

Tchotchke Smotchke:

A Strategic Approach to Promotional Items and Incentives

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Of all the items in the marketer's bag of tricks, the one most likely to excite clients — and least likely to be understood by them — is the promotional item. It is entirely understandable; we live in a world where it's impossible to pass 5 people on the street without seeing at least one logo or promotion emblazoned across a chest, back or forehead. People who work hard to build their businesses — and are proud of what they created — want to see their business identity out in the world.

And so they flock to the promo catalogs, ordering mugs, shirts, pens and all manner of other items (usually made out of bright plastic or cheap fabric) which they then distribute to their customers, friends and acquaintances. The immediate cost of these items can be fairly low, but the longer term costs can be very high indeed. For just a few hundred dollars, you can give yourself a reputation as an operation that's penny-pinching, cheesy, inappropriate and completely oblivious to quality.

Plan a little more carefully and spend a little more at the outset, and you can deploy an effective army of little ambassadors that will help you capture mind-share, earn repeat business and entice new customers.

6 Tips for Using Promotional Items Effectively

My friend and colleague **Ellen North of Concept Marketing and Promotions** has a tremendous amount of good advice for selecting and using promotional items to support your overall marketing objectives.

1. **Look for items with longevity.**

Promotional items can function as ever-present mini advertisements. So items with longer life spans are better investments than those that break easily or are disposable. "If you give someone something and it stays on their desk and just five people see it every day, you get a multiple factor," Ellen points out. "When we are doing a food item, we make sure the package is durable and attractive so people will want to keep using it." You have the opportunity to build a huge amount of brand awareness through just one relatively inexpensive action.

2. **Put quality before cost.**

It's always tempting to go for the cheapest possible item in a category. Pens and umbrellas are particularly subject to the cost standard. "I don't know how many times I've seen a virtually new umbrella with an organization's logo broken and in the trash," Ellen says, "or a 29 cent pen with the imprint worn off and the clip broken. People do not stop to think what that says about them and their brands."

3. **Consider your audience.**

Most people would not buy the first thing that catches their eye as a gift for their mothers, but this is exactly what even smart professionals and businesspeople do with promotional items and gifts. "At the very least, consider whether your audience is primarily male or female and whether you want to use the item at home or in the office. This tells you where to start looking for something that is different enough that people will use and enjoy it."

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4. **Respect your brand.**

The underlying purpose of using promotional items is advertising and brand awareness. “You shouldn’t do anything with a promotional item that you would not do in an expensive print advertisement,” Ellen advises. “Watch the usage of your logo, firm colors and other branding elements just as closely as you would under any other circumstance. Also, don’t forget to ask for a proof and check it carefully.”

5. **Avoid gadgets, gimmicks and knock-offs.**

Each of these things can send completely the wrong message. “If you send a knock-off, you’re saying that you don’t care about what others have worked for. If you go with a gadget or gimmicky item, you’re saying you don’t really care whether the recipient uses the item or not.”

6. **Outfit your own offices.**

“It sends a very subtle — but powerful — message to display your brand appropriately in your offices. Professional and financial firms should consider branded notepads, quality pens, leather placemats and mugs for use in the office. The expense is minimal, but the announcement of quality and attention to detail is profound.” Ellen also advises that some items, such as mugs or engraved drinking glasses, are more appropriate in your office than as giveaways. “You can always order a few extras to give away when clients admire an item.”

Innovative Gift and Promotional Ideas

After you start to get a handle on the basic “dos” and “don’ts” the real work begins. How do you select gift items that will delight the recipients, stand out and promote your brand? The answer, of course, varies from firm to firm. Here are some ideas taken from our conversation with Ellen and our experience with Evoke clients.

- **Flash drives** are both popular and practical. In addition, they can carry your message in more ways than one. Your logo can be emblazoned on the outside while the inside carries your electronic marketing kit or other promotional messages. There are even ways to use these to stay in communication with your clients through automatic Internet updates.
- **Hand sanitizers** are another useful gift item especially appropriate for events. Some versions even come with neoprene and belt clips that will “hang around” for continual use.
- **Leather book marks** can be a nice — and unexpected — gift. Concept Marketing and Evoke helped an elder law firm select some of these with a space for the recipient to insert a favorite photo. Since the firm’s tagline was “in legal matters, people matter,” these were particularly appropriate.
- **Tape flag booklets** are very useful and comparatively inexpensive. They can also be both elegant and eloquent carriers of your firm’s message. A CPA firm we work with likes to use these with a miniature version of their brochure cover.
- **Multipurpose highlighter pens** are particularly appropriate for firms recruiting on college campuses, especially if the barrel is a distinctive color.
- **Duffel bags with matching umbrellas** and other items can turn people into walking advertisements for your firm. One law firm sends this kind of kit to every third-year student who accepts a job offer.

- **Tombstone alternatives** get noticed more than the usual acrylic slabs. If the event concerns a building, a replica of the structure might be appropriate. Or perhaps a miniature newsstand with a mock-up publication will do the trick. When you have an event to commemorate, try to think out of the box — or perhaps I should say rectangle.

Value is Key

It's very easy these days to search items online. You might even find what looks like a cost savings. But a strategist like Ellen is a good ally to have on your side. Working with a specialist like this will give you more value in the long run because he or she:

- *Understands how to fit promotional items into your **overall marketing and branding framework.***
- *Knows a range of suppliers and understands how they work and how they charge so you can stay **within budget and meet your deadlines.***
- *Sees a range of items every day and can provide additional creative insight so your item **really stands out.***

There's another reason that is harder to quantify: service. Evoke always uses promotional items consultants because they smooth over a huge number of rough edges, from quality control to communicating with the factory to delivery. On one occasion the date of an event changed and the client needed some items by 8 am the next day. Ellen coordinated with the factory in Chicago, got on a plane and retrieved the item. She and her staff then worked well into the night to handle a last minute request to put the item in bags of 50 for easy distribution at the event. That wouldn't have happened if an Internet-based vendor had been used and that portion of the project would have been an unnecessary expenditure and a flop.

With promotional items it really pays to work with a professional. Find one who asks smart questions and listens to your answers. It should also be someone you are comfortable with; the longer you can work with the promotional items consultant, the more subtle and effective your promotional campaigns will be. And even if you only order one item per year, you will find that you get much better value with the right kind of help.



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No matter what you do, people will talk.

The key is getting them to say the things you want them to say about you and your business. That starts with mastering your own message and deploying it strategically. Evoke is ready to help. With our expertise – and our access to other experts (like Ellen) – you will generate the buzz you want, which will lead to the clients you need.

For more information, visit www.evokestrategies.com, email info@evokestrategies.com or call **212.967.7611**