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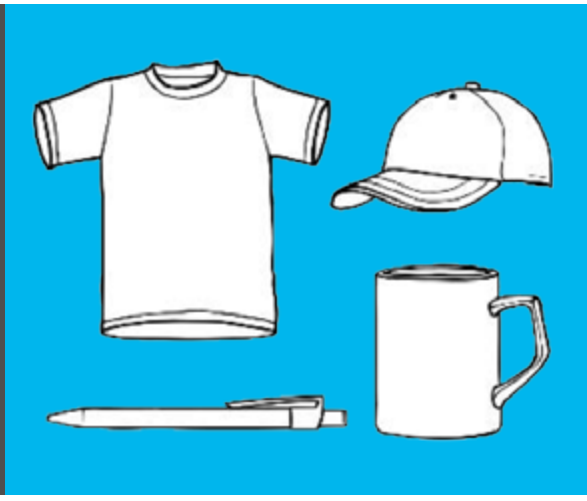
# How to sell promotional products



A step-by-step guide to getting started in the promo industry

# Taking the first step

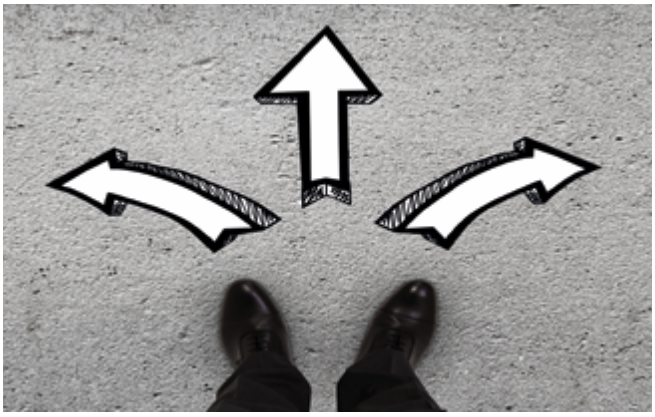
So you've decided that you want to sell promotional products. **Why?** The obvious response may be to earn a steady income. The not-so-obvious answer is a bit more heartfelt.

In a TED talk by Simon Sinek, he demonstrates the power a brand has when it puts the 'why' at the center of the business. This is not a corporate or even a practical objective. It's a from-the-heart-sentiment.

Here is a powerful excerpt from his speech: "...very, very few people or organizations know why they do what they do. And by 'why' I don't mean 'to make a profit.' That's a result. It's always a result.

By 'why', I mean: **What's your purpose? What's your cause? What's your belief? Why does your organization exist? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care?** As a result, the way we think, we act, the way we communicate is from the outside in, it's obvious.

We go from the clearest thing to the fuzziest thing. But the inspired leaders and the inspired organizations – regardless of their size, regardless of their industry – all think, act and communicate from the inside out."



# In other words...

**People don't buy what you do; People buy why you do it.**

# Care about your customers

In this industry you'll come across a number of competitors. Nearly anyone with a catalog full of pens and pencils can get a sale. But it takes a positive and caring individual to gain a client and keep them loyal. Listening to your client's aims and goals is going to help set you apart from others, while also keeping your customers happy.

**Here's what your goal should be:** As a promotional products distributor, your goal is to help promote other peoples' businesses. Hence, listening and responding with successful action is the key to achieving long-term success in this business. This means getting to know your client well enough to understand what is being said as well as what isn't being said.

# Do your homework

The promotional products business is an easy business to get into, as the cost to enter is low. However, in order to sustain a career in it, one needs the right resources to make it all work. You must first understand the value of promotional products.

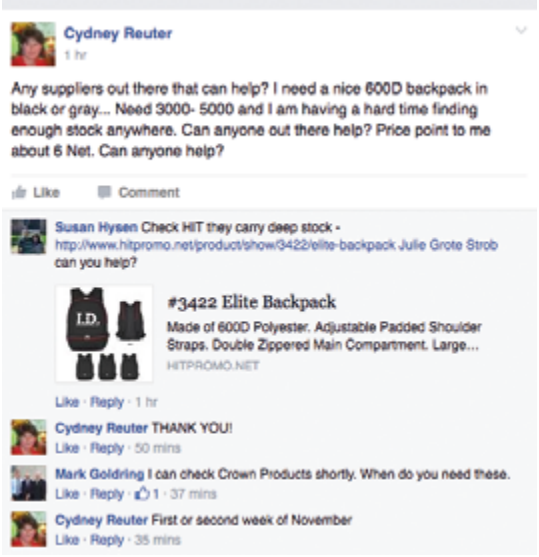
Understanding the value of promotional products to your target audience will help you to persuade them that they are spending their money on something more valuable than an Adwords campaign or newspaper ad. If you have any graphic design skills, do some research and create your own infographic – it's the sort of content that builds brand awareness and boosts credibility. And if design isn't your thing, then simply incorporate statistics about the benefit of promo items into your marketing messages.

