



SIGN
SALAD

Santa's little helpers

Brands bringing festive joy

December 2020



What makes for meaningful marketing during the festive season?

Whether singing Dickensian carols, setting out Christmas lights, or watching Die Hard, the form of Christmas traditions often seems to be less important than the fact that we each find special rituals to bring out our inner Christmas spirit. This year in particular will be a Christmas like no other, in which our usual traditions may not be accessible or possible to organise. While we may be wearing festive masks with our Christmas jumpers and toasting the new year over Zoom, the festive spirit will be more important than ever to get us through difficult times, however we are able to celebrate.

Deep down, whatever the celebration style, Christmas provides us with a temporary altered state of living and being, lighting up the darkest coldest months and letting us escape into a cheerful mindset at odds with the winter weather; it's up to each of us whether this is achieved through cocktails, extravagant light displays, or excessive consumption of mince pies.

In fact, rather than a single, pressurised event, it's often the little things from familiar brands that help ring in the festive spirit and put us in the Christmas state of mind. Many brands have helped create new shared traditions that demarcate the beginning of the season, through temporary brand transformations, or seasonal rituals in product offers and advertising.

In creating these traditions, brands assist us in changing our visual and sensory surroundings for a defined period of time and weaving Christmas throughout our days.

Images (Clockwise): House of Hackney Christmas decorations; Coca-Cola's iconic Father Christmas; Fenwick's 2020 online window display reveal.



2019 design

1. Starbucks - Red Cups

Perhaps one of the most recognisable of these traditions, seen out and about on many city streets, is the Starbucks seasonal “Red Cup.” Not everyone agrees on when the Christmas season officially begins, but many concede that one thing signals it each year: the ‘red cup’ replacing the classic white paper cup at Starbucks Coffee. While most brands create seasonal offerings or displays around the holidays, Starbucks has created a recognisable tradition that consumers look forward to with anticipation as though being given a gift by the company.

Each year Starbucks releases a new design, using upbeat, saturated shades of classic Christmas colours: most often red, green, and white. Each year the design is updated with a new illustration that draws on contemporary cues communicating brand values, while still adhering to the general theme of holiday spirit. In 2017, for example, the cups featured a hand-drawn, looping illustration in line with trendy millennial brands and media, communicating a youthful, modern but approachable holiday message. The 2019 iteration, however, featured these colours used bold geometric graphics – wide stripes and polka dots – and all-caps fonts. With finishes and offset colours reminiscent of letterpress cards and printmaker aesthetics, the recent cups also communicate a sense of unique craftsmanship and thoughtful artistry, ultimately communicating ‘Christmas’, but with a contemporary sense of authenticity and design.

Crucial to the success is that while these designs nod to the cultural significance of Christmas traditions through language such as “merry” and colours associated with the holiday, the designs do not directly represent the Christmas holiday.



Hyping the start of the holiday season: Starbucks' red cups & seasonal menu on Instagram this year



starbucksuk 🙌👉 ...05.11.20



starbucksuk 🙌 Get ready folks, our famous festive trio are back, and they've brought a friend... the brand new Truffle Deluxe Hot Chocolate. It's official, the Holiday Season starts now 🌲 #RedCups



starbucksuk 🙌 It's the moment you've been waiting for. This year's #RedCups are here and are ready for all your selfie needs! 📸 #RedCups

The 2020 designs, for example, make subtle visual nods to holiday jumpers and decorated trees through the use of pattern and colour, but do not directly reference a strict adherence to tradition. Instead they draw on the deeper cultural meanings of Christmas symbols; the cheerful colours, illustrations providing an approachable nostalgia – whether for childhood associations or more old-fashioned holiday imagery – help to transport us out of the dark and dreary winter months. The Red Cup focuses on “cheer”, positivity and brightness counteracting the dark chill of winter. Yet the new designs each year allow consumers to feel this cheer in a way that feels updated and relevant to their own values and aesthetic tastes, blending seamlessly and stylishly into their lives.

And in addition to visual cues, Starbucks uses the opportunity of being a food and drinks brand to create more multisensory Christmas cues through its seasonal offering. The Christmastime menu provides the opportunity to enjoy sweet nods to seasonal flavours such as gingerbread and peppermint, adding a nostalgic twist to the standard daily latte. For many, this is the true sign that the Christmas season, and the opportunity to indulge in cheerful nostalgia is open once again.

