

PPAI

Promotional Products Work!

10.25

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In today's crowded marketplace, promotional products need more than just a logo - they need standout design that captures attention and tells a story. While there's still tremendous value in classic, 1-color imprinting - a clean, cost-effective solution that works for countless campaigns - we believe brands should also have the ability to go beyond the basics.

At Garyline, we're leading that evolution by innovating and investing in advanced decoration methods that set our products apart. Our full-coverage printing technology allows us to 360 wrap print designs seamlessly around our American-made bottles - transforming traditional promotional products into stunning, shelf-worthy pieces that look and feel retail. This gives clients the power to express their brand in bold, creative ways without sacrificing affordability.

But we didn't stop there. Garyline has recently launched a line of embossed bottles (EXB241), featuring raised graphics achieved through a custom, in-house molding process. This elevated decoration method adds a tactile element and a premium feel, all while remaining affordable and proudly made in the USA - something few competitors can offer.

By combining design-forward thinking with in-house manufacturing and printing expertise, Garyline is redefining the norm in the promotional space. Through creative decoration techniques, we're helping brands stand out in a crowded market and leave a lasting impression.



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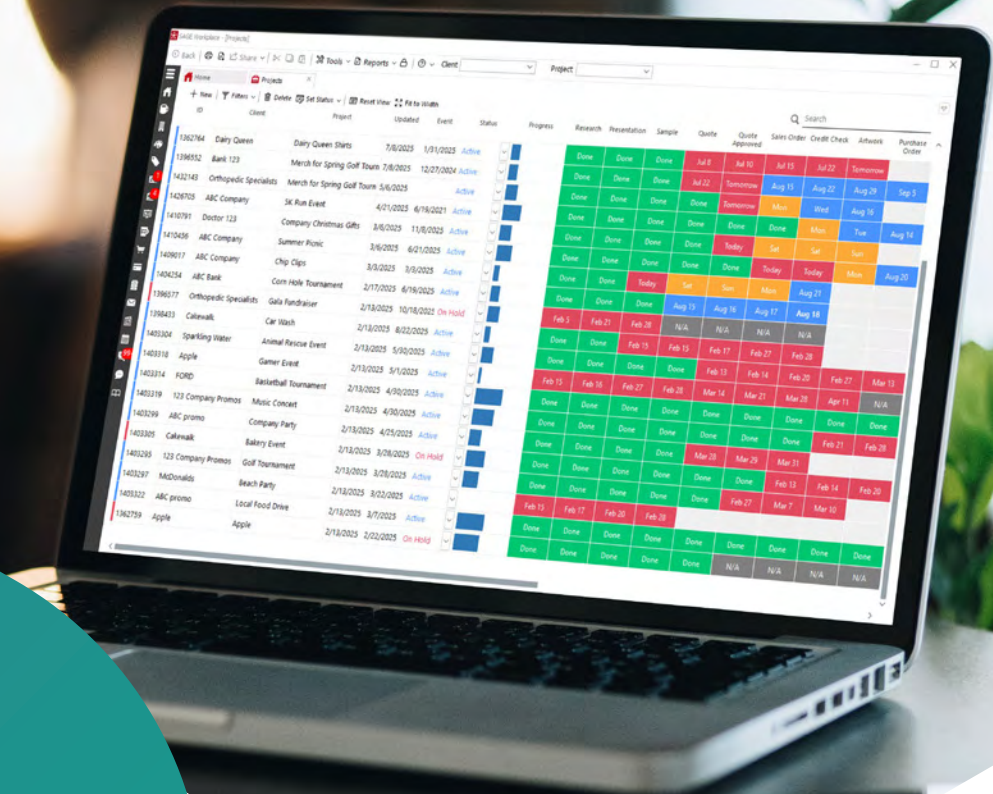


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From PPAI



Denise Taschereau
Chair of the Board

Potential Meets Progress

AS LEADERS, we all spend so much time thinking about where we're going that we don't stop often enough to trace the journey that led us here.

For example, just 20 years ago, conversations about sustainability in our industry were rare. Branded merchandise was everywhere, but concern for how it was made, who made it or its long-term impact were almost nonexistent.

A few of us believed this business could do more than promote logos – it could promote values. What felt like a niche perspective then has grown into a movement that is now reshaping the very core of our industry.

For most of us, a day doesn't go by without sustainability entering our consideration. That's progress in and of itself. But we've made real gains along the way.

The journey began with product safety. The Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008 placed a new responsibility on us to prove that our products were safe for children. It was a pivotal moment, and PPAI's Product Responsibility Action Group was out in front, leading the way for our industry to adapt and respond. Compliance, testing and traceability became standard practice, and those same systems became the foundation for today's ESG and sustainability efforts. Safety taught us accountability, and accountability has proved to be the heart of responsible business.

As expectations grew, so did the urgency. The *Fast Company* critique of "throwaway swag" challenged us to look in the mirror. The global pause of the pandemic highlighted the strain we put on planetary boundaries and showed how quickly our impact can change. Regulations like the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and updates to the FTC's Green Guides reinforced that sustainability could no longer be optional – it had to be central to how we operate.

And we have risen to face that challenge. Grassroots efforts like PromoCares mobilized the power of this community to do good. Corporate leaders set new benchmarks, such as Staples' 2022 partnership with EcoVadis – groundbreaking at the time – to bring sustainability into procurement decisions.

A few of us believed this business could do more than promote logos – it could promote values.

PPAI made sustainability a key part of the strategic plan that was developed by the Board of Directors in 2021. We established the Sustainability Advisory Group, built responsibility measures into the coveted PPAI 100 rankings from the very beginning and ensured that nearly half of our Summit programming in recent years has focused on sustainability. Elizabeth Wimbush, the Association's first ever director of sustainability and responsibility, joined the team in 2023.

All of these milestones demonstrate the momentum that is shaping our future.

Partnerships have also advanced our progress. Our collaboration with WAP Sustainability is generating a double materiality assessment, ensuring that we understand what internal and external sustainability factors will impact the industry so we can build strategies to address them proactively. Our work with the Fair Labor Association is making human rights due diligence accessible to companies of every size. These initiatives give our members not just vision but practical tools to lead with confidence.

Today, sustainability is no longer a side conversation but a business imperative. Clients expect it. Regulators demand it. Employees seek it. And as an industry, we are proving that we can rise to these expectations with innovation, transparency and a shared commitment to responsibility.

We should be proud of how far we've come but also clear-eyed about the work still ahead. Every step we take – from safer products to transparent reporting to more responsible sourcing – strengthens our relevance and impact.

Promotional products have always been powerful brand builders. Together, we are ensuring they are also powerful forces for good. ●

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**PUBLISHER &
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Josh Ellis
JoshE@ppai.org

DEPUTY EDITOR

John Corrigan
JohnC@ppai.org

SENIOR NEWS EDITOR

Jonny Auping
JonnyA@ppai.org

MARKETING COPYWRITER

Sarah Luna
sarahl@ppai.org

**MARKET ECONOMIST
& SENIOR MANAGER,
RESEARCH**

Alok Bhat
AlokB@ppai.org

PUBLIC AFFAIRS MANAGER

Rachel Zoch, CAS
RachelZ@ppai.org

RESEARCH COORDINATOR

Shiella Aparis
ShiellaA@ppai.org

ART DIRECTION

SPARK Publications
SPARKpublications.com
704-844-6080

ADVERTISING MANAGEMENT

ACCOUNT MANAGERS

Connie Brazil
Nick DiNicola
Brandon Dunaway
Heather Mangold
Mark Rykojc

PPAI.org/account-managers

ADVERTISING CONTACT

Amy Weisman
972-258-3080
AmyW@ppai.org



Promotional Products Association International

PRESIDENT & CEO

Drew Holmgren
888-I-AM-PPAI

**CHIEF REVENUE &
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Ellen Tucker, MAS, CAE

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PPAI HEADQUARTERS

3125 Skyway Circle North, Irving, Texas 75038-3526 Phone: 888-IAM-PPAI (426-7724) www.ppai.org, pubs.ppai.org

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SPECIAL OBSERVANCES CALL FOR

Compiled by
Sarah Luna

Exceptional Promotions

Use these key dates and seasonal celebrations to
spark creative campaigns your clients will love.

NOVEMBER

5 NATIONAL STRESS
AWARENESS DAY

◀ 14 NATIONAL
PICKLE DAY

17 NATIONAL TAKE
A HIKE DAY



NATIONAL PEANUT BUTTER LOVERS MONTH

Product Idea: **Dill Herb Seeds** make any campaign a big dill, delivering the fresh herb that gives pickles their signature taste. A sunny windowsill or small pot is all it takes to grow spring-ready dill for homemade pickles or countless other dishes. Each envelope contains at least 200 seeds and offers ample space for custom branding. Packaged for easy planting with clear instructions, these seeds offer a hands-on way to grow your client's brand.

Unicorn Line / PPAI 111031, Standard-Plus
unicornline.com

DECEMBER

4 NATIONAL
SOCK DAY

8 NATIONAL
CROSSWORD
PUZZLE DAY

◀ 17 NATIONAL MAPLE
SYRUP DAY



NATIONAL TIE MONTH

Product Idea: Sweeten any campaign with the authentic flavor of **Maple Shape Candies**. Shaped like the iconic leaf and individually packaged for freshness, each piece is made with simple, high-quality ingredients that will appeal to any taste bud. Packaged together in a burlap bag that adds gift appeal and rustic charm, the candies have a two-year shelf life, making them a memorable treat for any event program or campaign.

Yorkn / PPAI 599060, Standard-Base / yorkn.com

JANUARY

◀ 4 NATIONAL
TRIVIA DAY

15 NATIONAL
BAGEL DAY

21 SQUIRREL
APPRECIATION DAY



NATIONAL SOUP MONTH

Product Idea: Trivia gets a playful twist with the **Delightfully Useless Trivia** set by Brass Monkey featuring 200 quirky questions from TV sitcoms to true crime. The set is organized by theme and has three ways to play. The compact design and multiple branding options make it an effortless fit for client gifting, event giveaways or a marketing campaign that calls for something fun, memorable and a little unexpected.

The Book Company / PPAI 218850, Standard-Base
thebookco.com

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Essentials

IN STYLE

GIFTING FOR GENERATION Z

As Gen Z streams into the workforce, employers must rethink their gifting strategies to reflect a generation driven by bold style, strong values and a demand for sustainability.

