

Free Guide **PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS**

**STOP WASTING
MONEY ON BAD
PROMOTIONAL
PRODUCTS**



JAKE DERMER

847-461-3719

5 COMMON MISTAKES COMPANIES MAKE WITH PENS, DRINKWARE, BAGS, NOTEBOOKS, AND APPAREL — AND EXACTLY WHAT TO DO INSTEAD.

MOST PROMO BUDGETS ARE QUIETLY BEING WASTED

Companies spend thousands of dollars every year on promotional products pens, drinkware, totes, notebooks, apparel hoping they'll keep the brand top of mind. Most of that money goes straight in the trash. Not because promotional products don't work. They do when they're done right.

The problem is almost never the category. It's the execution. Companies buy what's easy, what's cheap, and what everyone else is buying. Then they wonder why it doesn't move the needle.

This guide gives you a category-by-category breakdown of where companies go wrong and the specific fixes that turn wasted budget into brand moments people actually remember.

IN THIS GUIDE:

- 1. Why cheap always loses, even when your budget is tight**
- 2. The difference between a branded item and a brand-building item**
- 3. How to match the right product to the right audience**
- 4. Why apparel either works completely or fails completely**
- 5. A quick audit checklist to evaluate your current promo program**





1. PENS

THE MOST ORDERED AND THE MOST THROWN AWAY

What Everyone Is Doing:

Ordering thousands of the cheapest pens possible and handing them out everywhere events, trade shows, front desks. Volume over quality, every time.

Why It Fails:

People already have more bad pens than they need. When yours feels cheap or writes poorly, it gets tested once then tossed. Cheap pens don't build brand. They signal that you are cheap.

What You Should Do Instead:

For a pen to earn its place, at least one must be true: it writes well, it connects back to you clearly, or it gives a reason to keep it. If you can't hit at least one of these, skip pens entirely.

"If you don't have the budget for a pen worth keeping, don't force it. Post-it notes, a good bookmark, a small utility item any of these will outperform a forgettable pen."

2. NOTEBOOKS

**YOU'RE ENTERING SOMEONE'S WORKSPACE.
ACT LIKE A GUEST, NOT A BILLBOARD.**

What Everyone Is Doing:

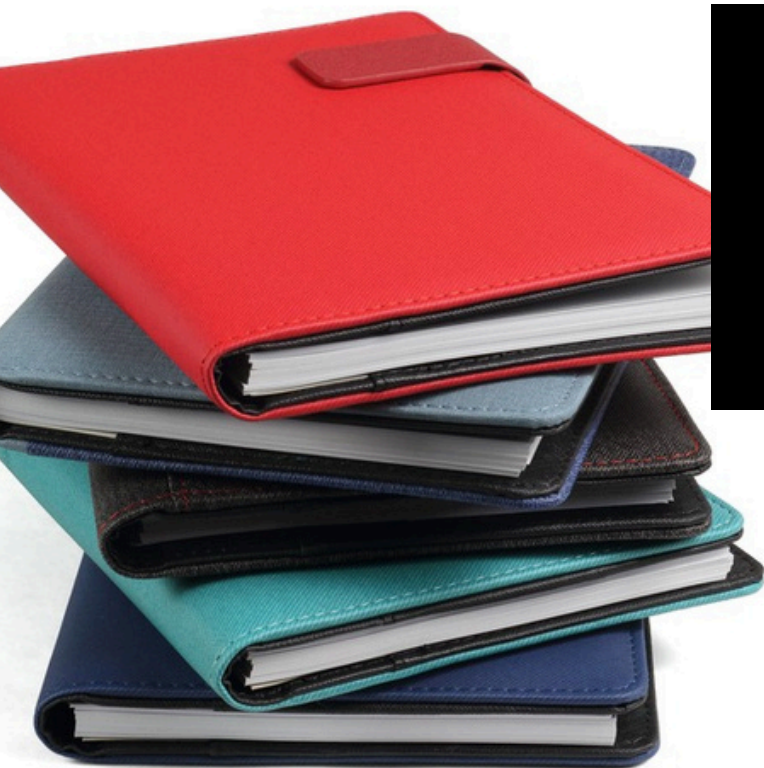
Slapping a big logo across the front cover of a notebook or plastering every square inch of sticky notes with branding and contact info.

Why It Fails:

You're forgetting what this object actually is: someone's workspace. It's where they think, plan, and work. It's personal. If it feels branded first and useful second, it stays behind.

