Father Christmas’s Secretariat: Nurturing the Corporate Soul by Serving Children or Capturing a Global Child Icon?

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This paper introduces a first genealogy and development over more than 50 years of the ‘Father Christmas’s Secretariat’ launched by the French Postal Ministry in 1962 and transferred to Libourne, a small town near Bordeaux, in 1967. In order to prepare the ground for the national celebration of the 50th anniversary of the ‘Father Christmas’ Secretariat’, the Historical Committee of the French Postal Service, with the financial support of the Mail Department, has commissioned a research study to retrieve all the available documentation likely to help reconstitute the genealogy and development of this unique service whose reputation is worldwide. The research we have conducted reveals some conflicts and paradoxes with regard to the process by which this original service developed even before its official institutionalization in 1962.

The historical method used systematically to gather archival data, documents and testimonials from witnesses who have run this postal service located in Libourne, consisted of:
- gaining access to and exploring several primary archival sources (administrative internal documents, a set of the most interesting letters, drawings, and envelopes sent by children to Santa selected each year by the secretariat), and public data (interviews on national audio-visual media, public press releases and articles, etc.) that were located in different places (Paris, Fontainebleau, Bordeaux, Libourne, etc.),
- selecting and scanning more than 4,000 pages of documents which have been loaded onto a unique, specially conceived database allowing a triangulation of documents, sources and a systematic documentation of 10 main interpretative lines,
- identifying and interviewing a series of 30 witnesses including former directors of Libourne’s Customer Services Department as well as former Ministers who managed the Postal Service in the 60’s and Corporate Directors in charge of mail or communication services,
- identifying and interviewing family members of the mail employees who, in the late 1940’s, in two small French villages, initiated the activity of answering children’s letters sent to Santa.

Among the paradoxes this research documents, it appears that the official creation of the ‘Father Christmas’s Secretariat’ by the French Postal Ministry in 1962, emerged initially as a secret and undercover initiative that local postal employees had been running for about 10 years in small towns. Although this adult initiative was child-centric and infused with love, it was conducted at the limits of the usual postal workload and actually infringed upon the strict regulations promulgated since the XVIIIth century to preserve the private nature of correspondence. For the Minister and top executives in the headquarters of the Postal and Telecommunications Ministry, launching this service offered the possibility of reintegrating deviant, secret and illegal practices, and presented an opportunity for building a communication strategy to strengthen the links between the public postal service and families by contributing to the magic and intimacy of Christmas family bonding. Our research reveals that the Ministry set up this new and totally free service without any communication – apart from the card sent to children on behalf of Santa - but with the aim of observing with extreme discretion its development over the first years mainly through word-of-mouth among parents and children. After some service interruptions in the 70’s due to external causes (national strikes, lack of funding, organizational problems, etc.), at the beginning of the 1980’s the Ministry systematized a communication policy. The increasing success of the secretariat in terms of number of letters received led to an increase in the means used, through to a complete reorganisation of the postal chain in order to ensure that all letters sent to Santa, from all over France or from foreign countries, were redirected
to the Libourne facilities. The technical evolution of the secretariat was compelled to adapt to children’s changing media practices, as an increasing number of messages were sent to Santa by e-mail. Moreover, as the reputation of the secretariat became more widespread overseas, it became necessary to hire multi-lingual secretaries able to answer letters from 160 different countries. To fulfil its mission of Public Service, the Secretariat reinforced its collaboration with school teachers who followed the official curriculum by introducing children to the art of writing letters, and created in 1992 an additional and specific letter aimed mainly at primary schools.

Albeit the mission of the secretariat was clearly stated as having no commercial objective, some postal employees enclosed commercial information about financial postal services for families in with the standard response letter on behalf of Santa. This risk of commercial diversion of a public service initiative was strongly rejected in internal administrative circulars, and managers resisted insistent pressures from marketing consultancy companies and professional toy manufacturers to have access to the content of the letters sent to Santa, and pressure from researchers to publicise children’s most-demanded brands. The marketing management of the French Postal Service never accepted breaking the rule of viewing correspondence as totally private and only the National Postal Museum and the Libourne Centre, in coordination with stamp collectors’ associations, have until now been allowed to keep and display a selection of letters sent to Santa for very special occasions.

Even though since the beginning advertising was totally excluded as a means for publicising the mission of the secretariat, several public relations events were regularly organized to invite journalists to visit the place where some of the 60 secretaries answered the letters received on Santa’s behalf. The global reputation of the secretariat dramatically increased following headlines in several famous international newspapers, for example, in the title page of the New York Times in 1986 and in the Komsomolskaya Pravda in 1989. The creation in 1996 of a dedicated website where children were able to access play activities, slowly provoked a transformation of Santa’s message addressed to children. Santa’s letter indicated the link to access the website and its community, and allowed more room for the logo of the French Postal Service - a progressive evolution which provoked some reluctant and even quite hostile reactions from parents and school teachers who simply accused the French Postal Service of privatising a global child icon.

The indisputable success of the secretariat measured by the exponential rise in the number of letters received has generated a very strong feeling of membership, gathering managers and employees in an active community actually proud to serve children’s imaginary worlds, and acting beyond hierarchical pressures within a kind of accepted organisational truce: “Santa is ours, he is not Coca-Cola’s!”.

However, despite huge efforts made to master all of the logistical aspects and to avoid any rupture in the delivery of the letters addressed to Santa to the Libourne Centre, an increasing feeling of dissatisfaction may crystallise within families as a growing number of letters remain unanswered every year...

Beyond its amazing global success for five decades, « Father Christmas’s Secretariat » developed through two opposing organizational movements: down-top child-centric initiatives and top-down corporate marketing and communication policies that have been nurturing ambivalent feelings among parents, teachers and employees... By tracing the genealogy of this quite unique public initiative, we illustrate the difficulty of achieving a progressive blurring of the limits between public service and corporate branding, between public relations and mere advertising... within the emerging ideology fostering drastic changes in Public Management practices.

References