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SPOTLIGHT *p. 18*



Eco Essentials For A **Lighter** Footprint

Distributors share their favorite products that help clients reduce carbon emissions, avoid excess waste and tell a more sustainable branding story.

Compiled by Sarah Luna



STEPH SHAW
E-Commerce Assistant
Sky High Marketing
PPAI 358169, Silver
Waukesha, Wisconsin

Shaw often recommends a plantable **SproutWorld Pencil** to clients looking to cut back on waste. Made from FSC-certified wood with a biodegradable capsule at the end, it can be planted to transform into herbs, flowers or vegetables once the writing days are over. "It's a great eco-friendly giveaway or gifting item," Shaw says. "It pairs great with a recycled journal or notebook." A laser-engraved logo on the barrel keeps branding in hand.

Koozie Group / PPAI 114187, Platinum
kooziegroup.com

Warmth, function and sustainability come together in the **Artisan Insulated Quilted Shirt Jacket**, which recycles 25 plastic bottles into every piece. "It feels good knowing this item has a positive impact on our planet," Shaw says.

Made with bluesign-approved fabric, the windproof and water-resistant shacket includes 100 GSM Thermolite



New Africa / Shutterstock.com



EcoMade insulation, a curved hem and a workwear-inspired quilted design. Available in men's and women's cuts, the jacket also offers a right chest pocket and hidden embroidery access for easy decoration.

Storm Creek / PPAI 438091, Gold / stormcreek.com

Made in the USA from 600D recycled polyester, the **Sublime Series rPET Duffel Bag** reuses post-consumer bottles and avoids emissions formed during conventional polyester production. Strong straps, double zippers and a detachable shoulder strap make it sturdy enough for everyday use. "These would be perfect for a game-day giveaway or school athletics program," Shaw says. The bag also has a wide imprint panel along the side, giving teams or sponsors ample space to show off logos.

Hit Promotional Products / PPAI 113910, Platinum
hitpromo.net



Say goodbye to plastic wrap with **Honey Bee Beeswax Food Wraps**, a reusable, washable and compostable alternative to single-use plastics. Made from cotton, beeswax and plant oil, they shape easily around bowls, sandwiches or produce using just the warmth of your hands.

"These beeswax wraps are perfect for wrapping sandwiches, covering bowls or keeping produce fresh," Shaw says. Each set includes two sizes and is packaged in a recycled kraft sleeve with space for branding. FDA-compliant and naturally antimicrobial, they're a smart option for eco-conscious gifting.

HPG / PPAI 110772, Platinum / hpgbrands.com

A portion of proceeds supports Shelter to Soldier, which trains rescue dogs as service animals for veterans.



The **Perka Barbarossa 24-oz. Recycled Tumbler** is one of Shaw's top items for reducing carbon footprint. The outer wall includes a blend of recycled coffee grounds and recycled polypropylene, while the inner wall is made from 20% post-consumer recycled stainless steel.

"This tumbler has an upscale look and feel," Shaw says. It comes with a screw-top lid and dual flip closures for hot or cold drinks, a reusable straw with a soft silicone tip and an anti-slip base. The tumbler is BPA-free and FDA-compliant, and it arrives in a kraft gift box. A portion of proceeds supports Shelter to Soldier, which trains rescue dogs as service animals for veterans.

Logomark / PPAI 110898, Platinum / logomark.com

Shaw recommends the **Port Authority Eco Snapback Trucker Cap** for keeping brands front and center while reducing waste. Made from 100% recycled polyester, including both the structured twill front panels and breathable mesh back, it's a sustainable upgrade to a standard cap. "It comes in several colors to coordinate with your client's branding," Shaw says.

The cap has a structured, mid-profile fit with a seven-position adjustable snapback closure. The front panel offers space for embroidery or patches, making it an easy choice for outdoor events, branded apparel programs or eco-conscious campaigns.

SanMar / PPAI 110788, Platinum / [sanmar.com](https://www.sanmar.com)



BRENT HOSKINS, MAS

President
Market Branding
PPAI 69452, Standard-Base
Vancouver, British Columbia

Hoskins currently uses the **MiiR Olympus 2.0 25L Laptop Backpack**. The roll-top design adds expandable space, while the padded laptop sleeve, reflective accents and water-repellent coating make it functional for daily commutes. Other eco-conscious details include recycled zipper pulls, mesh panels and key fob. "It features AWARE textile traceability to provide verified tracking of its environmental impact from origin to consumer," adds Hoskins. Each MiiR product supports transparent giving programs that benefit communities and the planet.

Gemline / PPAI 113948, Platinum / [gemline.com](https://www.gemline.com)

The **h2go Talus 30-oz. Tumbler** is on Hoskin's must-try list, because he likes that the product is "carbon-accountable at an accessible price point." The reusable item is made with 91% post-consumer recycled stainless steel, so it's made with lower energy use and emissions. Copper vacuum insulation keeps drinks hot or cold for hours, and a push-on lid with slide closure offers spill-resistant sipping. The powder-coated finish provides a clean surface for logos, and each tumbler is packaged in an FSC-certified gift box.

ETS Express / PPAI 135148, Platinum
[etsexpress.com](https://www.etsexpress.com)



The reusable item is made with 91% post-consumer recycled stainless steel.





The ClimeCo Certified Product Program measures and offsets any remaining carbon footprint, verifying its low-impact profile.

