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A buyer's guide

How to buy promo that actually gets used

Most branded merchandise fails for the same handful of reasons, and almost all of them are decided before the order is placed. This guide walks through the decisions in the order they matter, so you can brief your rep once and get it right.

1 Decide what the item has to do

A tote bag and a laser-etched decanter are both promotional products, but they are not doing the same job. Name the job first and the field of options narrows by ninety percent.

Earn impressions	You want the logo seen repeatedly by people who are not the recipient. Favors items used in public and kept a long time: outerwear, drinkware, bags, hats.
Start a conversation	You need a reason for someone to stop at a table or open a door. Favors the unusual and the immediately useful over the well-made.
Say thank you	The item represents your judgment to someone who already knows you. Quality matters more than logo size; a cheap gift is worse than no gift.
Make people feel included	New hires, volunteers, members, teams. The item signals belonging, so fit, choice, and comfort outrank unit cost.
Sell	Merchandise the customer pays for. Now you are in retail: sizing, margin, sell-through, and leftover inventory are the real constraints.

> If you cannot say which of these five the item is for, you are not ready to buy. The most common failure in this category is a decent product bought for no particular purpose.

2 Picture the moment it changes hands

How the item reaches the recipient constrains its size, weight, packaging, and durability more than most buyers expect.

Distribution method drives the physical spec

Handoff	What it demands	What fails
Trade show table	Light, flat, and pocketable. It has to survive a day in a bag with a laptop.	Anything bulky. It gets left in the hotel room.
Mailed to a desk	Ships flat or in a small box; padded or rigid packaging; no liquid, no battery surprises.	Fragile drinkware and anything that makes shipping cost more than the gift.
Handed over in person	Feels good in the hand. This is where spending an extra few dollars shows.	Obvious bulk-bin items. The recipient can tell.
Onboarding kit	Coordinated pieces, apparel sizing collected in advance, presentable box.	One-size apparel, and mixed-quality items in the same box.
Grab bowl	Cheap enough that taking three does not matter.	Anything you would be annoyed to see taken by the handful.

3 Set the per-unit budget honestly

Budget bands behave like tiers, not a sliding scale. Each one buys a recognizably different class of product, and stretching by a dollar rarely moves you up a tier while cutting a dollar often drops you down one.

What each band realistically buys, before decoration and freight

Per item	What you get	Best for
Under $2	Pens, stickers, magnets, lip balm, basic lanyards, light drawstring bags.	Volume handouts where reach is the whole point.
$2–$5	Better pens, notepads, plastic drinkware, tote bags, silicone and phone accessories.	Events and mailers where the item should survive a month.
$5–$10	Stainless tumblers, decent caps, mid-weight tees, small tech accessories, notebooks.	The sweet spot for daily-use items people keep.
$10–$25	Known-brand drinkware, quarter-zips and polos, backpacks, wireless chargers, gift sets.	Employee gifting, client thank-yous, recognition.
$25 and up	Branded-label outerwear, leather goods, premium bags and electronics, custom kits.	Executive gifts and small, high-value recipient lists.

Run the math on cost per retained impression rather than cost per unit. Four hundred $2 items that reach a landfill within a week is a worse buy than eighty $10 items that sit on a desk for two years, even though the first invoice is smaller.

> Budget the whole program, not the item. The landed cost is usually the item price plus decoration, plus a one-time setup, plus inbound freight, plus any kitting and outbound shipping. On low-cost, high-count orders the extras are a rounding error. On a hundred mailed gifts they can rival the merchandise.

Where to start, by industry

Not rules, just the categories that tend to survive contact with each audience.

If you are	Reliable choices	Why it works
Professional services	Executive pens, hardcover notebooks, insulated drinkware, desk tech.	The recipient works at a desk. Items that live on that desk get seen by clients and colleagues.
Healthcare, wellness	Sanitizer, lip balm, reusable bottles, cooling towels, tote bags.	Practical, consumable, and consistent with the message you are already selling.
Schools, nonprofits	Tees and hoodies, drawstring bags, stadium cups, pens and notebooks.	Wearables turn supporters into visible advocates at a price the budget can carry.
Retail, hospitality	Branded drinkware, quality totes, aprons and caps, stickers.	The item doubles as staff uniform and as merchandise customers will carry out the door.
Trade shows, events	Lanyards and badge holders, notepads, pens, magnets, one better item held back.	Cheap volume for traffic, plus a reserve item worth qualifying a lead for.
Trades, field services	Caps, hi-vis wear, tape measures, tumblers, work gloves.	Tools get used daily in public. Few categories earn more impressions per dollar.

4 Check whether your logo survives the imprint

A good product with a bad imprint is a wasted order. Decide this before you fall in love with an item, because some logos simply do not work on some products.

Bring the right artwork

Vector art is the standard: .ai, .eps, or a vector .pdf. A logo pulled off a website will not enlarge cleanly, and rebuilding it costs time and usually a fee. Know your brand's Pantone (PMS) numbers; screen and pad printing match to PMS, not to the hex values from your website.

Match the method to the product

Method	Used on	Trade-off
Screen print	Apparel, bags, flat surfaces.	Cheap and durable at volume; each ink color adds cost and setup.
Embroidery	Caps, polos, fleece, structured bags.	Looks premium and lasts; fine detail and small text disappear in stitches.
Laser engrave	Metal drinkware, pens, tools.	Permanent and handsome; you get the substrate color, not your brand color.
Pad print	Pens, curved and irregular plastic.	Handles odd shapes; small imprint area, limited colors.
Full-color digital	Drinkware, hard goods, some apparel.	Reproduces gradients and photos; durability varies, so ask about dishwasher and wash testing.
Sublimation	Polyester apparel, mousepads, full-coverage items.	Edge-to-edge color with no feel; only works on polyester and light colors.

Two questions that prevent most reprints

- **What is the actual imprint area?** A wide horizontal logo on a 1.5″ pen barrel is unreadable. Ask for the dimensions, then print your logo at that size on paper and look at it from arm's length.
- **Will I see a proof?** Always approve a virtual proof, and read it carefully. Once you approve, the imprint is yours — spelling, placement, color and all.

5 Understand what moves the price

Promotional pricing is quantity-driven and front-loaded with one-time charges. Knowing the mechanics lets you buy the same item for less without changing the item.

- **Price breaks.** Quantities step down at set thresholds. If a quote sits just under a break, ask what the next tier costs — ordering more frequently costs less than you would guess.

- **Setup charges.** A one-time charge per decoration location, usually per color. Reordering the same art often waives or reduces it, which rewards standardizing your logo treatment across products.
- **Extra locations and colors.** Every additional imprint position and ink color adds both a setup and a per-piece run charge. A one-color logo bought across a whole program is materially cheaper than a four-color one.
- **PMS match charges.** Exact brand-color matching typically carries a fee. Standard stock ink colors do not.
- **Less-than-minimum fees.** Ordering below the listed minimum is often possible for a flat fee. Sometimes the minimum quantity costs less in total than the under-minimum order.
- **Freight.** Quoted separately more often than not. On heavy goods it is a real line item, so ask for it up front.
- **Rush charges.** Paid for speed, not for quality. Planning is the cheapest discount available.

> Ask for one number: the delivered cost per piece, including decoration, setup, and freight. Comparing that figure across quotes is the only apples-to-apples comparison in this industry.

6 Work backward from the date

The clock usually starts when you approve the proof, not when you place the order. Every day spent deciding on artwork comes out of production time.

- **Standard domestic production** commonly runs about one to three weeks after proof approval, plus transit. Embroidery and multi-piece kits sit at the longer end.
- **Rush service** can compress that to a few days on many stock items, at a premium, and only if the product is in stock and the art is print-ready.
- **Custom or overseas production** — your own shape, color, or packaging — typically runs a few months door to door. Worth it for volume and distinctiveness; not an option for next month's show.
- **Apparel sizing** adds a step. Collect sizes before you order, and expect to buy a size curve rather than the counts you first estimate.

A workable rule: set the in-hand date a week before you actually need it, and share that date with your rep at the start rather than after the quote.

Where compliance actually matters

Most orders raise no issues. These are the categories where it pays to ask the question in writing.

- **Anything for children.** Products intended for users under 12 are subject to federal children's product safety rules and third-party testing. Ask for the supplier's compliance documentation rather than assuming it.
- **Food and drink contact.** Drinkware, utensils, and food gifts should come from suppliers who can speak to food-contact compliance. Ask about dishwasher durability for the imprint too.
- **California recipients.** Proposition 65 warning requirements can apply to a range of consumer goods. Confirm the supplier handles labeling.
- **Batteries and electronics.** Lithium batteries carry shipping restrictions that affect both transit time and your ability to mail the item onward.
- **Someone else's trademark.** Team logos, university marks, and licensed characters require licensing. A supplier who is casual about this is a problem you do not want.
- **Supplier vetting.** Ask how long your distributor has worked with the factory behind the item. The difference between a good order and a bad one is usually the supplier, not the product listing.

What wastes the budget

- **Buying the item before naming the job.** Everything downstream gets decided by taste instead of purpose.
- **Oversizing the logo.** People do not wear or carry billboards. A restrained mark gets used; a huge one goes in a drawer.
- **Cheaping out on a gift.** For thank-yous and recognition, a low-quality item communicates exactly what it cost.
- **Ignoring the size curve.** Ordering apparel in even counts per size leaves you with a box of XS and nothing in XL.
- **Skipping the proof read.** Approved art is final art. Read it as carefully as a contract.
- **Printing a date or a version number.** It guarantees the leftovers are dead inventory. Leave the year off unless the year is the point.
- **Ordering the exact headcount.** Always add a small overage for damage, latecomers, and the samples you will want on hand.

Before you call your rep

Answer these seven and a good distributor can bring you real options on the first pass instead of the third.

- [ ] **Who receives it, and how many?**
  Recipient list drives everything; a range is fine, a guess is not.
- [ ] **Which job is it doing?**
  Impressions, conversation, thank-you, belonging, or resale.
- [ ] **How does it reach them?**
  Table, mail, hand, kit, or counter.
- [ ] **What is the total budget and the per-piece ceiling?**
  Give both. A total alone invites a quote you cannot use.
- [ ] **What is the in-hand date?**
  The date you need it in the building, not the date of the event.
- [ ] **Do you have vector artwork and PMS colors?**
  If not, sort this out first — it is the most common delay.
- [ ] **Is there anything you will not put your logo on?**
  Brand rules, sustainability requirements, prior duds. Say so early.

Bring this to the conversation.

Send the seven answers above and ask for three options at different price points, each quoted as a delivered cost per piece. Anything you cannot answer yet is worth talking through — that conversation is the part of the job a catalog cannot do, and it is what our Account Executives are for.

Contact an Account Executive today: sales@image-innovators.com