



Illustration: Heather Gentile

BY VICTORIA WURDINGER

**'Twas the night
before Christmas and
Santa's a wreck... How
to live in a world that's
politically correct?**

**—From *A Politically
Correct Christmas***

by Harvey Ehrlich

We can all get a chuckle from politically correct holiday stories, like "Twas the Night Before Solstice" and "Frosty the Person of Snow," but holiday merchandising is no laughing matter this year.

Along with hopes for an economic boost is a new sensitivity about heavy-handed commercialism and politically correct inclusiveness—either multi-denominational or non-denominational. Does this mean scrapping Santa, or installing a tree, a menorah and a Kwanzaa display?

Holiday displays in public areas involve legal questions of separation of church and state; privately held companies can do what they want. But retailers in visible spaces are focusing on what's appropriate and what offends because they fear alienating consumers. Besides, in a litigious society, you can't always predict the basis of a lawsuit. (Skip the mistletoe if you even suspect someone will use it to demand a kiss!)

Let's start with what seem to be the obvious symbols: the Christmas tree, the menorah and the Kwanzaa table. Should you include them in holiday displays?

According to Bonnie Russell, president of www.1st-pick.com, a nationwide source for legal, medical and real estate professionals, anything demonstrating goodwill without a specific secular theme is allowed. ►

Anything specific to religion might offend. "We're very prickly these days," she notes.

At Yellow Strawberry Salon in Sarasota, Florida, Richard Weintraub agrees, noting that he puts up neither a tree nor a menorah.

"For me, both are religious symbols," he says. "Today, we're so diverse in terms of religion and culture, how do you not offend someone? By being somewhat generic. You can decorate with gold, silver, blue, red and green, but if you use just red and green, you're moving toward one bent."

This season, Weintraub is keeping up his red, white and blue display. The September tragedy will be felt most during the holidays, and showing patriotism will still be important, he says.

"Know your market and work with manufacturers," adds Weintraub. "Five years ago you had to create promotions and displays yourself; today manufacturers are incredibly savvy with the packages they put together."

For the salon in a multi-ethnic neighborhood that's confused about Kwanzaa, know that it's not a religious holiday, but a celebration that's rooted in African culture and is celebrated by African Americans of all faiths.

Diane Bailey, owner of Tendrils in Brooklyn, New York, says she'll have a table with fresh fruit,

maize, eucalyptus, raffia, African fabrics and candles in black, red and green to represent the seven days of Kwanzaa.

"I'll have a wreath as well; I like to create the flavor of the holidays without overt ornamentation," says Bailey. "If you don't understand Kwanzaa, avoid putting up anything or you'll diminish its spirit, which is the opposite of commercialism."

Bailey notes that you can't recognize every religion, and each salon has its own culture, flavor and mood. She has a Koran in the salon for stylists who celebrate Ramadan, but says Muslim braiders are not offended when clients give them Christmas gifts, because it's a recognition based on a relationship.

"I don't have a problem with businesses that have trees and menorahs if everyone feels comfortable, but you don't need obvious symbols," says Bailey. "The relationship is the important thing and individual stylists can relate Kwanzaa or Christmas wishes to their clients one-on-one."