Hoskins is interested in trying the **C-FREE District Re-Blanket**. “It stands out as a sustainable choice for high-volume, everyday promotional products.”

Made from a blend of recycled cotton and post-consumer polyester fabric that has never been re-dyed, this blanket reduces emissions and water use tied to textile finishing. The ClimeCo Certified Product Program measures and offsets any remaining carbon footprint, verifying its low-impact profile. The blanket comes fully hemmed and offers ample space for branding. It’s comfortable, durable and carbon-accounted.

SanMar / PPAI 110788, Platinum / [sanmar.com](https://www.sanmar.com)



Extreme weather protection and lower-impact design go hand in hand with the **Stormtech Vertex Stormshell**. Made of 45% recycled polyester with mechanical stretch for range of motion, this three-layer waterproof jacket has fully sealed seams, underarm zips for ventilation and a helmet-compatible hood with a welded brim. With a water-resistant zipper, adjustable cuffs and an extended back hem, it’s made to handle the elements. “It’s a strong recommendation for clients looking to offer high-performance gear with reduced environmental impact,” says Hoskins.

Stormtech Performance Apparel / PPAI 260245, Platinum / [stormtechperformance.com](https://www.stormtechperformance.com)



The **Duelix 500mAh Wireless Powerbank** doesn’t skimp on sustainability. Made from 100% recycled ABS plastic, it arrives in packaging designed for a second life (as a circular calendar) to further cut down on waste. “It’s a practical promotional product recipients will actually use every day,” Hoskins says.

The powerbank includes a 5,000mAh battery with wireless charging for phones and a built-in Apple Watch charger that swivels out from the back. A kickstand makes it perfect for video calls or streaming, and a fast-charge USB-C port adds flexibility. Compact and lightweight, it’s an all-in-one item that keeps your brand on-the-go. ●

Rupt / PPAI 826757, Silver / [rupt.com](https://www.rupt.com)

Luna is a marketing copywriter at PPAI.

Gifting For Generation Z

As Gen Z streams into the workforce, employers must rethink their gifting strategies to reflect a generation driven by bold style, strong values and a demand for sustainability.

By Hanna Brookshire



GENERATION Z – often defined as people born between 1997 and 2012 – makes up 18% of the workforce, surpassing the population of baby boomers, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

With this quickly growing demographic comes new preferences and world views to consider when it comes to gifting and workplace culture.

Because Gen Z grew up with the internet, it's not surprising that they are one of the most fashion-focused demographics. With constant inspiration from social media and

a push for values to be reflected in garments, Gen Z knows exactly what they want.

While trends come and go, though, timeless basics still have a place in every Gen Zer's wardrobe. When in doubt, something versatile is a good choice. Additionally, decorating items with more subtle logos or artistic graphics allows promo items to feel more like retail pieces. There's a level of minimalism and elegance that Gen Z likes in a branded item.

Neutral colors will always be important, but don't shy away from bold colors. Gen Z loves to take risks,

recently popularizing colors like butter yellow and cherry red.

Gen Z is full of outspoken change-makers, so make sure items reflect that spirit. Choosing items made from recycled materials or ethically sourced fibers is a great way to show you care about their views. As the generation set to inherit a world greatly impacted by climate change, eco-friendly options are crucial. Not only is it good for the planet, but it shows that Gen Z's values are heard and respected.

As a Gen Zer myself, I have gathered a few products that are perfect for the workplace

The **Heritage Prep Crew** is a classic sweatshirt with vintage-inspired details. While it is a men's item, it could be worn by anyone. It comes in four neutral color options – gray, black, navy and cream – and sizes S-3XL. Each color includes contrasting stripes on the wristbands, collar and hem. Adding a logo in the color of the accent stripes is a great way to maintain a minimalistic and elevated look.

Momentec / PPAI 187246, Silver / augustasportswear.com



This **Rockridge Quarter-Zip Cotton Fleece Pullover** is a cozy staple that offers inclusive sizing and comes in beautiful fall colors like forest green, maroon and navy, plus black and gray. Made of prewashed soft cotton, it's extra cozy starting with the very first wear. It also includes open side pockets and vintage-inspired trims.

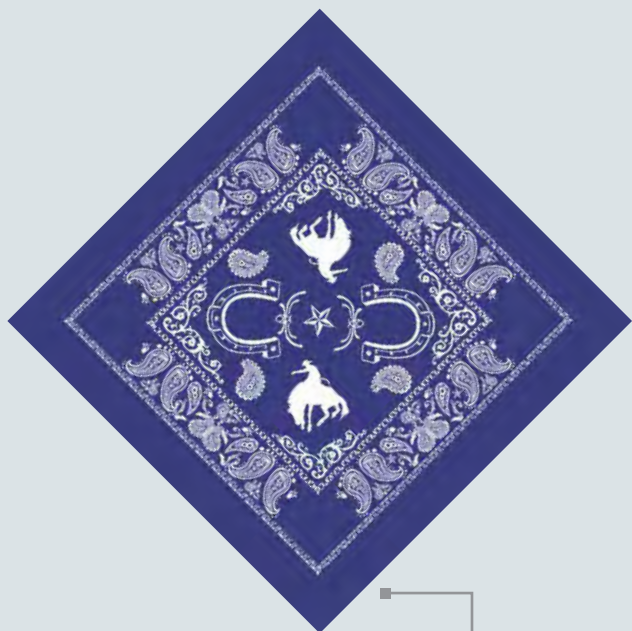
Landway / PPAI 243349, Standard-Base / landway.com



The **Robin Textured Cardigan** is a versatile piece for the office. Made with a two-tone stitch in both seashell and black/white, it has a roomy fit, is machine washable and comes in sizes XS-XL. This cardigan can be worn as a top or layered over a blouse or dress.

