

The 12 Dumbest Things to Do With Giveaway

And smarter things to do instead.

By Candy Adams

Premiums. Tchotchkes. Adcentives. Swag. Whatever you call the promotional items you pass out in your trade show exhibit, you probably could be getting more bang for your buck.

When they have some thought and planning behind them, giveaways can serve several useful purposes. They can attract target customers to your booth. They can help you generate leads to be converted into sales. They can act as a meaningful "thank you" to customers and booth visitors. They can reinforce your theme or message and serve as a reminder of it long after the show is over.

But giveaways also can be an empty gesture and a waste of money. Far too often, in fact, that's exactly what they are. Here's what I think are the dozen dumbest things to do when you're making decisions about premiums.

1. CHOOSE A GIVEAWAY WITHOUT CONCERN FOR YOUR SHOW OBJECTIVES.

Why are you giving out freebies in the first place? And to whom? Your exhibiting effort should be supported by your premium, not driven by it. Set your goals first, then choose the freebie to meet a specific goal. Do you want this item to convey a specific message about your company's products or services? To reinforce a recent ad campaign? To help introduce a new product? To reinforce your exhibit's theme? An effective giveaway has a purpose. What's the purpose of yours?

2. DON'T MATCH THE PREMIUM TO YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE.

Got a great deal on 2,000 neon CD holders, did you? That's nice. But if you sell golf equipment, wouldn't your cus-

tomers really rather have a sleeve of golf balls? The question is, what would your target audience be likely to value, to hang onto-and ideally, to use regularly or keep in sight? "Top of desk, top of mind" is a good motto to remember when choosing tchotchkes. If it's a toy, are your targets likely to play with it? If it's something theoretically useful, will your targets use it?

3. SELECT GIVEAWAYS WITH NO INPUT FROM STAFF OR VENDORS.

It isn't always easy to come up with an idea for a premium to support your theme. Why do it in a vacuum? Send out for pizza and host a brainstorming luncheon. Scan premium catalogs. And explain your needs to your premium vendor; sometimes a supplier can suggest pre-show, at-show and post-show tie-ins to your marketing message.

4. OFFER NOTHING SPECIAL TO VIPS.

Major customers and other VIPs are unusually valuable to you, and they want to be treated as such. Giving your million-dollar client the same 89-cent pen you're handing out to everyone who stumbles into your booth is not a good idea.

5. DISTRIBUTE PROHIBITED SWAG.

Read the rules and regulations in your exhibitor guide to learn about giveaways prohibited or discouraged by show management. These often include anything that will have to be peeled off or scraped up after the show is over, including stickers and gum. Helium balloons are also commonly discouraged. Some show sponsors discourage giving away any food, especially popcorn. This isn't just about the mess; it has to do with food-and-beverage contracts in force at hotels and

convention centers. After shipping thousands of bottles of water to a show, one exhibiting company discovered it would have to pay a stiff fee to the convention center's exclusive food and beverage contractor for each bottle it gave away.

6. GIVE YOUR PREMIUM TO EVERYONE, INDISCRIMINATELY.

Unless your giveaway's goal is to promote name recognition don't hand out your swag to every trick-or-treater or booth beggar who wanders by with an open bag. Use it instead as a thank-you gift for listening to a presentation, participating in a product demonstration, talking with your staff or completing a survey. Train your staff beforehand on the proper use of giveaways. Make sure they perceive your giveaway as valuable, or they'll present it to attendees as a worthless trinket.

7. GIVE AWAY SHODDY OR DEFECTIVE STUFF.

One show sponsor recently gave out blinking yo-yos to exhibitors during a sign-up session for space at next year's event. Good read on the target audience, since a lot of us were the kind of people who will put such a device to immediate and enthusiastic use. But as we waited in line, playing with our yo-yos, they fell apart in our hands. The knots in the string didn't hold, some of the batteries were already dead and the lid that held the battery in would spin off every time you got a good rhythm going. The sponsor's clever idea was sabotaged by cheap, defective merchandise, and appreciation turned to annoyance.

8. GET TACKY AND TASTELESS.

If you're trying to create a buzz among attendees, make sure it's a positive buzz. An Internet security company became the talk of a major show by handing out colorfully wrapped condoms imprinted with, "Have a SAFE show from XXX Security." Most of the talk was about the company's poor judgment.

9. BUY JUST A FEW AT A TIME.

You can save big money on tchotchkes by purchasing them in quantity. Consider the number of shows on your sched-

ule at which you'll use the same theme and message, and buy giveaways in bulk.

10. HAND OUT SWAG WITHOUT YOUR COMPANY'S CONTACT INFORMATION ON IT.

A check of my goodie box of trade show samples picked up over the years reveals that only about one-third of the items have a toll-free number or a Web site address on them. How good is that stress ball you gave me if, after squeezing it for two years, I finally decide to contact you but I don't know how? (Tip: When exhibiting overseas, imprint giveaways with your Web site address; toll-free 800 numbers are only good in the United States.)

11. TIE GIVEAWAYS TO COMPLICATED TESTS, PUZZLES OR CONTESTS.

As a rule, attendees don't want to spend more than a few minutes listening to presentations, filling out surveys, getting their pictures taken or whatever. And contests that force them to visit 15 booths to get their "passports" stamped for a prize drawing (drive-by stampings, I call them) generally don't drive qualified buyers to your exhibit. Mostly, they just create traffic jams of swag hunters.

12. IGNORE THE PRESS.

Reporters are people, too, and they're flattered by a special something given just to them. At the 2001 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E³), a major event in the electronic-gaming industry, California accessories-maker Mad Catz Inc. provided its best press contacts with daily "Catz Nipz." These energy-boosting gift bags, bearing Mad Catz stickers, were delivered daily to the reporters' hotel rooms. They included chocolate-covered espresso beans, four-packs of an energy drink and ginkgo gum, along with a note to stop by the exhibit for refills ... which the exhausted reporters frequently did.

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