive!