



Getting WORK

by Nancy K. Austin

Promotional Products: The Horror, the Horror!

It landed on my desk one day — an innocuous-looking box from a colleague, an independent management consultant I don't see all that often because he lives and works halfway across the country. Inside I found another box and inside that — well, inside that was a hideous gold-toned plastic clock, fashioned to resemble a stack of giant coins, maybe four inches across. It was even personalized with my name and best wishes from my colleague — his name was engraved right next to mine on its shiny base.

Now, if you buy the idea that dispensing promotional products is a valuable marketing strategy — a move that pulls in clients like iron filings to a horseshoe magnet, inspires customer loyalty, and makes recipients stop dead in their tracks and go “Wow!” — then you assume that this time-telling tchotchke fixes my colleague's name and image firmly in my poor overheated mind. Next time somebody asks me to recommend a really great consultant, will one blink at

my gleaming desk-trinket cause me to blurt out his name? Two words: *as if!* The only thing that could get me to refer an independent professional is the quality of the IP's work, period. Not-so-subtle reminders like that tick-tocking promotion turn me off, off, off. Oh, the horror!

But, hey, maybe it's

me. I know, I'm deep into anti-establishment territory here, because the promotional products industry is one great big booming business. According to research by the Promotional Products Association International (PPAI), sales of all such merchandise have passed the \$13 billion mark. This stuff's deployed as business gifts (the dominant category), in not-for-profit promotional programs (for fundraising and public-awareness campaigns), in customer-referral programs (you propel a prospect my way, and I'll present you with a peck of plastic pickle forks), and in tons of employee incentive programs (for hitting sales or TQM or productivity bogies). Any product can be, and probably has been, transmuted into a promotional piece. Clothing's the most popular category: caps, headbands, jackets, shoes, aprons, zipper-pullers, socks, ties — an endless parade of couture. And let's



Everybody says giveaways are an indispensable marketing tool for IPs. *As if!*

not forget the always faithful pen-and-pencil duos, calendars and desk diaries, loads of acrylic doodads, air fresheners, yo-yos, wristbands, golf balls, calculators, wind chimes, towels, umbrellas, decals — even condoms (packaged inside “Safety Keychains”). Just etch Your Name Here, and you’re good to go.

Or are you?

Let’s face it, promo products are saddled with a seriously stubborn image problem. So many giveaway gizmos are cheesy, pedestrian, dorky, useless, poorly made, or else a royal pain. Somebody once presented me with a digital-clock/perpetual-calendar/time-zones-of-the-world thingy, and the operating instructions were utterly unfathomable. Out it went. Send the wrong thingamabobs, or worse, irretrievably tacky ones (a clutter of refrigerator magnets, perfume pens) and your name is Mud. To hear my corporate friends tell it, lots of these things, even the very expensive gadgets, get chucked immediately or find a sudden new purpose when you find yourself one gift short.

But the real question is: do promotional products work? Will they improve your business simply because they keep your name and image in front of the people you’re dying to impress? Although promotional items are wildly popular, hard-nosed research into whether they actually boost business is, well, spotty. There are plenty of anecdotal reports about how promotions encourage customer goodwill and spark a modest increase in referrals, for instance. There are oodles of surveys that delve into what recipients look for in promotional products (usefulness, quality, and attractiveness). But none of them go very far to explain how those warm, fuzzy feelings translate into real live buying behavior and

hard, cold cash. When you opt to go the promotional product route, you’re betting on a long shot.

I see I’ve neglected to mention that I myself own several such trinkets. These I wouldn’t dream of parting with: a small-but-fly collection of Olympic pins; an imperfect acrylic block with a walnut and a bolt encased inside (nuts and bolts, get it?); a magnificent Baccarat vase (the only such object that survived a 7.1 earthquake); a pewter cup, perfect for my makeup brushes; and coasters from the San Diego Zoo imprinted with illustrations of endangered species. Except for the pins, most of which I scarfed up myself at the 1988 Winter Games in Calgary, everything else came from somebody I remember, for reasons I understand. All the other bits and pieces — the scarves and the hats, the socks and the spice sets — have long ago been jettisoned. As it turns out, each of the treasures I kept teaches a brief but memorable lesson in promotion.

Olympic pins. Some I bought, some I traded, and a handful were given to me, but every one brings back the Games in all their glory. As fellow pin-heads are aware, most of these little enameled badges get handed out to voracious collectors by big corporate sponsors, famous names like *Sports Illustrated*, IBM, 3M, and BellSouth. Don’t assume that because the pins bear



certain company logos that I happen to recognize, I'll rush right out and buy ThinkPads or Post-its. Get real. Promotional pins aren't a form of hypnotic suggestion, folks. Mine are a fun commemoration of an extraordinary event, and that's enough. Don't go putting your logo on a pile of lapel pins; unless they're tied to an unforgettable event (imparting solid restaurant advice does not qualify), pins are a silly waste of an IP's marketing moolah.

Acrylic blocks. Along with plaques, these are the gold standard for recognition and achievement awards. You can line them up on every available surface in your office or use one as a handy door prop. But beware, they gather dust, especially deeply engraved ones, so they're hell to keep clean. Of course, my witty nuts-and-bolts block — a simple and disarming reminder to stick to the basics of the business — requires very little in the way of dusting. It carries no engraving, no imprinting, and no name at all, but it made its point, which only adds to its one-of-a-kind allure.

Baccarat vase. It weighs a ton and cost a fortune, and I love it because a client went to considerable trouble to find just the right thing to give me after I delivered a speech that happened to fall on my birthday. Sometimes it's better to give one show-stopping gift (or write one perfect letter of appreciation) than debase your reputation with a hundred cheap, silly souvenirs.



Pewter cup. It's useful, well-made, attractive, tasteful, convenient, unique, and long-lasting — the characteristics a good promotional product should have (and in that order, according to my research). Mine's engraved with a certain organization's name and a date, but between you and me, I keep that side turned toward the wall. What I value most is the cup's simple design and utility.

Animal coasters. A classic promotional product, I like these coasters because they symbolize my relationship with one of the premier zoological organizations in the world, not because I actually use them. This is one rare instance where I agree with the proponents of promotions when they say giveaways build goodwill. It does, yes, but that's because *we already had a pretty good thing going*. I like them, they like me, fine and dandy. Relationships first, goodies later.

Please understand that no promotional thingamajig can create a relationship where none exists. You're a professional. You're trying to build a business. So pay attention to what really matters: keep your skills sharp, learn new things, hustle for new clients, and show some grit. Say thank you in a unique and personal way (I send homemade cookies and a note). Leave the dreadful doodads to the also-rans.

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