Marine Layer / PPAI 690355, Standard-Base / marinelayer.com





Bandanas have been making a comeback in fashion, and this USA-made **Solid Stock Colors Bandanna** is an ideal choice. According to Scott Thackston, director of marketing and product development at Caro-Line, the bandanna is made of 100% cotton natural cloth and is printed with eco-friendly water-based PMS ink.

Caro-Line / PPAI 113413, Silver / caro-line.net

The **LoveLetters Fanny Pack** offers endless customization possibilities, allowing even the pickiest Gen Zer to find something they like. This on-trend fanny pack is offered in 42 colors, ranging from neutrals to bright orange. After you pick a color, you can customize it further with patches of shapes and letters. This item can hold four letters or symbols, enough for a monogram and shape or some other combination.

LBU Inc. / PPAI 111287, Standard-Plus / lbuinc.com



This **Trendsetter Kit** is perfect for the on-the-go Gen Z worker. This kit includes the Soho Elizabeth Small Backpack, the Slim Wireless Power Bank and Chromeo Wireless Earbuds and Wireless Charger. These items all come standard with full-color personalization. Customize the items with a creative and trendy graphic or simple logo to appeal to Gen Z. The backpack comes in a black/gray color, and the portable charger is black. ●

HPG / PPAI 110772, Platinum / hpgbrands.com

Brookshire is a freelance writer and former PPAI Media intern.

Zero-Operations Online Stores Designed for Distributors

The Single Serve Merch platform makes creating evergreen and pop-up shops easy, painless, and risk-free.

FOR MANY DISTRIBUTORS, setting up online stores after making a sale feels more like a chore than a win. Setting them up is time-consuming, managing them is messy, and the process often stalls sales momentum.

Single Serve Merch is set to change that.

“Our on-demand platform takes all of the store management off your plate, so you can stay focused on landing new accounts,” says founder Todd Richheimer, a 30-year veteran in decorated apparel. “Distributors don’t want more busywork. They want more sales and opportunities.”

With on-demand production, there’s no inventory risk, no wasted product, and clients always get exactly what they want. Stores launch in minutes and run seamlessly in the background, letting salespeople move faster, win more projects, and keep clients engaged.

A Platform Engineered for Distributors

Richheimer developed the Single Serve Merch platform, a vertical, full-service solution for branded on-demand and pop-up stores. “We do the heavy lifting, so you’re not drowning in spreadsheets,” he says. Every order is produced in real time from its facility and shipped in compostable packaging, giving distributors and their clients a seamless experience.

The platform’s proprietary SinglePick tool revolutionizes the way distributors and clients collaborate

to select products for online stores quickly.

“SinglePick lets a salesperson upload a client logo, set margins, and pull from our collections of wearables and hard goods,” Richheimer says. “Then, share a live landing page with the client to add or remove products, pick colors, and leave notes, so it engages them.”

When you build a store, selected products are displayed with the chosen colors, positioned logos, and set pricing defaults. “It takes 30 seconds to build a product,” he says.

Fast and Intuitive Stores

Single Serve Merch delivers an easy-to-use interface, allowing users to set up products and stores in minutes.

Beyond the interface, Single Serve Merch includes everything from a ready-to-go product catalog and POD decoration methods to back-end functions like payments, tax management, and international shipping. “Distributors can build the store, or we can, but after that, we take over,” Richheimer says.

As distributors add more client stores, they leverage features like branded emails, detailed financial dashboards, and donation options.

All Back-End Work Done-for-You

After a store launches, the platform handles customer support, fulfillment, and reporting, so distributors can continue selling.

The Single Serve team provides an automated help desk and white-label

customer service. “We respond to end-user questions via live chat on each store,” Richheimer says.

The Single Serve platform is also robust and hyper-granular.

“Our reporting gives a clear snapshot of sales and cash flow by store, so distributors can see how their clients are doing,” Richheimer says. “In addition, every transaction, from deposits to subscriptions, is attached to the right store, so distributors can also run commissions for salespeople and see how each account is performing.”

Richheimer continuously curates and expands Single Serve’s product catalog, with options for custom kits, notes, and gift boxes. “Our POD mix includes apparel, hard goods, food, plants, Stanley drinkware, oversized games, and retail lines like Helly Hansen and Woolly Made,” he says. “We’re adding print products like business cards.”

Distributor reps can try the Single Serve platform for free at SingleServeMerch.com. “Our platform relieves pain points and gives peace of mind for salespeople,” Richheimer says. “They just want to sell and land new accounts.”





Product Testing

These verified PPAI-member business services firms are helping promo companies make real progress toward smarter and more responsible operations.

PRODUCT SAFETY, sustainability and compliance aren't optional, they're essential. That's where product testing comes in.

The environmental impact of promotional products begins long before an item reaches the end user. Reliable product testing prevents waste, ensures compliance and protects resources invested in every order. Without it, a single defect can mean an entire shipment is scrapped, in addition to losing the labor, raw materials and transportation that went into producing it.