Most importantly however, both the drinks and their containers fit into the regular day-to-day habits of consumers, providing a seasonal update to what they would do, and how they think of the brand, on any other day. While the limited-edition nature of the red cup provides something to look forward to and the feel of a break in normality, they do not require consumers to go out of their way or spend additional money to get the holiday feeling. Instead the cups are more like a friendly holiday greeting from the brand they already visit, with a bit of novelty that brings the brand values as well as the wider holiday spirit to top of mind. Particularly this year, the updated menu and designs bring a sense of normal holiday cheer to what is otherwise a completely unusual holiday season; whether consumers are still commuting or simply picking up a coffee on their daily walk to take home, they find a small dose of festive spirit in their day-to-day.

Starbucks' first red holiday cup, 1999



This year Starbucks has also launched a limited edition reusable cup that changes colour from green to red



2017 design



A scene from this year's advert

2. John Lewis Christmas Ad

The annual John Lewis Christmas advertisements seem almost as much of a Christmas tradition as Santa, but in fact the first one premiered in 2007. These television (and now digital) ads are another example of a brand creating a new Christmas tradition, as each year consumers excitedly discuss and share the new ad when it is finally released.

No two ads are really the same, but they successfully leverage similar cultural and emotional elements of Christmas, and as a result have on their own come to signal that the season for those feelings has begun. Throughout the years the ads have taken many different creative directions - from playful and upbeat to slow-burning and heartfelt, live action or animation - but they consistently communicate themes that leverage underlying cultural ideas about what the Christmas spirit, broadly and agnostically speaking, is about.

Many of the ads over the years feature imagery of children opening gifts or anticipating being allowed to open them, again playing into the Christmastime nostalgia for childhood wonder and excitement that adults remember and seek out each year. But in addition, the majority of John Lewis Christmas ads focus on the power of gift giving to demonstrate love, emotional connection, and understanding between individuals, no matter what their relationship. Earlier ads have featured taglines such as “if you know the person, you’ll find the present,” touching on the emotional power of giving a gift you know the recipient will love, and the broader social and cultural significance of Christmas gift giving beyond material value.





The 2009 ad focused on children unwrapping gifts intended for their adult selves and ended with the nostalgic line, "Remember how Christmas used to feel? Give someone that feeling."



The heartwarming 2015 ad emphasized emotional connection through gifting and was so iconic as to be spoofed by Aldi.



Excitable Edgar, 2019: acceptance and understanding in a fantasy land

Likewise the 2019 “Excitable Edgar” advertisement starring a young girl and her unlucky dragon friend, was set in a fantasy Christmas season but thematically featured a storyline touching on difference, acceptance, and demonstrating understanding and care through the power of giving the right gift for each individual. The ads do visually reference historic Christmas traditions (garlands, decorated trees, a banquet-esque meal), making the Christmas season association straightforward and bringing classic holiday visuals onto our screens. But equally importantly, the ad touched on the deeper social importance of Christmas as a time to bring people together, and to demonstrate love and care. While the more overtly Christmas visuals quickly transport us to associations of winter holiday wonderlands, the storylines and imagery of connection and joy pull us into the deeper emotional elements of Christmas that connect with consumers no matter which traditions they may follow.

This year’s ad, reflecting the strange and often difficult year everyone has experienced and the unusual Christmas season we are expecting, brought the theme of love and care to the forefront. Again, the ad features some classic Christmas imagery – snowy scenes, finishing the Christmas tree decorations – but rather than hinting at the perfect gifts and Christmas products to be purchased at John Lewis, the ad promotes “giving love” and care this holiday season, replacing material giving with acts of kindness.

Particularly significantly, the narrative focuses on strangers passing on these acts of kindness; from neighbours connecting through a Christmas cracker to children lending each other a hand, to pigeons including a hedgehog in their social circle, the ad draws on the need many have felt – locally and even globally – to act collectively and care for one another and for people far beyond our usual milieus. In the ad, each individual lifts up the next through simple small acts, communicating a sense of optimism in a time when many may feel powerless; the storyline reminds us not only of the power of Christmas giving, but of the power of the way many have responded to help one another under unusual circumstances. The diverse filming and animation styles throughout visually reinforce this message as well, communicating an underlying narrative of many individuals working together to create the story and the finished product.

