



**FINANCE  
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DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE  
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# REVE NEWS

FINANCE'S MONTHLY NEWSLETTER • DECEMBER 2007 • VOLUME 4, NUMBER 12



## 2007 SPECIAL HOLIDAY EDITION



### Commissioner's Holiday Message

Celebrating Successes from 2007

Martha E. Stark, Commissioner



Dear Colleagues:

As this special issue of **ReveNEWS** reminds us, sometimes it's not enough to simply enjoy the holidays. Sometimes you need a strategy to deal with gifts you don't like, or, can't use, or to figure out the best way to give to others who are less fortunate than us. Apparently, even Santa Claus is thinking about data-driven decision-making. Yes, Virginia, SMART has reached the North Pole.

For me, though, the holidays are most importantly a time to celebrate what we've done and appreciate what we have. As we look back on 2007, I'm proud that Finance has a lot of things to celebrate.

In the article below, you can read about one of our biggest successes – the opening of our new, consolidated business center in the Bronx. This is a project that has been more than 10 years in the making. For those of you who worked in either of our old Bronx centers at 1932 Arthur Avenue and 1400 Williamsbridge Road, you know how badly we needed to create a world-class facility, for the people we serve and for our staff. We've done that, and I couldn't be happier. I'm convinced that the new site will increase employee engagement, which in turn will affect customer satisfaction and complier treatment.

Every success reminds us that we can do better. For example, the new Bronx center is fabulous, but for the first several days the heat did not work despite our best efforts to fix the problem.

#### ***Customer Satisfaction, Complier Treatment Numbers Are Up***

And speaking of those two metrics, I should point out that our external customer satisfaction rating is on the rise as we head toward 2008: It increased to 4.14 for the quarter that ended in September 2007 – the highest it has been in a year. Our complier treatment scores also went up last quarter, jumping from 3.32 to 3.83 – an impressive 51-point increase. These are signs that your hard work is paying off.

#### ***Success Stories***

We have a long way to go, but every day we're getting better at helping people pay the right amount on time. And we're learning from our experiences: Here are some other successes and learnings to celebrate:

- We surpassed our expectations when almost 90 percent of your colleagues participated in the Gallup employee engagement survey – an amazing number. It tells me that most employees really care about improving their work environment. Congratulations on a great start to what I hope will be a very rewarding process of improving employee engagement.
- Employee Services delivered on our promise to offer free training to all staff, as well as provide new chairs to employees in our Brooklyn offices, and make physical improvements to some of our buildings, including supplemental cleaning service for all city-owned Finance facilities, and painting our location at 66 John Street and the Staten Island Business Center. But we also learned that simply offering training isn't enough, since a lot of employees haven't taken advantage of the offer.

- FIT, Property, Legal and Communications helped create, promote and process the electronic Real Property Income and Expense forms. We received more than 90,000 electronic submissions from owners, which means Property will have easy access to more data than ever in order to accurately value property. At the same time, we learned that we can create a form that's easier to fill out.
- Treasury and Communications succeeded in passing a bill that requires most City vendors to receive payments electronically, making these payments safer and reducing our own paperwork;
- Tax Policy and Legal led the successful charge in Albany and the City Council that simplifies our tax laws and makes it easier for not-for-profits to claim exemptions;
- Treasury, Payment Operations and the Office of the Sheriff implemented a plan that will allow people to redeem cars towed by City Marshals with credit card payments. Now, more than 20 percent of all redemptions are done by credit card;
- Payment Operations created and mailed a Summary of Estimated Tax Payments to more than 100,000 taxpayers, letting them know the amount of payments credited to their accounts in advance of the due date of the returns, so they could pay the right amount on time;
- The City Register streamlined the document intake process and reduced the rejection rate from 6 percent to 4 percent. Just as important, they learned a lot along the way. For example, they recognized the need for a standard operating procedure accessible to all employees, and they created one. And they re-trained employees to ensure uniformity across the boroughs.
- Last January, we took the unprecedented step of mailing amended tax returns to people who we believed were eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit but had not claimed it. Notwithstanding the amazing work done by Tax Policy, we learned a lot about the IRS data that we didn't know beforehand, and that has helped us prepare for another mailing this February. So far, more than 15,000 people claimed the EITC thanks to our efforts, claiming more than \$10 million in benefits.

Not everything is a resounding success, but good ideas and good attempts are always worth celebrating as learning experiences. So please, please take the time this holiday season to pat yourself on the back. You deserve it. In fact, don't just do it now – celebrate a little bit every day, because every day that we're here really is a blessing.