By catching issues early, testing helps manufacturers avoid costly do-overs. It verifies recycled fabrics for durability, confirms the biodegradability of packaging and checks whether low-impact inks truly deliver on their eco-friendly promises. With solid data from accredited labs, companies can stand behind sustainability claims.

Testing also strengthens production itself. Inspections at critical stages cut down on defects and unusable goods. Accurate forecasting

paired with tested, correctly sized orders reduces excess inventory and lowers emissions tied to storage and shipping.

Consistent testing is more than a box to check. It saves resources, protects budgets and keeps campaigns running smoother. When multiple companies commit to the same high standards, the industry shows that responsibility and progress go hand in hand. ●

See more on these business services providers and many more. Visit PPAI.org/solutions.

The Provider**The Solution****QIMA**

PPAI 517075; Standard-Plus

QIMA is a global quality control and compliance service provider that teams with brands, retailers, distributors and suppliers to secure, manage and optimize their global supply chain.



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PPAI 826747; Standard-Base

A trusted partner for independent testing and certification, Hohenstein has over 75 years of experience in studying the human product – environment interaction. It develops science-based methods and standards that consider real-life use, not just in the lab.

**HQTS-QA International**

PPAI 888395; Standard-Base

HQTS-QA has solutions for all small to large companies that import from any Asian or Middle East country and are looking to reduce costs and take control of their product's safety.

**Insight Quality Services**

PPAI 638198; Standard-Base

Insight Quality is a quality assurance company that provides audits, inspections and testing management.

**MADE Laboratory**

PPAI 822854; Standard-Base

MADE Laboratory specializes in testing and development, including full-scope fabrication testing, and apparel profiling with data and documentation, comprehensive consumables testing and performance comparisons.

**TÜV Rheinland**

PPAI 638919; Standard-Base

TÜV Rheinland is an independent, third-party testing, inspection and certification body. It conducts comprehensive lab testing, inspection, verification and certification services in key manufacturing locations, which saves both time and money.

**TÜV SÜD America**

PPAI 690221; Standard-Base

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YOUR BUSINESS

FROM SWAG TO STRATEGY

Teach clients the true value
of branded goods.

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The Circularity Solution

This is promo's secret weapon against tariffs and tough markets.

By Elizabeth Wimbush, CAS



OUR INDUSTRY HAS ALWAYS been good at turning pens, totes, drinkware and apparel into tangible and exciting brand stories. But lately, the story hasn't been as fun to tell.

Tariffs are driving up costs, freight prices swing more than a bad DJ set, and clients – spooked by the economy – are trimming budgets. And if you've got a warehouse full of slow-moving stock, well, congratulations: You're now the proud curator of a very niche, very expensive museum.

The instinct in times like these is often to hunker down, cut costs, clear space and wait it out. But there's another path that not only helps navigate these pressures but can actually turn them into opportunities: circularity.

Circularity isn't just a sustainability talking point, it's a business strategy. It's about keeping products, materials and resources in play for as long as possible, creating loops that capture more value from what you already have instead of constantly buying new. For promo companies, it can mean reducing tariff exposure, unlocking new revenue streams and building resilience in a turbulent market.

Good As New

In the traditional linear model, leftover products from an order, outdated designs and returned products often end up written off or discarded. Circular thinking flips that script.

Every box of product in your warehouse is potential raw

material. Overrun drinkware from a canceled order could be reprinted with a fresh design and sold at a discount. Outdated apparel could be overprinted, embroidered or patched with new branding. There are whole merch lines for popular music artists using this strategy and proving to be very popular with concertgoers. Even products with minor defects can be refurbished, packaged creatively and moved into a clearance or "circular special" line.

The key is recognizing that this inventory is already paid for. You're simply finding a second life for it instead of paying tariffs and freight on brand-new goods. In other words: Stop letting your money collect dust in the warehouse when it could be out there collecting *actual* money.

The real leap for promo companies is seeing circularity not as a side project but as core strategy. The benefits aren't just environmental, they're financial.

Refurbishment As Revenue

Other industries have proved the potential for payoff. In the medical device sector, one company invested \$500,000 in a refurbishment program and pulled in \$3.5 million a year in returns. That's a 600% ROI - not bad for what's essentially giving old products a spa day.

In promo, apparel, bags and tech accessories are all prime candidates for refresh programs. Imagine offering a corporate client the option to "rebrand" their existing promo gear and swapping out old logos for a new campaign at a fraction of the cost of a full reorder. You get repeat business without waiting for them to budget for a brand-new purchase, and they get sustainability bragging rights without having to explain to their CFO why they just paid for 500 more jackets when last year's are still perfectly wearable.

In the fashion world, brands using resale platforms like ThredUp and eBay's Pre-Loved Partner Program are making millions annually, not just in direct sales, but in customer acquisition and PR buzz. The promo equivalent could be just as effective.

A tote bag supplier could collect gently used branded bags from distributors, reprint them and resell them as limited runs. A drinkware company could give clients a credit for returning old tumblers, then refurbish and resell them in clearance channels. Distributors could host "swag swap" events for local businesses, trading in old branded goods for discounts on new orders while diverting products from the landfill.