Finally, it ends with a suggestion to give to Home Start or FareShare, providing an actionable way to care for the community at Christmastime. This not only reinforces the narrative in the ad, but in a year filled with calls for real social action and change is a way for both the brand and consumers to respond to this need while responding to challenges often faced by families around the holidays. Overall, the 2020 John Lewis ad has again successfully responded to and reflected what has become a highly unusual Christmas season, while remaining positive and hopeful. Through narrative, visual styles, and social purpose the 2020 John Lewis advert blends immediate cultural needs with the longstanding emotional meaning of Christmas.

In the case of John Lewis, the brand Christmas tradition is about capturing the spirit of Christmas, drawing on familiar holiday imagery but always updating how it is expressed through an entirely new style and story, and building an emotional connection beyond surface visuals. This builds renewed annual anticipation – what will the ad be this year? – while maintaining a sense of traditionality and history. But equally these ads work well in their connection to John Lewis’ purpose for consumers: they help to build the brand’s association as the place to find the right gift for everyone on your list, and as a place to simply to find the Christmas spirit again each year. Furthermore, it contributes to broader associations, leveraging the department store’s identity as the heart of the British high street, embedded in local communities, and reinforcing the idea in consumers’ minds that John Lewis is dedicated to helping British consumers find everything they need all year round.

The 2008 ad showed a range of people alongside their perfect gifts



Diverse animation styles in the 2020 ad



ネット予約でも! 📱💻



KFC Party Barrel

3. KFC Japan

Even in Japan, a country with a small Christian population (about 1%) and without much history of celebrating Christmas, KFC has created a surprising place for itself as a contemporary festive tradition for Japanese consumers. While Christmas is not a public holiday in Japan, consumers join waiting lists to get their “party barrels” (including chicken, sides, cake, and wine) on December 23rd-25th each year.

This modern tradition originated in the 1970s when KFC noticed an opportunity to provide expats living in Japan with a meal that could stand in for traditional Christmas turkey and helped them celebrate even without the right ingredients, nor a day to spend cooking. It has since grown, however, into a representation of the Christmas season itself, and created a broader tradition throughout Japan, with many shops selling chicken specifically as a Christmas meal for expats and locals alike.



Christmas Party Instagram graphic with instructions for reheating KFC's original chicken – an anticipation of the special consumption moment.



Party barrels and seasonal plates from this year (above) and last year (below). Customers can reserve theirs online ahead of time.



While KFC may not represent a literal import of Western Christmas into Japan (after all, it's not Turkey with cranberries), the advertising plays on idealised imagery of Western Christmas traditions, including snow, brightly lit-up gift-filled storefronts, bedazzled Christmas trees, advent calendars, and actors in elf costumes. This imagery brings a picture-perfect scene of non-religious Christmas festivities and consumer culture into a Japanese context, but it is lent a sense of legitimacy by the KFC brand behind it. As a brand authentically rooted in Western (American) consumer culture – and with a mascot who looks conveniently like a typical representation of Santa – KFC is able to draw on its own brand identity to connect it with the Euro-American Christmas spirit. While many Japanese brands could and now do use similar Christmas imagery in December, KFC was able to use its product offering to fill a relatively small market need and, in the process, expand that need beyond its original cultural context.

Part of this seasonal marketing success was KFC's ability to leverage its brand heritage to legitimately claim a connection to Christmas practices. Without the element of holiday nostalgia so prevalent in the UK or US, for example, Christmas themes and imagery were not a seasonal norm. And in addition, KFC picked up on a unique way of serving their classic product: serving meals with whole oven-roasted chickens is atypical in Japan, and while providing this option gives western consumers the feel of a Christmas turkey, it adds to the Western holiday credentials for Japanese consumers. Instead of drawing on personal or cultural nostalgia KFC draws on a fantasy of Western Christmas traditions, allowing Japanese consumers to buy into a Western cultural tradition. With KFC already communicating an idealised notion of American heritage, this connection to become the authentic purveyor of Christmas food and Western festive feeling connects with an interest in participating in global holiday festivities.