What You Should Do Instead:

Keep the logo subtle. Protect usable space the first sticky note they peel off should be completely blank. Upgrade the finish. Tie it to a moment.



"Everyone needs a notebook during onboarding. If they like it, they'll use it outside of work. That's when your brand starts traveling on its own."

3. DRINKWARE

**YOUR AUDIENCE ALREADY OWNS A BOTTLE THEY LOVE.
YOUR JOB IS TO REPLACE IT.**

What Everyone Is Doing:

Going as cheap as possible and hoping people use it anyway. Or blindly overspending on big-name brands without considering whether the audience will appreciate the difference.

Why It Fails:

Your audience already owns a better bottle Yeti, Stanley, Owala, Hydro Flask. A cheap bottle doesn't replace that it becomes cabinet clutter.

What You Should Do Instead:

Match the product to the audience. Double-wall insulated is the baseline. Bridge the price gap the \$10 to \$20 difference is everything in perceived value. The lid and straw decide everything.

"People rarely rotate drinkware. They pick one for hot and one for cold and use them every day. Your job is to replace the one they love."





4. TOTE BAGS

A BAG THAT BREAKS IS A BRAND THAT BREAKS. MAKE IT COUNT.

What Everyone Is Doing:

Ordering on price, treating the bag as an afterthought a vessel for other swag rather than a product worth giving on its own.

Why It Fails:

Heat-sealed handles rip the moment horizontal force is applied. Thin materials feel disposable. When a bag fails, it doesn't just get thrown away. It gets remembered.

What You Should Do Instead:

Upgrade the construction reinforced handles over heat-sealed, always. Think retail, not giveaway. Use the bag as packaging. Design for repeat use.

"A great bag turns a giveaway into a gift. And a great bag turns a one-time brand moment into daily brand exposure."

5. APPAREL

**TWO OUTCOMES: PEOPLE WEAR IT, OR THEY DON'T.
THERE IS NO MIDDLE GROUND.**

What Everyone Is Doing:

Throwing logos on cheap apparel and guessing at sizes. Or overcomplicating fulfillment with print-on-demand shipping when it doesn't make sense at scale.

Why It Fails:

Apparel only works if people choose to wear it. Most don't poor comfort, bad fit, loud branding, guessed sizes.

What You Should Do Instead:

Start with the garment, not the logo. Know your audience. Design for real life, not just the brand moment. Match the context. Simplify fulfillment at scale.

"If they wear it outside of work, you win. If they don't, you paid for a shirt sitting in a drawer."



PROMO AUDIT

IF YOU CAN'T CHECK MOST OF THESE BOXES, YOU'RE NOT READY TO ORDER. THAT'S NOT A PROBLEM THAT'S THE CHECKLIST WORKING.

Strategy

- ☐ I know exactly who is receiving this product and why
- ☐ I can explain what behavior or feeling I want this product to create
- ☐ I've verified this product fits the lifestyle and context of my audience
- ☐ This is tied to a specific campaign, event, or moment, not just "swag"

Quality

- ☐ I would personally use or keep this product myself
- ☐ The construction, materials, and finish reflect the quality of our brand
- ☐ I've held and tested a physical sample before ordering in bulk
- ☐ The logo placement doesn't interfere with the product's function

Budget

- ☐ I'm not choosing this product because it's the cheapest option available
- ☐ I've calculated cost per impression, not just cost per unit
- ☐ I've honestly weighed cheap-and-tossed vs. quality-and-used

Execution

- ☐ If apparel: I've collected or estimated sizes, not guessing
- ☐ If fulfillment is involved: I know the total cost, not just the product cost
- ☐ I can clearly describe what "success" looks like for this purchase

MOST COMPANIES DON'T HAVE A PRODUCT PROBLEM. THEY HAVE A STRATEGY PROBLEM.

Promotional products aren't a line item to check off a list. They're brand touchpoints physical representations of how you think about your customers, your employees, and your own brand. Done right, they get used. They travel. They keep your name in rooms you're not in.

The product isn't the problem. The strategy is.

GET A FREE PROMOTIONAL PRODUCT STRATEGY REVIEW

- ✓ 15-minute call. No obligation.
- ✓ Review of your current product mix
- ✓ At least one strategy you can use immediately
- ✓ Honest feedback even if you don't work with us

Call Jake at: **847-461-3719**