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Greeting cards off script

By Stephanie Mansfield

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The card looks innocent enough: a Christmas package with festive ribbon and red wrapping paper. The message is brief and heartfelt. Even sentimental. "Christmas brings out the child in all of us." But then look inside. "The hostile, selfish, parking-space stealing child."

Rude, often crude and definitely created for shock value, many boutique greeting card companies this season are pushing the envelope and piling up profits with edgy, insensitive and tasteless depictions of the baby Jesus, President Bush, even naked women waiting for Santa Claus.

Beyond politically incorrect, many of the best-sellers are downright subversive.

One is the wildly popular greeting card by NobleWorks, depicting the late Pope John Paul II wearing a red vestment and lying in state. Behind him is a doctored photograph of Mr. Bush, saying, "What happened to Santa?"

"What's funny to some is not always funny to another," said Ron Kanfi, president of the Hoboken, N.J., company that has in the past riled religious conservatives with its outrageous and dark sense of humor.

"What was once offensive is rapidly moving mainstream," he said, citing the glut of sex and freewheeling lifestyles on prime-time television and in Hollywood movies. "Porn is the norm."

At the gift store Wake Up Little Suzie on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C., a card depicting Mr. Bush as the baby Jesus surrounded by the Three Kings comes with the message, "Oh come let us abhor him." It's the store's best seller.

"We've had to re-order three times already," said owner Suzie Lihn, noting that the city voted 90 percent Democratic in the 2004 presidential election.

Then there's the "Iraquettes," Vice President Dick Cheney, Mr. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice posed as the famed New York Radio City Music Hall's Rockettes.

Greeting card companies -- a \$7.5 billion-a-year industry -- typically do 60 percent of their annual sales during the holiday season. The so-called "alternative cards" -- produced and sold by small, artistically driven companies -- still lag behind the giants: Hallmark and American Greetings. But the message is clear.

"I think people in general are looking for ways for paper products to express their sense of humor," said Ebony Hurr, owner of Pulp Couture Inc. a Chicago-based seller of offbeat cards. "There's so much tip-toeing around Christmas."

Pulp's best-seller this year is a card that depicts an ashtray with three cigarette butts. The message: "Ahhhhh, the

familiar sense of guilt, regret and group hostility."

Inside: "Must be the holidays."

The card companies are equally offensive enterprises. No one escapes ridicule. They skewer Jews, Christians, blacks, blind people, fat people, old people, metrosexuals, mullets, Frosty the Snowman, elves, reindeer and especially the baby Jesus. Pets are also popular targets, especially cats.

One of Pulp's offerings is a Nativity scene with Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger, looking up at Joseph. The caption, coming from the baby's mouth, reads, "You're not my real father."

The buyers, who Mr. Kanfi said are mostly yuppies, grew up in a time when Christmas cards were safe and dull -- sentimental snowy scenes with a thin layer of vellum and gold leaf signatures. Then came the Internet, with breezy e-cards and risqué images. And while they may not send out the rebellious cards as their official holiday greeting, young professionals will pick up humorous cards for co-workers and friends, often at \$3 or more a pop.

One popular card this year features the ideal, happy American family, circa "Father Knows Best." The campy 1950s tableau shows a perfectly coifed Mom, chiseled Dad in topcoat and hat and ruddy-cheeked daughter and son, all toting light brown leather suitcases.

But don't be fooled.

The greeting reads: "You better have a Merry Christmas or we'll come visit and stay till New Year!"

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