Drinks by the Dram whisky advent calendar

4. Alternative Advent Calendars

The centuries-old tradition of advent calendars has proved itself infinitely flexible and re-definable for unique holiday brand experiences. While the traditional advent calendars – often filled with chocolate or small treats – are most often seen as a tradition for children to enjoy, an increasing number of brands have embraced a more grown-up version in a variety of shapes, sizes, and styles.

In particular, the beauty advent calendar is becoming a popular option from luxury brands and department stores such as Jo Malone, Liberty, and Harrods, as well as high street retailers like Boots and M&S. But it doesn't stop at beauty - in 2020 it seems there are advent calendars for everyone on your Christmas list and for every range of budgets, including everything from luxury marshmallows to old & rare whisky to even more adult themes. No matter the contents, these interactive, decorative 'calendars' have become luxurious gifts in their own right, and an opportunity for consumers to “self-gift” a variety of treats they might otherwise not buy individually.



Particularly in the context of Covid-19, as many will be unable or unwilling to visit brick and mortar shops for their holiday shopping this year, these calendars are an effective way of bringing a tangible and three-dimensional brand experience to consumers. Jo Malone's advent calendar, for example, opens up into a substantial set of drawers, effectively creating a luxurious 'toilet table' setting in the brand's own style. While sitting in front of it and opening a drawer, consumers are engaged in a nearly immersive experience from the comfort of their own home. And in addition to the broader brand touchpoint opportunity, it provides a useful chance to introduce consumers to products they might otherwise not try, and potentially expanding their interaction with the brand in the long term.

One of the joys and benefits of the format is that the concept of the advent calendar is flexible enough to lend itself to total design freedom and create something completely unique to a particular brand and set of customers. And in our increasingly digital-first world the calendar can provide an accessible, tangible antidote to two-dimensional screen experiences. Yet at the same time these calendars are also so successful across brands because they bring that sense of childhood holiday nostalgia to adults who have graduated out of their sweet tooth (at least a bit). These alternative calendars provide the sense of joy and anticipation of counting down to Christmas day felt as a child, but with brands and products more relevant and 'treat'-like in grown-up life.



From Harrods to Boots, beauty is a firm favourite for the advent calendar format.



24 Days of Stationery advent calendar by Martha Brook



Microdrinks brand Waterdrop have a range of calendars to choose from

Jo Malone's advent calendar, which opens up into a set of drawers





Save the Children Christmas Jumper Day

5. Christmas Jumper Day

Filling offices and public spaces with tongue-in-cheek holiday kitsch on a designated day in December (this year the 11th, for those who are counting the days), “Christmas Jumper Day” is an initiative started by Save the Children to create a seasonal fundraising campaign. The campaign draws on a longstanding history of seasonal knitwear: the oft maligned handknitted “ugly sweaters” gifted and worn around the Christmas season.

The campaign, started in 2012, has been wildly popular, with consumers purchasing over-the-top decorated Christmas jumpers covered with appliqué Santas, tinsel, or even some that light up with hidden battery packs. Instead of updating a classic Christmas idea to incorporate modern design cues, Christmas Jumper Day encourages us to embrace the unstylish naivité of old-fashioned holiday traditions. Perhaps inspired in part by the Christmas jumpers featured in the film *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, consumers have embraced the opportunity for a day (at least) of holiday camp. The general rule seems to be “the uglier the better,” and consumers are given an opportunity to bring real merriness and cheer to the Christmas season with a chance to dress in playful, colourful, childlike knitwear concoctions for at least one day a year.



In 2016, Madam Tussauds participated in the initiative by putting Christmas jumpers on their models of the Royal Family



*Was this the scene that started it all? Mark Darcy’s infamous Christmas jumper in *Bridget Jones’ Diary**



Save the Children have recently released a video on the event's Sustainability & Inclusivity page with campaign star "Coach Christmas" showing participants how to decorate a jumper they already own instead of buying one new



The “ugly” tinsel-covered Christmas sweaters have been making the rounds long before Save the Children adopted the concept as a fundraiser, but by making it an opportunity for play and a kind of self-deprecating humour, the charity has turned a punchline into a contemporary tradition. This initiative took the idea of updating a Christmas tradition in a new direction: re-writing the narrative around what many considered a cringeworthy holiday association and allowing consumers to poke fun at the tradition and themselves, while also taking part in living out that nostalgia. Instead of sleekly incorporating the Christmas jumper into contemporary lifestyles, they provide an opportunity to do just the opposite, and allow us all to find joy in the collective visual effect of festive kitsch.