These aren't just waste reduction strategies, they're ways to keep your brand in front of customers between orders. And frankly, they're a heck of

a lot more creative than sending yet another email blast with the subject line "Need Merch?"

Localized Loops To Beat Tariffs

Circularity also builds tariff resistance by reducing dependence on imported virgin materials. When you reuse or refurbish products already in your domestic supply chain, you're no longer as exposed to geopolitical price swings or trade restrictions.

A tote manufacturer could source reclaimed fabric from a local textile recycler instead of ordering new rolls from overseas. A decorator could focus on refurbishing blank products already in their warehouse or bought secondhand from clients. Shorter, localized loops mean fewer shipping delays, lower freight costs and far less stress when a surprise tariff announcement drops right before a big client order.

Technology Makes It Easier

What once required costly infrastructure can now be done efficiently with accessible tech. Direct-to-film and UV printing allow for fast, high-quality reprints on existing products. Simple barcode scanning apps help track returns and manage refurbished stock. Even small, AI-powered inventory tools can flag slow-moving SKUs early enough to pivot them into a "second life" program before they become obsolete.

Basically, the technology exists to make circularity possible without needing a warehouse full of robots - although if you want a warehouse full of robots, that's between you, your *Jetsons*-themed dreams and your budget.

Telling The Story

The real leap for promo companies is seeing circularity not as a side project but as core strategy. The benefits aren't just environmental, they're financial.

You reduce the need for costly new imports, generate revenue from assets you already own and keep your brand relevant with clients who increasingly value sustainability in their marketing spend.

And just as important, it's a story worth telling. Clients are looking for partners who can help them stretch budgets, reduce waste and still deliver impact. Sharing measurable results - like units saved from the landfill, dollars saved on materials or emissions avoided - positions you as more than just a supplier or distributor. You become the marketing equivalent of a Swiss Army knife: practical, versatile and always there when needed.

Circularity offers the promo industry a way to stay nimble when the market isn't playing nice. It transforms slow-moving stock into revenue, turns tariff pressure into motivation for local sourcing and makes sustainability a sales tool.

In a market where margins are thin and competition is fierce, it's a way to keep more value in your own loop and out of someone else's landfill.

The companies that start experimenting now - whether with refurbishment pilots, take-back programs or creative inventory refreshes - will be the ones who weather the economic storms and come out stronger. Because in promo, just like in sustainability, the smartest moves are the ones that keep your resources working for you as long as possible.

Why not make a little more money while saving the planet? ●

Wimbush is the director of sustainability and responsibility at PPAL.

Data Does Good



Digital transformation meets sustainability with tech platforms to redefine accountable sourcing.

By Tanaisha Dunbarger



EVERY MONTH, THIS COLUMN is all about transformation. And yes, the promo industry has been modernizing quickly. But that's not just in technological terms - it's also in our care for the planet and society all around us.

The one can serve the other. Digitization has reshaped everything from order processing to product discovery, but one of the most important evolutions is happening right now at the intersection of sustainability and digital reporting. Increasingly, companies are discovering that eco-consciousness isn't just about sourcing better materials or trimming carbon footprints - it's about *proving it* through transparent, data-driven tools.

More and more, clients need proof, not promises.

Increasingly, companies are discovering that eco-consciousness isn't just about sourcing better materials or trimming carbon footprints - it's about proving it through transparent, data-driven tools.

For years, sustainability claims in the promo industry were aspirational. "Recycled materials," "organic cotton," or "responsibly sourced" were enough to catch a buyer's eye. Today, buyers - especially those representing large corporate brands - expect substantiation. They want to know how a product's life cycle affects the planet and how a supplier is reducing its impact.

That expectation puts pressure on distributors and suppliers alike to deliver more than talking points. You need measurables. Enter the rise of sustainability platforms - digital tools that

track, analyze and display the environmental impact of products and operations in real time.

The go-to solutions for these kinds of tools include PPAI business services members like Aclymate, Aware, DayRize and Green Business Benchmark. EcoVadis and B Corp certifications have their own systems as well.

The advantage of digital reporting dashboards like these is twofold. First, it gives suppliers and distributors internal visibility into their progress toward sustainability goals. Second, it provides customers with transparent evidence that



If two suppliers offer comparable products, the one that can provide auditable, shareable sustainability data has the edge.

they can take to their own stakeholders, from marketing teams to ESG committees.

This is transformative stuff in our industry. For example, these digital scoreboards can prove the percentage of a supplier's line made with recycled content or the reduction in water usage compared to industry averages. Carbon offsets associated with certain orders or production processes are there, too – the kind of thing that buyers love to brag about to their own stakeholders.

These metrics not only reinforce credibility but also create a competitive differentiator. If two suppliers offer comparable products, the one that can provide auditable, shareable sustainability data has the edge.

It's important to note that the shift to these sorts of platforms for tracking sustainability metrics isn't just about "going green" – it's about going digital. Companies that invest in digital sustainability tools often discover operational benefits far beyond compliance and

marketing. These dashboards centralize data that used to be scattered across spreadsheets, certificates and third-party reports. It streamlines communication between suppliers and distributors, and it reduces the administrative burden of fielding endless client requests for ESG documentation.

Think of it as sustainability meeting efficiency. The companies pioneering in this space are demonstrating that eco-consciousness, when paired with technology, is not a cost center but a value driver.