89% of consumers recall the name of the advertiser on a promotional product they received in the past 24 months.

# Join the conversation

Not all fellow distributors have to be seen as competition. As a new member in the promo industry, you're now a part of a community. And what better way to **learn the ins and outs of this industry than from those who have done it for years?** Joining in on a discussion forum (via Facebook, for example) will not only allow you to ask questions, it will also allow you to prepare for what's to come by learning from those who are sharing their stories of success and defeat.

**"Promotional Products Professionals"** on Facebook is a favorite of ours. It helps us to see the pain points of those in the promo industry, and allows us to create the right content to help make their lives easier. Better yet, it helps those selling promotional products (aka YOU) to get support and questions answered from those within the promo community.



# Learn Print Methods

Most newbies know that you can't embroider a mug. But what about knowing the difference between debossing and embossing? Do you know what print methods are best for what product, and how this can affect the client's logo?

You don't need to have all of the answers right away, but you need to have some of them so you can make recommendations to your clients.

## Screen Printing

Used on: t-shirts, tote bags, water bottles, plastic pens, stress balls and koozies.

## Digital Printing

Used on: Mousepads, magnets, and note pads.

## Laser Engraving

Used on: Metal pens, wood items (like cutting boards), glass awards, and corporate gifts with metal plates or plaques.

## Debossing/Embossing

Used on: Leather padfolios, vinyl pouches, custom chocolates, and leathergoods or vinyl patches, business cards and announcements.

## Embroidery

Used on: Jackets, button down shirts, polos, blankets, caps, backpacks, and towels.

Source: *IMS Branded Solutions

# Find your target market

Do you know who your customers are? More importantly do you know who the best customers are for your goods and services?

It's important to understand who you're targeting and how to sell to them. "I plan on selling to everybody", is not the proper mentality to have in this industry. Because there's a lot of competition in the promo world, you need to **leverage yourself as the best in your niche field or location.** Decide which industry you want to focus on, such as doctors, dentists, schools etc. Or better yet, market yourself as the best in your field by locality.

Through optimizing your online presence by niche or location, **you will be far more successful** than if you try to sell everything under the sun and compete with the big guys who may have a much larger marketing budget than you.

For example, you may want to focus on dentist offices with promotional toothbrushes or dental floss. Make a list so you can maximize inventory and purchase costs of goods based on larger quantities.

**You want to have answers to these questions:**

- Who are my target customers?
  - Describe their life (or business) situation
- What do they want?
- What's the pain?
- What are their needs that aren't being met?

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# Survey existing customers

Once you've found your target market, your road to discovery doesn't end just yet. You should be conducting yearly surveys to get in the heads of your customers, and learn why and how they buy. Don't survey all of your customers, just the last 20 to 100 who still remember their recent purchase experience. If you ask somebody who made the purchase 6 months or more ago, they have long forgotten and might feed you with false information. Try asking the following:

**Who are you?** Get the demographical data and see if there are any trends. Ask about their industry and position in the company (and who makes the decisions!)

**What are you using [your product] for?** What problem does it solve for you? Here you want to make sure you understand their problem.

**How is your business better thanks to it?** This will tell you the end-benefit your product provides in the words of your customers. If some say really nice things, ask them for testimonials or case studies.

**Did you consider any alternatives prior to choosing us?** If so, which ones? You want to know who people compare you to.

**Why did you choose us over others?** You want to know what's working for you in your current website + identify some advantages you might want to emphasize more.

**Anything else you would like to tell us?** Leave room for feedback you don't know to ask.

**What else would you like to buy from us (if we were smart enough to offer it)?** Ideas for new products or services your customers are ready to pay for.

# Select suppliers

Not all suppliers are going to be ideal partners for you, and some have fairly long-winded processes for setting up a trade account, which you don't want to be doing after your client has placed an order.

So pick a small number of suppliers – **as few as 5 to start with** – and ask to open a trade account. If they request additional proof that you're a genuine distributor, you can sign up for a free UPIC number which identifies you as such.