In 2007, I turned 47, which means I have achieved a truly important personal goal. I have lived longer than my mother and my brother. Whenever I get frustrated or scared, and whenever the odds of success seem insurmountable, I remind myself of this fact. Remembering my mother and my brother reminds me to celebrate what I've done and what I will be able to achieve just by being here.

My sincere holiday wish is that you celebrate your own success and the success of your colleagues, now and every day.

### Happy Holidays!



#### Did You Know?

The New 2007/2008 Schedule for Professional Development and Training is available for all staff... and it's free. Sign-up by visiting **FinanceNet**.







## BETTER TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE

By Carolyn Russell

Throughout the upcoming holiday celebrations, most people will enjoy exchanging gifts, sampling varieties of food and spending time with their family. But a typical Christmas Day, marked by people receiving electronics, jewelry or other gifts that may not make a difference in their lives, soon becomes a distant memory. By the following week, those same gifts may be found stored in the back of the closet. Those gifts may be easy to store away and have for a keepsake, but there are other things we can do throughout the holiday season that are guaranteed to be a more prominent part of our lives. Challenging ourselves to do something new during the holiday season is always easier to talk about than it is to put into action, but giving something more priceless than material gifts is ultimately more rewarding for both you and the recipient.



So, instead of donating a gift in a box at your job, or writing a check to your favorite charity, why don't we go further, and give of ourselves? If we become more involved, by visiting or volunteering this season at a local hospital, or by taking toys to children who have serious or long-term illness, or by offering our services at one of the men's or women's shelters located throughout the city; we can make a difference to those less fortunate and also feel how these acts make a difference in ourselves. We should remember, especially during our sumptuous holidays, there are families who cannot afford to prepare a decent dinner, not to mention one with ham or turkey or trimmings.

It's a joy to see the faces of people in shelters when they receive hot meals from volunteers. You can prepare and serve hot meals or donate used clothing to many shelters throughout the City. It can be a

humbling experience knowing that your contribution makes a difference. To know you are part of this generous process can bring much joy and satisfaction, because these simple acts can enhance the life of another person in a very meaningful and life changing way. I've found volunteering at men's shelters in Bedford Stuyvesant, the Bowery, and Alphabet City, as well as at the women's shelter in East New York, to be personally rewarding. It has been an unforgettable experience that has brought me great joy and satisfaction.

So I encourage you to reconsider your plans, and become a part of the process of helping make the holidays what they are truly intended for... the invaluable and precious opportunity to give of yourself. Share your personal time and treasures with those less fortunate, because however little time you give or no matter how small the gift may seem, it will make a difference.

## CONSOLIDATED BUSINESS CENTER OPENS IN THE BRONX

Modern Facility Brings More Efficient Service, Professional Workspace

From the building which houses the spacious new offices of Finance's Bronx Business Center is a bird's eye view of the bustle of commercial activity on Third Avenue. This main thoroughfare of the South Bronx is incredibly active with shoppers year-round – as well as restaurants, jewelry and clothing stores abound within a few blocks of the new facility – and has an undeniable energy and vibrant atmosphere that signifies much of the Bronx's, and in particular the South Bronx's, resurgence.

It's here at 3030 Third Avenue that Finance has found the perfect location to consolidate its two previous Bronx locations, at 1932 Arthur Avenue and 1400 Williamsbridge Road. Now Finance can provide services at one easily accessible location in an area in which the agency's successful new center mirrors the growth and revitalization of the neighborhood as a whole.

"There's more space," Sharon Danner, Manager for Payment Operations emphatically said about the Center that opened on November 19. "At the 1400 location there was peeling paint and people would always complain about the conditions. It was so crowded that our customers would even call the Fire Department saying it was overcrowded in order to get some people to leave so there could be a shorter wait time on their line. Now customers are definitely more comfortable and they like the space. And of course our staff says that the new space is just marvelous."

The impressive carpeted facility has approximately 76,000 square feet of office space and occupies the second floor of a two-story building. Escalators lead customers directly to a central security desk or a nearby information booth, to be guided to the right area or to obtain a number in the comfortable lounge where the wait time is minimal. The lounge has nearly twice the space as the similar area at Williamsbridge, Danner noted.

Customers can pay water bills, parking tickets and process property documents in this bright, over-the-counter service area.

