

MAIL CALL!

If you've ever been in the military stationed in a foreign land, you know how any contact from home is cherished. That was the inspiration for a unique graphic arts partnership. *by Joe Andrukitas*

Political opinions notwithstanding, Americans want to support the young men and women serving in our armed forces around the world. Many wonder what they can do to show that support. If you're among them, the next time you're surfing the Internet, stop by *LetsSayThanks.com*.

It's a modest little site that's had a big impact on a lot of people. Once there, you can choose one of about 60 postcards that were drawn by six-to-14 year-olds around the country, type in your own message, and have a printed version physically delivered, with others, in special care packages to U.S. troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

"We'll probably get a little bit of publicity out of the project, I guess, but that's not what drives it," says John Springthorpe, III., president of SouthData, Inc. of Mount Airy, N.C., which prints many of the postcards. "Years ago I was one of those Army guys, a long way from home, and I guess I remember *that* part of it. Any contact with your family or hometown is important and can make a difference. Just knowing that somebody else cares that you're...well...doing something."

Something Special

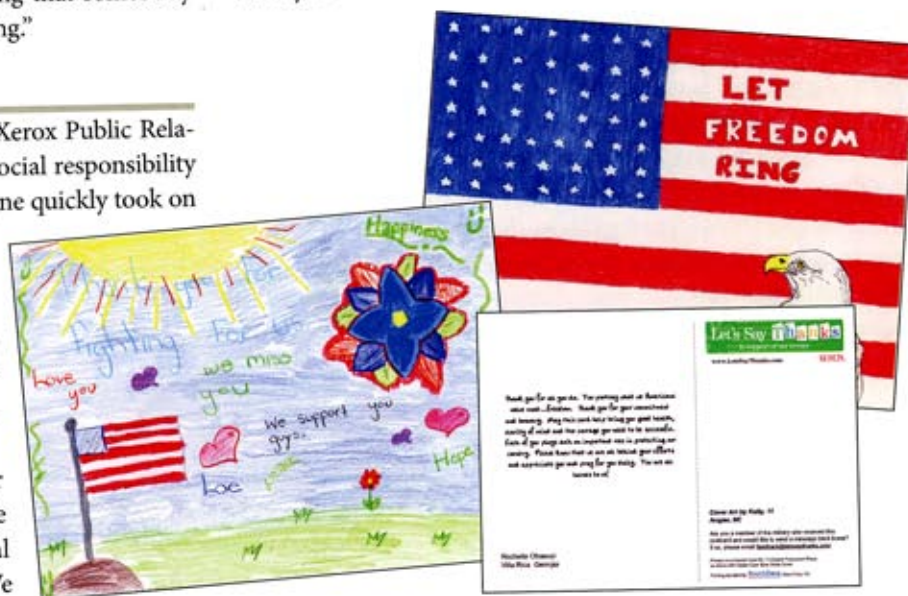
Let's Say Thanks was the brainchild of the Xerox Public Relations Department. Xerox has a number of social responsibility programs throughout the country but this one quickly took on a life of its own. "A little over a year ago, one of our local sales offices, in Atlanta, was looking for some ideas for the holidays that would interface with the public and also have a corporate responsibility aspect," explains Carl Langsenkamp, Public Relations manager for Xerox.

"There's a National Guard base near Atlanta that serves 11 states. So we asked the children and relatives of those National Guard men and women to draw pictures. We

received hundreds, then had a design professor from the Atlanta School of Design pick the best. We printed them out as postcards on a Xerox iGen3, rented space in a mall, and asked people to sign them. We printed about 8,000 cards, and in less than eight hours they were all signed. That's when we realized there was something special about this idea.

"To make it accessible to everyone, we put it on the Web and sent out a call to schools and to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts around the country, asking them to draw more pictures. The best were chosen and there are now about 60 different postcards on the site. The website changed everything. And, as of now, a little over 10-1/2 million visitors have submitted postcards."

SouthData got involved when Xerox began to get overwhelmed. "The program received some television coverage," says Springthorpe, "which generated a lot of traffic to the website. When I talked with Xerox, they said they had more than eight million responses at that time. That tasked their ability to do this in-house on a more or less part-time basis. So



it approached its Premier Partners, which we're one of, and asked if any of us could help. Xerox provides the paper and the shipping and our company contributes the labor and the click charge to do the work."

SouthData specializes in billing and communication products, providing postcards, newsletters, payment books, and statements for the healthcare, financial services, and real estate markets throughout the United States. Everything it does

"The smiles from soldiers who seldom received mail were priceless."

involves variable data, so this project was a natural.

We agreed to do a half-million of the postcards."

says Springthorpe. "And we said it would work best for us if we got 50,000 in a batch. The idea was that we would do them over a 10-week period, one batch per week. We're currently into our fourth batch and at the 200,000 level right now.

"Xerox sends us QuarkXPress files for the card backgrounds and we use XMPie software to integrate the variable data," he explains. "Each card contains the name and the hometown of the child who designed the card as well as the name and hometown of the person sending it. The data file triggers the different messages and the proper card background to use."

Spreading the Word

Visitors to the Let's Say Thanks website can choose from a variety of stock messages or compose a unique message of their own. According to Xerox, about a third of the messages are original. Every single card, though, is unique in that it is signed by the person sending it.