If you're local, see if they offer factory tours, or have a representative who can meet with you to talk you through what they have to offer. If you have no idea where to start when it comes to selecting suppliers, I'd suggest the **QCA accredited suppliers.** You can also narrow your list of suppliers by asking trusted peers who they buy from and finding out which suppliers win the most industry awards bestowed by distributors, such as the Distributor Choice awards, are other excellent ways to select good suppliers.

# Explore buying groups

As soon as you get started in the promo industry you'll undoubtedly start hearing things about buying groups. Strength is certainly found in numbers. With the support of organized buying groups, growing your business is that much easier.

**Definition**: a buying group is an organization that leverages the purchasing power of a group of distributors to receive discounts from vendors based on the collective buying power of the group. Depending on the group, some offer the following services to their members:

- Order financing/accounting and back office support
- Sales and marketing
- Brand identity/equity

When you join a buying group you'll have sourcing, financial and graphic design support, which means you can focus more on selling. You'll receive better pricing from suppliers which can make you more competitive. And the network of supportive distributors is particularly useful newcomers in the industry.

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# Invest in your website

In this day and age, regardless of whether you sell online or not, its essential to have a website that is both presentable and engaging. Think of your website as your digital salesperson. And as your digital salesperson, it needs to give people a **reason** to buy from you when they have 1000's of other options. According to a recent survey by IntelliResponse, nearly 70% of customers say company websites are the first place they look when they want information on a product or service.

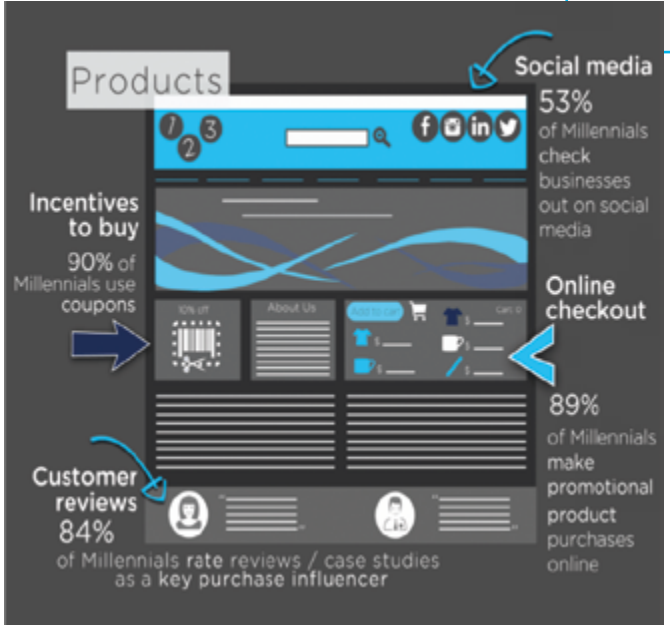
**Key takeaway:** Your website is your customers' first impression of you – and if you want that impression to lead to a sale, then you need to make sure your website is tailored to their needs.

**Here are 4 elements your website will need to help make the experience enjoyable for your customers:**

1. **Make it easy for them to contact you** by having your contact number very clear and easy to find. You should also consider adding live chat to your website, as BoldChat found that 31% of online shoppers from both the US and UK said they would be more likely to purchase after a live chat.
2. **Add a 'Have a question?' form.** A lot of small businesses with successful websites get a high proportion of inquiries as well as orders. So it's important to make it easy for customers to get their questions answered. An uncomplicated form which is easy to access and complete is a great way of capturing people's details who are still shopping around.
3. **Put information at their fingertips.** A great way to help answer some of their basic questions is to add a Q&A section on each product page. Customers like to self-educate so make sure that any information that might be useful to them is at their fingertips.
4. **Signpost them towards the best products for their needs.** Too many product choices can overwhelm a customer and make it harder for them to make a decision. Make it easy for customers to locate the perfect product for their needs by creating pages of products dedicated to different industries, seasons, events etc.

# Website must-haves

Knowing your current target market is one thing, but understanding the direction of your future clients is another. By 2020, Millennials will make up 50% of the workforce. So you really need to pay attention to their wants and needs as a consumer!




It's a great idea for you to start understanding this demographic and how to make your promotional products website more appealing to them. The following infographic will help you get you started.

# Act as a consultant

“Order takers” are a dying breed, because most customers now know what they want and they’re going online to get it. The few customers who don’t know what they want, are seeking a deeper consultancy experience where their problems are discussed and several solutions presented.