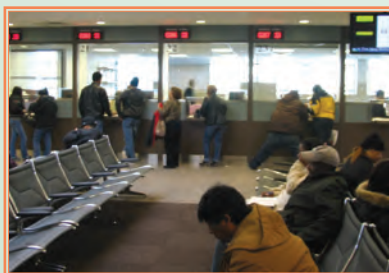
Payments of real property and related taxes, recording fees as well as towing fees, sanitation and health violation fines will now be collected at this central location. City Register facilities are also on site for filing deeds and mortgages. Access to computers with entré to the Automated City Register Information System (ACRIS), will also provide the public quick access to information for title and lien searches.

Another service provided, of course, is parking hearings. "We only had on-site adjudications at 1400 but not at Arthur Avenue," said Bronx Administrative Law Judge, LaWanda Jackson. "We just outgrew the space. So now having all the services in one location will cause less confusion." "At Arthur Avenue, the customers were inconvenienced by having to go to numerous floors to complete their transactions," said Deputy City Register Mary Scheman. "Having all the Bronx offices on one floor is less of a runaround for our customers. While working at Arthur Avenue was a pleasant experience," Scheman continued, "the beauty of the new office greatly surpasses our former work location." The successful consolidation of the two locations allows Finance to provide the public with all services in a one-stop-shop center within the comfortable and safe state-of-the-art facility.

Finance has been engaged in finding a new location since a new Finance Business

**"When customers come in they have a smile on their face even though some of them have to pay money."**

Center was proposed for the Bronx in the late 1990s. The facility at 3030 Third Avenue met the specific criteria of Finance's Statement of Needs, which originally proposed centers for each borough in 1996. "Many of our customers said, 'It's about time,'" stated Danner. The move, long in



planning and now in fruition, gives Finance employees the comfort and professional environment they need and deserve to perform their duties. Approximately 150 Finance employees relocated from the two locations: from Williamsbridge on November 19th, and from Arthur Avenue on December 3rd. It is estimated that 1,600 taxpayers will visit the new facility each day. "It's much larger and cleaner," said Clerical Associate Helen Wright, one of the front line workers who help customers on a day-to-day basis. "This location is better for our customers. It's a totally different atmosphere. They have a different attitude. Everything here is better. At 1400 customers hardly had a place to sit."

This improved atmosphere is indicative of the changes that not only have come to Finance's customers but also to the South Bronx as a whole. "This is a great transformation," said Wanda Allston, Principal Administrative Associate. "The change in attitude is overwhelming," she said. "The center is in an up and coming neighborhood, so now it's a pleasure to come to the South Bronx. It's good to see our taxpayer dollars at work. The location is easy to get to because most of the buses that cover the Bronx run here and the IRT is only a few blocks away," said Allston. "The customers also can find a place to park. At 1400 they had to use meters and by the time they would finish their business with us they would have another ticket," said Wright.

Much like the South Bronx, the previous location at Williamsbridge had its share of problems. Not only were the peeling paint and plumbing problems common but that

(Continued at top of page 4)

## REGIFTING ETIQUETTE

By Debbie Targhi



and may even pass them on by the act of regifting. Someday you may find yourself in a similar situation and consider the act of regifting. You can call it tacky or call it rude, but in reality this practice exists.

Say you receive a gift – a nice gift, like a handsome travel clock – that you can't use, don't want or already own. You rewrap it and give it to someone else. You look generous, the recipient is appreciative, and your storage closet just got bigger. Mission accomplished.

Regifting was even a subject that received a lot of attention on a Seinfeld episode where the character Elaine calls Dr. Tim

If one of the season's joys is giving, then surely one of its hidden "guilty" pleasures is "regifting." It may seem unfathomable, but the truth is your friends and loved ones may not love the gifts you've chosen,

Whatley a "Regifter." Dr. Whatley gives Jerry a label-maker that was originally given to Whatley by, whom else? Elaine!

If you choose to regift, make sure the gift is not used and is still in its original wrapper. What was once thought to be improper has become a very common occurrence.

In order to be a successful regifter, there are some simple rules you should try to follow:

- Try to take the negative connotation out of regifting by focusing on the gift itself, and how it might benefit someone that needs whatever you received. The purpose of giving a gift is to give pleasure, to bring joy to someone's life. And let's say you already own a copy of the 'Godfather' collection for example and you know that someone else would like to have it, what's the point in keeping it? It would be wasteful.
- Once a gift is given, it belongs to the recipient and they can do what they wish with it, whether it be returning it or regifting it. Some etiquette experts say that people are not required to keep something they don't need or like. Good etiquette doesn't require you to keep anything, just that you are grateful when you receive it.
- Not only is it okay to regift, some experts say there are times you are morally obligated to regift. For example, if someone gives you an article of clothing or food that you don't want or don't need but that someone else could benefit from, such as a homeless person or a shelter,