Some site visitors keep the messages short, others send a more detailed note

(messages can be up to 472 characters long), but all write from the heart. Here's a sampling:

From Don in Utah:

To an American Hero:

Please accept my gratitude and appreciation for the sacrifices you are making from a retired fighter pilot, having lived through the Great Depression, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and now this great conflict. May God bless you and your companions to endure and to serve righteously.

My thoughts and prayers are ever with you. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

From Brent in Louisiana:

You guys/girls are GREAT!!!! Hope you all come home soon

From Anthony in Texas:

Hi my name is Anthony, my mommy is typing this because I'm just a little boy. Thank you for fighting for our country, and keeping us from harm. You are in my prayers, all of you!! Come home safe and sound.

A host of celebrities, from Phyllis Diller and Wayne Newton to Notre Dame football coach Charlie Weis and *Survivor* winner Aras Baskauskas, have offered their support. "Whoopi Goldberg heard about the program, talked about it on her radio show, and called us," says Langsenkamp. "We sent her a supply of cards, she signed them, and we shipped them to the troops."

So far so good, but how do you get the cards to the troops. Where do you get a mailing list like that? Not necessary. Xerox enlisted the help of Andi Grant. You've probably heard of her.



▲ "Years ago I was one of those Army guys, a long way from home," says SouthData President John Springthorpe, III, left, whose company has agreed to print a half-million variable-data postcards for U.S. troops overseas. Above, Lisa Martin of the company's Shipping and Receiving Department packs some of the 200,000 cards already completed.

In December 2002, Andi's husband received his deployment orders for Operation Iraqi Freedom and she felt she also had to do something. She sent him care packages. She then began sending care packages to friends she knew in Iraq. Pretty soon she was getting requests.

Word spread and donations began arriving from all over the country, some on pallets in 18-wheelers. In 2004 she incorporated and chose the name *Give2TheTroops*. She opened branches in other states and, to date, her organization has supported hundreds of thousands of troops around the world with care packages.

Each time SouthData prints a batch of postcards, it ships them in cartons to Andi Grant. "The program is fantastic," says Grant. "I hear from troops on our website's blog, and even on *myspace.com*, about how much they love the care packages and

postcards that we include in them. It's a perfect partnership program and we feel Xerox and SouthData have gone above and beyond their corporate duty, paving the road for other patriotic companies to follow."

"It's all about basic human being-to-human being interaction," says Xerox' Langsenkamp, "about somebody filling out a card for someone overseas that they don't even know. It's not about the conflict, it's about the people involved."

Talk about a great use of variable printing. Talk about a perfect partnership. Xerox is expert at collecting data, SouthData is expert at printing it, and Andi Grant is expert at delivering the goods! For more information, to fill out your own card message, or to find out how you can help, visit www.Give2TheTroops.org or www.LetsSayThanks.com. ❖

Joe Andrukitas is NAPL Special Projects editor.

The Troops Respond

Whatever time and effort are put into programs such as Let's Say Thanks are repaid many times over by the reactions of the men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces receiving the messages of support from their fellow Americans back home. Here is a sampling:

"Receiving letters from all across the country was one of the greatest things that happened to me during deployment. It truly amazed me that a total stranger took the time to write me. The smiles that came from soldiers who seldom received mail were priceless. Packages that came from an organization that I had never heard of brought a smile from within, not because I got something, but because I knew someone appreciated me."

—Cpl. Larry Kessler, B Co 3 BSTB, deployed to Afghanistan

"It truly amazed me that a total stranger took the time to write."

"I am the mail clerk for my section and I can tell you every soldier is touched in some way when they receive a package from someone they don't know. Knowing that people back home have not forgotten us and do everything they can to contribute to a soldier makes me proud."

—Spc. Eric Shackelford, 149th BCT, U.S. Army, deployed to Iraq

"During 'mail call' we received dozens of letters, cards and boxes from people back in the States—people who we did not know personally. Reading the well wishes, thank you notes, and blessings, along with opening boxes filled with goodies, snacks, games, and toiletry items made us feel like children opening presents on Christmas morning."

—Sfc. Ronald G. Townsend, U.S. Army, just home from Iraq



▲ Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan, above, read their Let's Say Thanks cards from home; At left, members of the U.S. Air Force's 447th Expeditionary Group in Iraq with cards that came in the Give2The Troops packages they received.

Here's an email sent directly to SouthData, Inc., which prints the postcards, from a soldier whose hometown is Mount Airy, N.C., where SouthData is based.

"Most of you don't know me but I grew up in the Pine Ridge area of Mt. Airy just off Pine Ridge Road. I have been in the U.S. ARMY for almost 24 years now. I saw in the 'Mt. Airy News On-Line' what you were doing for the soldiers deployed and I wanted to write and say Thank You. It means a lot when folks from your HOMETOWN do something special. It really helps to get a letter from someone who appreciates the sacrifice here. I'm with the 1st Cavalry Division, Ft. Hood, Texas, and this is my second trip to Iraq. With God's help I'll retire in a couple years. My family will be moving back to Pine Ridge this spring....We plan on building a house in the Pine Ridge area and settling down... We don't get much computer time, so I'll say Thank You again and I appreciate you all a lot. Write me anytime. Take care, GOD Bless you all!!"

—Cw4 Johnny W. "Chuck" Johnson II, BCO, 115th BSB, 1BCT, 1CD, Camp Taji, Iraq