However, the initiative also highlights the need to keep contemporary cultural values in mind while developing and maintaining these new traditions. Sustainability, in particular, has come to the fore, as short-term seasonal items flood store shelves and our homes. With concerns about the waste generated by “fast fashion” and single-use plastic novelty items filling landfills, last year Save the Children began encouraging people to purchase second-hand, re-wear, or trade jumpers in order to reduce seasonal waste. In this sense, Save the Children has picked up on the need for modern holiday traditions to continue to be culturally relevant in how they are communicated and encouraged by brands. While the overt visual styles of Christmas jumpers are old fashioned and ‘uncool’, there is a need to align at a deeper level with contemporary concerns about social and environmental welfare. This issue goes beyond the novelty jumpers; as sustainability becomes a hygiene factor for many consumers, brands of all kinds must be aware of the environmental impact of their festive seasonal products, how they are used and disposed of, and whether they do indeed need to be updated every year.

Christmas Jumper Day
20 November at 12:00

Whether you're in the office or hanging out with your colleagues over an online call, on Friday December 11 you can help children's lives become more magical! 🌟 <http://save.tc/kcy050ByWHw>

What are YOUR fun and COVID-safe suggestions for taking part this year? Share them in the comments below!

Here are some of our tips to get you started:

- 👉 Mute button penalty - every time someone talks on mute, they have to donate to Christmas Jumper Day!
- 👉 Christmas Carol-oke - crack out your laptop, get on a call and get everyone involved in a Christmas singalong. Charge £2 to take part, and extra for requests!
- 👉 Quarantine quiz – match donations to the number of people who join; the more people who join, the more money you raise!

SIGN UP TODAY!

This year, Save the Children continues to encourage people to join in with Christmas Jumper Day by adapting to the circumstances, e.g. showing off jumpers on Zoom

Key take-outs: how to create a Christmas brand tradition

Christmas is the perfect time for brands to try new ways of connecting with consumers in playful ways, and creating a unique tradition allows brands to innovate and communicate in ways that reflect the patterns of social and cultural life. Whether as in-store experiences, takeaway products, or even seasonal digital design, creating these traditions allows brands to contribute visibly to the holiday moment, but it should be done authentically and in a way that adds emotional value:

1 Fit it seamlessly into everyday habits:

make it a bit of Christmas magic that appears in day-to-day life.



2 Balance consistency with anticipation:

choose a medium and stick with it, but be creative with the execution.



3 Play with a mix of nostalgia and novelty:

bring in recognisable Christmas elements, but reflect contemporary representations of key cultural values.



4 Rework an old tradition for new purpose:

as with Christmas jumpers and advent calendars, picking up on longstanding traditions and conversations around the holidays and adapting them to new purposes can re-energise consumers around the original idea and allows the brand to own it in a distinctive way.



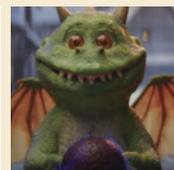
5 Find out what Christmas means locally:

Christmas has been exported around the globe, but it may not have the same connotations and meanings in local markets; find out what role a Christmas campaign can fill locally, as with KFC.



6 Find what connects your brand to the underlying cultural meanings of “Christmas spirit” and highlight that:

whether that’s family, warmth and spirit lifting treats, the spirit of giving and sharing, enjoying some temporary glamour.



7 Align with broader cultural values and needs:

while these traditions are on the surface about the meaning of Christmas, they must also continue to align with broader values, for example sustainability, brand transparency, gender identity, diversity & inclusivity, etc.



The logo consists of a dark purple circle containing the words "SIGN" and "SALAD" stacked vertically in white, uppercase, sans-serif font.

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**Thank you
& all the best for the festive season.**

Sign Salad is a cultural insight agency, specialising in semiotics and language analysis. Please feel free to get in touch with us at hello@signalsalad.com.

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