## DATA-DRIVEN SANTA...SANTA GETS SMART

By Mary Rose O'Connell

On Christmas Eve morning, Santa Claus's computer froze. This was the same computer that included data he depended on to do his job. His reliance on Google Earth was a "must-have" for the evening's activities. The computer's data bank held extremely valuable information. Like who was naughty and who was nice. Like the list of toys that children throughout the world desired. Like how the heck he would get from the North Pole to Timbuktu... to Sao Paulo... to Swansea... to Brooklyn! In short, Santa Claus was stymied. What was the proactive thing to do? The SMART thing to do? Thank goodness he took the MFR training and attended the Unified Team and the Mummy and the Invisible Man films with his staff. He immediately called the local Help Desk. Although he received a response quickly, he was given the bad news: His computer was dead. No amount of Christmas magic could revive it. But that didn't stop Old Saint Nick. Momentarily incredulous at the turn of events, Santa decided to take a step back and, after a few minutes of thought, formed a plan. Ever the eternal optimist and believing in employee engagement, Santa Claus called his team together. Quickly, the elves and all eight reindeer, including Rudolph, were sitting in the conference room or in attendance via videoconference. Santa Claus detailed the problem and exhorted his team to "create a solution." One of the elves, Marley by name, explained to the others: "Let's begin by stating our objective: we need to deliver toys and sugarplums to children everywhere." "In a fair and transparent way," added Ebenezer. Some of the other elves began to debate what was more important: fairness or

transparency. The discussion was beginning to rile Prudence, the youngest elf. "But how will we accomplish our mission without the data needed for Santa's route?" she cried. Another elf, whose name was "Smarty," announced, "as long as we treat our compliers fairly and satisfy our customers, we will accomplish our mission." Donner snorted and Blitzen shook her head incredulously. Dasher started to butt Smarty with his antlers. Santa realized he was about to



witness a fracas between the elves and the reindeer. Grabbing Dasher's antlers with his one hand, he gently told Smarty, "We will have to think this through. We lack the information to satisfy our customers, who are children everywhere and to treat our compliers, their parents, fairly. Therein lies the problem."

As the elves were hashing this issue out, Rudolph, Santa's chief reindeer, had an "AHA" moment, and he and the other reindeer strategized the elves and Santa, who were animatedly arguing about the process. Rudolph trotted up to Santa with the others in tow. He nudged Santa with one of his

it's not only a good thing to give it to the shelter, you *should* give it to the shelter.

- If you plan on regifting, do it with a gift you received recently, in other words, the sooner the better. Otherwise you may forget who gave it to you in the first place and end up giving the gift back to the original giver and find yourself in an embarrassing situation.

Also, make sure you give the gift to someone who won't possibly run into the person who initially gave the present. It would be terribly embarrassing if your mother-in-law saw the one-of-a-kind, handmade sweater she gave to you being worn by another relative. It probably is best to keep sentimental gifts that are given by family or friends, but those are the gifts that we wouldn't think of regifting anyway. Right?

Naturally, if you're regifting, be casual. You don't want to give the recipient the impression you bought the item, spent a lot of time looking for it, picking it out and ordering it. Make sure that the gift is in its original condition (i.e., original box, unused) and, of course, remove the evidence by taking off all the original gift tags!

The next time you are given a gift and you don't think you will be able to utilize it, consider regifting. As long as you use these common sense rules and realize that regifting doesn't corrupt the gift-giving process, but is done with the hope that the next recipient of the gift may enjoy it more than you. If you keep this in mind, then regifting remains a viable option.

gigantic antlers. Santa swiveled his head in Rudolph's direction. "I think we have to break all the rules here," Rudolph asserted. "Let's maximize our strengths. To wit: we reindeer have been pulling this sled since we were created in 1823. I've only been involved with the project since 1939, but that's still 68 years. It's pretty much the same route every year. I know it like the back of my hoof. We don't really need to depend on gearing up the computer. But to make us all feel more comfortable, I remembered that we had the data permanently stored in my hooves as a back up." Santa Claus thought about this and although elated that the itinerary may be in Rudolph's hooves, he wondered about the data for who's been naughty and who's been nice? There has to be a fair distribution of toys or all heck would break loose. Reading his thoughts, Prudence suggested, "why don't we simply divide everything equally; one toy and one sugar plum to a customer. That way, we operate fairly, efficiently and transparently!" "Right-o" agreed Marley, "and with the data in Rudolph's hooves, our decisions will literally be data driven." All of Santa's employees felt empowered by their actions. They had utilized the advice of their consultants by listening to the reindeer, who were a fundamental part of the operation. The reindeer could now positively rate their opinions as counting. Everyone could enjoy the holidays with the knowledge that the mission would be accomplished without waiting for the repair of the computer.

