

Giants say there's no rhyme, nor reason, for greeting card market fight

BY ADRIAN HUMPHREYS

Happy Louis Riel Day? Condolences on the Quebec referendum? Sorry to hear about the brain drain?

That may not be exactly the kind of Canadian content we'll see, but a group of independent greeting card manufacturers has filed a complaint with the Competition Bureau of Canada and written letters to Sheila Copps, the Heritage Minister, demanding some federal regulation of pre-written spontaneous sentiment.

Greeting cards — or the business of social expression, as some manufacturers call it — is a \$600-million a year industry in Canada, and almost three-quarters of those sales are of cards from just two companies, Hallmark and Carlton. Both are subsidiaries of American companies.

As the competition between the two giants heats up, those companies are muscling the small, independent companies off of the shelves of the large retail drug stores where most cards are sold, said Terry McTavish, owner of Pendragon Prints, a small photographic card company in Burnaby, B.C.

The independents say the big manufacturers are making special arrangements with some of the largest sales outlets. Most of the deals involve some sort of exclusivity clause, including deals in which Hallmark supplies display racks in a store, and competing cards are not allowed to be stacked on them. Carlton refused to talk

about its business contracts.

The independent manufacturers, some just family-run cottage industries, have little clout to offer better deals than Carlton or Hallmark, said Mr. McTavish. So in an attempt to reclaim some of the lost ground, Mr. McTavish is trying to organize 150 independent manufacturers to mount a campaign to convince the government that greeting cards should be declared a cultural product.

"We need to have our own words and images out there and have them reflected back at us. You expect to hear Barenaked Ladies, Leonard Cohen, or depending on your age, Anne Murray, in the music industry; you expect to see Canadian content on the book shelves. But you go into where most of the cards are sold and what do you find? Just Hallmark or Carlton," said Mr. McTavish.

The two greeting card giants feel the attack from the independents is unwarranted.

"You make it sound like the World Wrestling Federation," said Kendall Wigoda, spokeswoman for Carlton Cards. "We have Canadian content. Approximately 20% of our product offering is Canadian. Very Canadian."

Garth Jay, spokesman for Hallmark Canada, said his company also produces plenty of CanCon.

"We have our own in-house artist. We have a set of boxed cards from Canadian painters, a line of 30 cards of Quebec landscapes. All of our French cards are created here in Canada."

Talk of cultural regulation of greeting cards is bizarre, said Ms. Wigoda.

"People buy cards to express sentiments they wish to convey. Birthday cards, I miss you, sorry somebody important to you died, I'm thinking of you — to me this is not about Canadian content."

National Post

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Terry McTavish, owner of a Canadian card company



SOUTHAM NEWS

A Canadian-produced greeting card.