So on the face of it, distributors have a choice to make: to learn how to optimize your website to get a bigger share of the online ordering pie, or to seek out customers who are looking for a consultant.

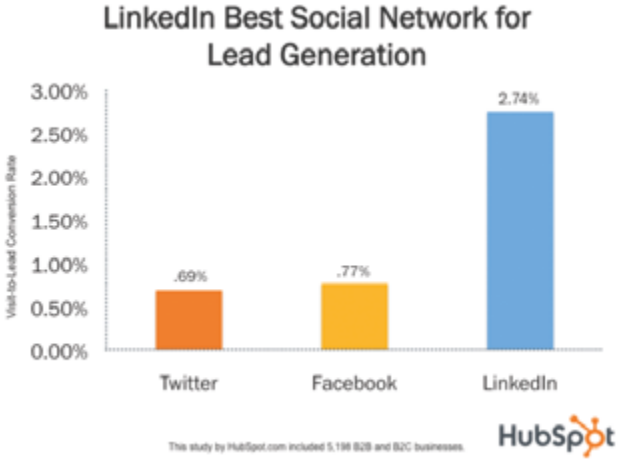
In reality, a successful distributor needs to be able to do both. The convenience of internet shopping is attracting more and more B2B buyers, and you can’t afford to ignore that. Your website should be working away alongside you, bringing in those quick, easy deals, while you’re investing your time in the bigger clients who warrant and require a personalized approach.

# Leverage your network

Every company should be on social media, but LinkedIn is so important that it needs a page all to itself in this eBook. Here's why: **65% of B2B companies have acquired a customer through LinkedIn**, so this is a social platform that you'll want to master.* (marketing.Linkedin.com). LinkedIn allows you to reach specific audiences by location, industry, job title and more. Take advantage of this feature to find and connect with potential customers who could be interested in your products or services.

Try connecting with 2nd degree connections rather than complete strangers, as contacts within your extended network tend to be more receptive toward invitations from people with whom they share a mutual contact. Or politely ask the mutual contact if they could introduce you to your target connection.

Additionally, LinkedIn allows you to export your contact list in a neat excel spreadsheet. So once you make the right connections, you'll have the ability to start marketing to them. Once connected, however, don't bombard them with sales messages; that's a surefire way to lose contacts and gain a reputation for being an obnoxious spammer. LinkedIn is all about nurturing relationships and building trust.



# Utilize social media

While LinkedIn has the potential to be a lead generating machine, that doesn't mean you can ignore other social media pages. But with over a dozen options to choose from, how do you choose which media outlets to focus on? It's important to have a presence on at least 3 major platforms. We recommend **LinkedIn, Facebook and Pinterest.** Being active on social media both builds credibility and allows your customers to interact with you.

**What to post:** It's easy to get into the habit of simply posting a popular product on your social media pages. However, that is not what these social outlets are intended for. It's about liking and commenting and sharing your customer's posts. It's about posting content that if your customers were to share, it would make them look good / funny / educated. What it is not, is a pitch for your services.

# Attend Tradeshows

One of the greatest needs of any new business is to be seen and heard by prospective clients. In a world where the Internet is now the forefront of many businesses, more traditional forms of communication may be deemed primitive.

Trade shows, however, are far from a thing of the past. Although they can  present some challenges due to travel time and cost, the benefits easily outweigh the expenses, even for smaller companies with limited budgets.

Not only are Trade shows are a great way to establish and nurture relationships with suppliers, they're also ideal for identifying new products for your clients.

# Record data in a CRM System

CRM, or Customer Relationship Management, is a simple enough concept. By recording information (size, industry, how they market their business etc.) about your customers in a software program, **you can invest your time better in the most promising and profitable leads.**

Moreover, once you start to build up a database of prospects, you'll be able to create mailing lists based on shared criteria. A simple example is to send everyone in healthcare an email promotion on pill boxes, pedometers and stress toys. A more fun example would be to send everyone in your home town a promotion on appropriately colored stadium cups, flags and cushions a few weeks before a big game. Even if they're not in the market, they'll most likely appreciate the sense of community. Start out as you mean to go on, otherwise you'll end up with a huge pile of business cards with notes scribbled on the back, that you never get around to entering into your computer.

# Never stop learning

**Promo Marketing** sends out a daily newsletter with news and articles from the industry, and has a great print publication too. The experienced distributors and suppliers who contribute to **PromoKitchen's** newsletters will open your eyes to new ways to engage with customers.

# Additional content

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