"And I heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight, 'Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night.'"

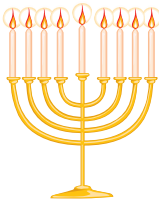




## DECEMBER HOLIDAYS

December is Universal Human Rights Month. Human Rights Day, December 10th, was created by the United Nations, to promote awareness of the importance of Human Rights issues around the world. On this day in 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its purpose is to disseminate information throughout the world about human rights and to distribute copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. See below for more information about other December holidays and commemorations.

- 5 - **Hanukkah** – The (Hebrew word for dedication, Hanukkah lasts for eight days and known as the Festival of Lights, celebrates the victory (165 BCE) of the Maccabees over the Syrians and the subsequent reclamation of Jerusalem.



- 6 - **St. Nicholas Day** – This is the feast day for Saint Nicholas who was renowned for his great kindness and his generous aid to those in distress.
- 7 - **Pearl Harbor Day** – The day commemorates the attack on Pearl Harbor, which was a pre-emptive military strike on the United States Pacific Fleet base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii by the Empire of Japan's Imperial Japanese Navy, on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941 that made the United States enter World War II.
- 8 - **Bodhi Day** – Buddha's Enlightenment – The Buddhist holiday that commemorates the day that the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni or Siddhartha Gotama, experienced enlightenment.
- 12 - **Virgin of Guadalupe Day** – (Mexico) The Virgin of Guadalupe, a 16th century Roman Catholic Mexican icon depicting an apparition of the Virgin Mary, is Mexico's most beloved religious and cultural image. Guadalupe's feast day commemorates the traditional account of her appearances on a hill near Mexico City.
- 13 - **Santa Lucia Day** – Throughout Sweden the feast day of Lucia, or Lucy, a young Christian martyr venerated by the Roman Catholic Church, is celebrated as a festival of lights.
- 16-25 - **Las Posadas** – Spanish for "the inn," Las Posadas is a traditional Mexican festival which re-enacts Joseph's search for room at the inn.
- 20 - **Eid al-adha** – Feast of Sacrifice is the most important feast of the Muslim calendar. It concludes the Pilgrimage to Mecca. Eid al-Adha lasts for three days and commemorates Ibrahim's (Abraham) willingness to obey God by sacrificing his son.
- 22 - **Winter Solstice** – The day when the distance between the Tropic of Capricorn and the sun is the shortest. This makes the Winter Solstice the shortest day in the Northern Hemisphere where it marks the beginning of winter.
- 25 - **Christmas** – An annual holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus. Christmas festivities often combine the commemoration of Jesus' birth with various secular customs, many of which have been influenced by earlier winter festivals. The date as a birthdate for Jesus is traditional, and is not considered to be his actual date of birth.
- 26 - **Boxing Day** – A public holiday celebrated in the United Kingdom, Canada and most other Commonwealth countries on the day after Christmas Day. It is known for being the day when people would give a present or Christmas box to those who worked for them throughout the year.
- 26 - **Kwanzaa** – An African-American cultural festival beginning on December 26 and ending on January 1st. Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga created the festival in 1966 to establish a holiday that would facilitate African-American goals of building a strong family, learning about African-American history, and developing unity.
- 31 - **New Year's Eve** – Celebrations on this night typically include going to parties or gathering in public places. One of the most famous gatherings occurs at Times Square where the singing of Auld Lang Syne and drinking a toast to the New Year follow the lowering of the ball.

