



Perspective

Holiday greetings, traffic lights, and love letters from the IRS

It's hard to believe that another year has come and gone. 2008, who would have thought we'd get here so fast? It seems like just yesterday that we were planning for the massive calamity of Y2K (another media-inspired disaster that wasn't). Well, ready or not, here it comes, and I want to take this opportunity to wish everybody a very Merry Christmas and/or Happy Holidays.

You know, we at AB&I really do appreciate all our customers, friends, colleagues, even competitors. We've been around more than 100 years now, and attaining that vintage brings with it a certain perspective on business and people and what truly matters. The bottom line is that *you* matter, more than all the brick and mortar, more than industry recognition - even more than the bottom line, even though it's that bottom line that keeps us going.

Thanks for a great year. Thanks for buying from us, for calling us when you need help, and even writing to me when you disagree with something I've written in this silly column. We really do value your being there, and wish you all a happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year.

I got an email from the IRS the other day, stating that I had a \$109 refund coming on a previous tax return. I know it was from the IRS, because the mail message displayed the IRS logo and showed an IRS return email address.

The message said that all I had to do to get my \$109 was click here and apply for the refund. Simple enough. Or was it?

I had never heard of the IRS communicating with its 'customers' through email. I suppose in this day and age, it's the most efficient way to reach large numbers of people. Still, I thought it best to check with my tax guy, to see if he knew anything about these messages. He barely let me get my question out. Don't do it, he said. It's a

fraud.

Now, who has the huevos to involve the IRS in a fraud? These are the guys who put Al Capone away, when nobody else could touch him. These are the guys who check their sense of humor at the office door, and don't reclaim it until they retire, 40 years later. Of all the people in the world to choose as a partner in crime, why the IRS? The mind boggles...

Anyway, if you get a similar email from our friendly folks at Internal Revenue, do yourself a favor and trash it. I didn't even click on the link to find out what I had to do to get my hundred bucks. I assume they wanted me to verify my ID by giving them something like, oh, my social security number. I probably would have balked at doing that, but who knows what spyware or cookies these bunko creeps could have placed on my computer, just by linking to their site?

No doubt this criminal enterprise is using email servers from Outer Desertopia to remain clear of enforcement action. So now, we not only have to lock our doors at night, but remain vigilant against cybercrimes that originate in parts of the world not even National Geographic goes. Welcome to 2008.

With property values going down, and the state and counties having to get by on smaller property tax receipts, it's important that all of us put our thinking caps on and send in ideas for saving public money.

While walking with some colleagues recently, I had a great idea for cutting waste and saving big bucks. It became apparent to me that almost nobody pays the least attention to pedestrian traffic signals (you know, the little orange hand and the walking white guy). Wherever we went, pedestrians would cross the street against the orange hand, without giving it a second thought. When I asked a co-worker why he crossed

when the signal was red, he said simply, "There weren't any cars coming." Sounded logical to me, although I did wonder if these same people blew through red lights in their cars if there wasn't any traffic...

This almost universal ignoring of pedestrian signals got me thinking. There are probably 2-3000 of these things in most big towns. If they cost \$1000 each when new, maybe we could take them all down and sell them to someplace like Mexico or Venezuela for, say, five hundred bucks apiece. We would not only enjoy a one-time windfall from the sale, but think of the dollars we'd save on maintenance, electricity to run the things, and repairs when some clown bashes into one (probably swerving to avoid a pedestrian).

If nobody follows the law anyway, why have it? Just think. If enough people ignore stop signs, maybe we could pawn those off on some African or Middle Eastern country. The benefits could go far beyond just getting rid of an annoying hindrance to our daily travels. After all, the country who bought them would have to learn at least one word in English, spreading bit-by-bit the glories of American culture.

I'm sure there are plenty of laws we could get rid of, if we just thought about it awhile. The recent problems with tainted spinach point out that a lot of farmers ignore our food safety laws. After all, most spinach is perfectly good. Why have inspectors checking it all? Dump those laws.

Most planes zoom along just fine, with no problems. Firing aviation inspectors would save us millions, and allow the airlines to cut fares and improve service. The list goes on.

Or maybe we should just stop at the orange hand. Even if no cars are coming.

Don't forget that charities need our help more than ever this year. Big givers reduce donations as the stock market cools. It's up to us, now. Give what you can.