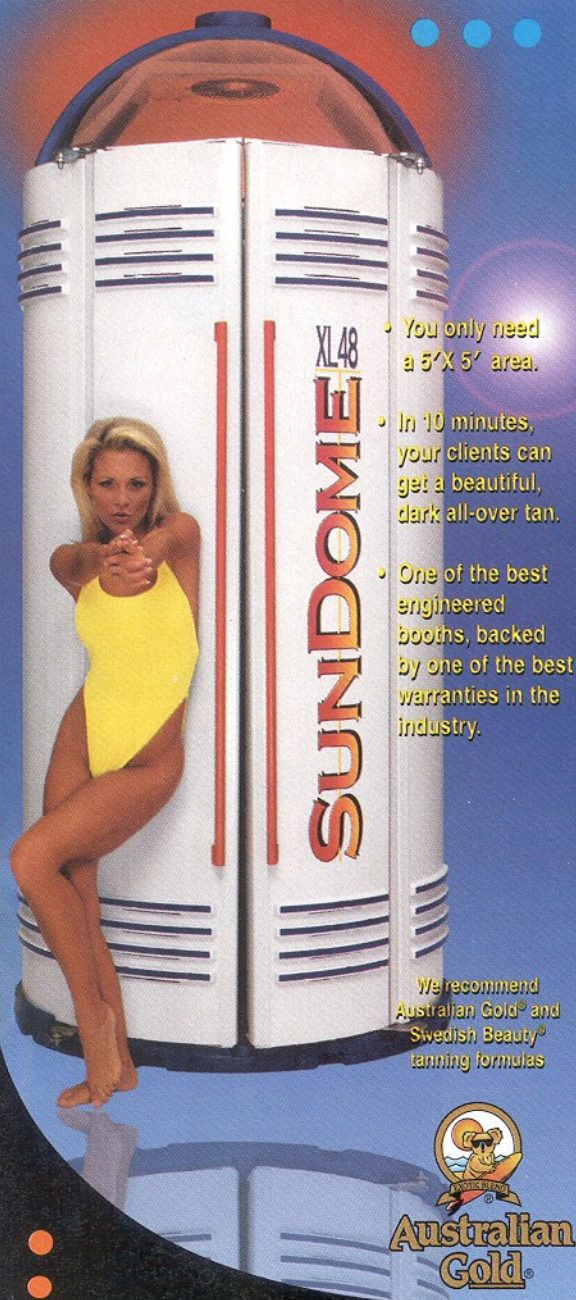
What is offensive to Bailey? As a Christian, she doesn't like to see a crucifix lit up with hordes of flashing lights.

Verbiage gets many people in trouble and if you put up signs, hold parties or send out cards, "Celebration of the Season" and "Holiday Greetings" are the buzzwords that keep you safe in the valley of PC-ness. If your signage talks specifically about Christmas, you had better know your market. Weintraub says his holiday party even became a holiday "gathering," but a Mormon stylist still could not attend, based on his faith. A party is a party.

Display themes are yet another issue. According to a *New York Times* Company article on seasonal decor, expert merchandisers say everybody wants a classic Christmas, and not only is traditional Christmas decor popular, it's expected. The feature points out an instance of a ►

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Display Peace

retailer who deviated with a "Winter Wonderland" theme and had it blow up in his face.

But everybody does not want to see "traditional" Christmas decor if that means an overtly religious Nativity scene. Yet Christmas is still the holiday that represents the largest portion of most businesses' profits. So how do you best attract shoppers?

"Be careful when you get into religious aspects; if people are sensitive, go for basic holiday concepts," says Rick Segel, author of the book and CD-ROM combo *Retail Business Kit for Dummies*. "However, Christmas has become an American event; you can't say no to Christmas displays, and trees are a universal thing now. Personally, I resent it when people try to turn Hanukkah into an event like Christmas because it isn't."

Here are just a few ideas Segel offers for snagging seasonal shoppers and keeping correct:

Proudly proclaim your patriotism. The nation has been in a patriotic mood lately, and consumers want to see that you are, too. Include flags in displays. Consider a "Give America a Holiday Gift" event; pick a week in December and donate 10 percent of sales during that period to a charitable organization.

Make your business a holiday haven. People don't shop for the joy of spending money; they are looking for a fun, entertaining experience. Use aromas like cinnamon, eggnog, peppermint and pine to set the mood. Greet customers with "Happy Holidays" and make them feel good. Offer free mini-massages or make-up touch-ups.

Try unexpected promotions. You don't have to focus on Christmas or Hanukkah; think outside the box. For instance, celebrity birthdays offer great opportunities. Could Dec. 18 be a good "Get a Brad Pitt hair-do day?"

Celebrate community with creative contests. The holidays are a time when people's thoughts naturally turn to friends, family and neighbors. Leverage this community spirit by holding contests. Have clients write an essay about their favorite firefighter. Have kids draw the style they'd like Mom to get. Give away prizes; post the winner's essays and pictures prominently.

Bundle merchandise for more sales. Spas have endless possibilities in retail relaxation packages and if the deal is right, it doesn't have to be under a tree.

If you're still looking for a holiday theme that can't offend, perhaps that internet poem we started with offers a solution...

*Something special was needed, a gift that he might
Give to all without angering the left or the right.
A gift that would satisfy, with no indecision,
Each group of people, every religion;
Every ethnicity, every hue,
Everyone, everywhere...even you.
So here is that gift, its price beyond worth..."
May you and your loved ones enjoy peace on earth."*