(Consolidated Business Center—Continued from page 2)

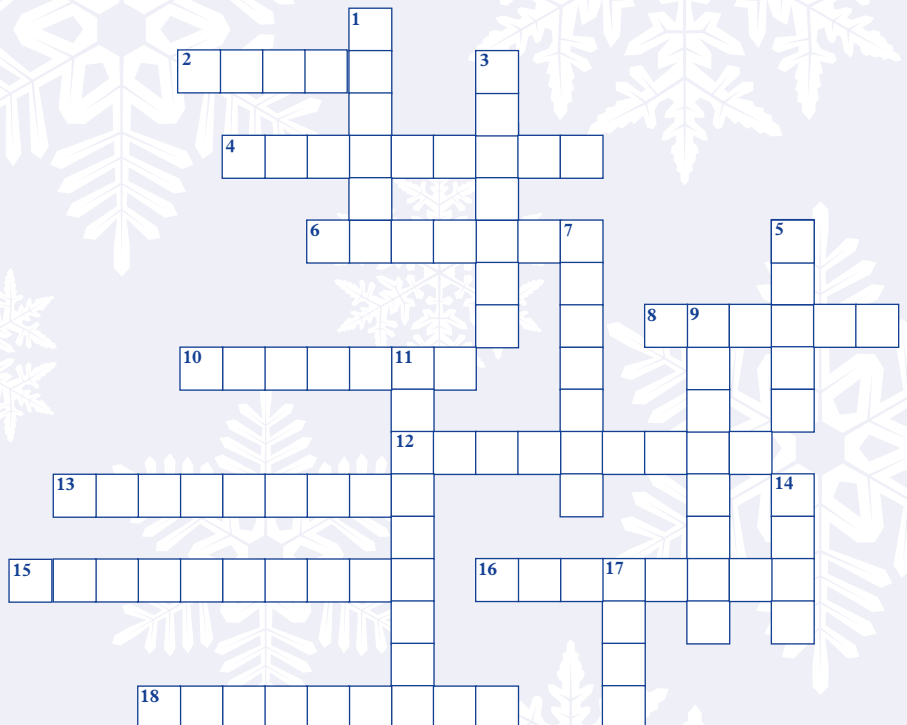
location couldn't accommodate voice mail, and the air conditioning system was in disrepair, causing the computers to fail during hot weather. Due to the high demand for hearings, the Administrative Law judges were in cubicles or had to share hearing rooms that made the taping of cases problematic. The overcrowded conditions increased the noise levels that compounded the stressful environment.

"The atmosphere is more conducive to calmness," said Jackson of the new center. "It's a pleasant environment. It seems the building itself has lent a calming effect. Sometimes tempers would flare (at Williamsbridge). But they don't seem to flare here." The improvement is so dramatic that Wright noted: "When customers come in they have a smile on their face even though some of them have to pay money."

"I'm thrilled that we have finally provided a world-class facility for Bronx residents and the great Finance employees who serve them," Commissioner Martha E. Stark said. "This has been more than 10 years in the making, and it was a team effort involving Employee Services and FIT, with a special assist from First Deputy Commissioner Rochelle Patricof."

## A HOLIDAY CROSSWORD

Many of our readers have mastered our quizzes, so this holiday season we wanted to create a different kind of challenge with a special crossword devoted to all things wintry. So while sharing good times and cheer with family and friends, work out your brain with our crossword which we hope will inspire even more winter activity. Fill out each word in the appropriate box according to the numbered clues given below the crossword, and fax your answers to Holiday Crossword – 212 232-1890. You must print your name, work location and phone number on your answer sheet. The first three entries with the correct answers will receive a prize. Good Luck!



### ACROSS

- 2 To celebrate in song
- 4 Everyone has received this but no one eats it
- 6 Benevolence towards people
- 8 Thursday's reindeer
- 10 Wrote a famous seasonal story
- 12 You can see women kick up their heels here (two words)
- 13 He nips at your nose (two words)
- 15 Many people do this while walking along Fifth Avenue (two words)
- 16 It occurs twice a year
- 18 A tree or Streisand song

### DOWN

- 1 Horse-drawn carriage
- 3 Winter activity
- 5 People pour brandy in it
- 7 See one on TV if you don't have a fireplace (two words)
- 9 Handel wrote a famous one, but Bach did too
- 11 You're on top of the world (two words)
- 14 What Citizen Kane remembered
- 17 Winter precipitation

## SMART- OPERATIONAL REVIEW DAYS

Mark your calendars for 2008 Operational Review Weeks:  
January 28th, April 28th, July 28th, and October 27th.

This Holiday issue of **ReveNEWS** is an annual collaboration between the Communications & Government Affairs Division and the Ad Hoc Committee: Alima Jones (City Register), Denise McIntosh (Customer Relations), John Mulligan (Legal), Mary Rose O'Connell (Legal), Carolyn Russell (Legal) and Debra Targhi, (Customer Relations). We would like to thank the Ad Hoc Committee, as well as David Miller and Robert Schott (Communications), for their hard work and creative contributions that indeed make this holiday issue truly special. We also thank Creative Services, Jodie Brown and Joanna Flokiewicz.