Digital sustainability reporting is not without its challenges, of course. Smaller suppliers may balk at the cost of implementing sophisticated systems. Data collection can be messy, especially across global supply chains with varying standards. And then there's the question of integration: Will one company's dashboard integrate with a distributor's system or a client's procurement platform?

These hurdles are real, but they mirror the growing

pains of every other digital transformation we've seen in this industry. Ten years ago, ecommerce portals felt out of reach for many midsize suppliers. Today, they're table stakes. The same trajectory is unfolding for sustainability platforms.

Two forces make this conversation urgent. First, regulatory pressures around ESG disclosure are increasing worldwide, and promotional products companies serving global clients must be prepared to comply. Second, younger generations of buyers place sustainability at the top of their purchasing criteria. For them, digital proof isn't optional – it's expected.

That means the companies that adopt digitized sustainability early are not just doing the right thing – they're positioning themselves to win the next wave of business.

Digital transformation in promo is about more than efficiency or convenience. It's about credibility. As sustainability becomes a defining business priority, reporting tools will be the way companies separate aspiration from action.

Think of it this way: Eco-consciousness without data to back it up is just marketing. Eco-consciousness with accessible proof is accountability. And accountability, in today's market, might be the most valuable brand asset a company can own. ●

Dunbarger is the project management lead at PPAI.

From Swag To Strategy



Teach clients
the true value of
branded goods.

By Michele Schwartz



FOR AS LONG AS most of us can remember, the promotional products industry has battled a perception problem. Too often, branded merchandise gets lumped into the category of “swag” – a box to check at a trade show, a giveaway tossed into a tote bag, a budget line item that can be trimmed without consequence.

But those of us inside the industry know better. We've seen firsthand how a thoughtfully chosen product can elevate a brand, spark an emotional connection and drive measurable business results.

The challenge - and the opportunity - lies in teaching clients to see what we see. For every business in this

industry, including yours, storytelling matters more than ever.

Marketing leaders are inundated with pitches, from digital ad buys to influencer campaigns to experiential activations. Each comes packaged with metrics, case studies and data dashboards. In that crowded landscape, distributors can no longer afford to position promo as “stuff with logos.” To capture the attention and imagination of clients, we must frame promotional products as an integral part of the marketing mix.

That means telling a story - about reach, recall, engagement and the emotional resonance that comes when a brand exists

in someone's daily life, not just their feed. Unlike a fleeting impression online, a branded product can live on a desk, in a kitchen or on a backpack for months or years, creating hundreds of micro-interactions.

That's a story worth telling. And best of all, it's a *true* story. There is data to back it up. The key is to make all the numbers digestible. Clients don't need a 40-page report; they need a single chart or stat that underscores your point. Check out the most updated Ad Map at PPAI's Premium Research hub, comparing promo to other mediums in terms of likeability to recall.

At the macro level,
distributors should remind

clients that our industry is not about trinkets – it’s about impact. Promotional products consistently rank among the most cost-effective advertising channels, often outperforming traditional and digital media in cost-per-impression studies. They drive brand recall at levels digital banners can only dream of.

But this story is bigger than just numbers. It’s also about human connection. A pen handed across a desk, a hoodie worn to a community event,

a water bottle carried to the gym – these are extensions of a brand into the real world. When told well, that narrative shifts promo from a “nice-to-have” to a “must-have.”

Words matter. Distributors can elevate their conversations by using the language of strategy instead of the language of stuff.

It might mean shifting your vocab just a bit. Replace “*Here are some pens we can do for you*” with “*Here’s a tool to keep your brand in front of clients*

Consider this a call to elevate. The industry doesn’t lack powerful stories. What it needs is more distributors willing to tell them with conviction, clarity and creativity.

24/7 at less than a penny per impression.” Instead of “This water bottle comes in four colors,” try “This product aligns with the wellness narrative your HR team is building internally.”

It’s not about abandoning product knowledge. It’s about framing that knowledge in ways that connect to marketing objectives.

Consider this a call to elevate. The industry doesn’t lack powerful stories. What it needs is more distributors willing to tell them with conviction, clarity and creativity. Every client conversation is a chance to reframe the narrative – from swag to strategy, from trinkets to tools, from giveaways to game-changers.

When we teach clients to see our products not as expenses but as investments, the whole industry benefits. More importantly, so do the brands we serve. In a marketplace where attention is fleeting, promotional products remain one of the few mediums that linger, connect and endure.

That’s a story worth telling until the industry’s true value is undeniable. ●

Schwartz is the manager of supplier and business services sales at PPAI

Teaching Clients Through Case Studies

One of the most powerful ways distributors can reshape client perceptions is by bringing stories to life with examples. Instead of opening a presentation with a catalog, start with a case study.

- Show how a nonprofit used branded apparel to unify volunteers and double event participation.
- Highlight how a company launching a new product embedded QR codes into giveaways to drive digital engagement.
- Share a campaign where sustainable merchandise reinforced a client’s ESG commitments and resonated with employees and customers alike.

Each of these is not just about a product – it’s about solving a marketing problem. When clients see themselves in these stories, they begin to view distributors less as order-takers and more as strategic partners.



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FEATURE

OUR SUSTAINABILITY JOURNEY

Once dismissed as an afterthought, sustainability has become a driving force reshaping the promotional products industry, from buyer expectations to boardroom priorities.

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