



Goody, Bags!

Goody, Goody

Gifts Your Guests Will Remember (for the Right Reasons!)

BY NANCY A. SHENKER

THE TERM "SWAG" has not yet made it into the dictionary, but no event today – corporate, fundraising, sports, consumer or other – is considered complete without the ubiquitous gift bag, filled with all types of brand-building swag.

Guests leaving an event used to be given a single item as a memento. The trend has shifted over the past decade to product-packed bags (and other containers). Fueled by companies' desire to build brand and product awareness, the availability of a wide range of "bag stuffers" seems to be on the upswing.

The media today delights in reporting in detail the contents of celebrity gift bags. For example, the gift for each presenter at the recent Golden Globes awards was comprised of a whopping \$62K worth of branded merchandise, coupons and other goodies. In fact, the booty had to be packed away in a treasure chest, rather than a traditional bag!

Most marketing events, however, do not involve a red carpet or celebrity clientele who expect to receive a \$2K diamond ring just for showing up. So, how do you, as a marketer, give your guests something memorable and appropriate? The following are general guidelines for creating gift bags, based on my own experience as a brand marketer, as well as input from business and consumer event professionals.

KNOW YOUR GUESTS...BE SELECTIVE...BE CREATIVE

Base your gift choices on what would appeal to the audience receiving the gifts, not on what YOU think is valuable. That said, just because your audience is sports-minded (for example), you shouldn't pack the bag with anything and everything related to sports. Ask yourself the following questions as you are choosing items:

- Will my guests really use this? Do they have hundreds of these already? Will the item be more likely be "re-gifted" than used by the intended recipient? (Most truthful guests will admit to having parceled out gift bag contents to their kids, employees or household help upon return from an event. That's fine, provided visibility of the brand is what's most important.)

GOODY, GOODY, GOODY BAGS!

- Pay special attention to the size of the logo on items. Clearly, the value of gifting is to increase brand awareness, but remember that guests are not being paid to advertise products. Branding should be subtle, yet powerful.
- The quality of gift items is very important. Make sure the gifts – as well as the bag – have high perceived value and will withstand the trip back from the event. As Harris

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Schanhaut, Manager of Event Marketing for American Express, notes, “If you’re doing an out-of-town event, be sure you’re giving items that will travel well through airport security and baggage check.”

- Give credit where credit is due. Sponsors contributing items to gift bags are expecting as much exposure as possible. Be sure to thank them in the event marketing materials, at the event itself, and after the fact.

“LESS IS MORE” AND SOMETIMES “MORE IS MORE”

Although a bag stuffed with surprises can be a real treat, one amazing item can have more of an impact. For example, at a recent fundraiser for the Association for Women in Communications, a sponsor donated a fluffy spa bathrobe and slippers. These gifts were unexpected, high-quality and useful. Although the actual cost of the gift was relatively low, the perceived value was high. As the evening wore on, some of the guests even took off their high heels and donned their slippers!

High-end client events call for special, meaningful and memorable items, not bags of trinkets. For an investment bank client, Special Event Specialties created a custom “captain’s boat tote,” personalized with the name of each banker and his client, an insulated wine carrier with a bottle of vintage wine, and a customized lucite tombstone, designed to resemble each client’s retail storefront.

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If, on the other hand, you choose to pack a bag full of smaller items, make sure you’re creating a selection that’s eclectic, fun, useful and balanced. Again, think about the types of products your target market uses and needs.

GOODY, GOODY, GOODY BAGS!



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Think Outside the Box (or the Bag!)

- A poll of event professionals revealed these clever, practical and timely ideas for gift-giving.
- Each guest received a vacuum cleaner (Michelle Sampson, AIM Shapiro & Associates)
- Technology-related items are hot right now — imprinted flash disk key chains, digital cameras, imprinted ipod docking stations (Jennifer Owens, Boundless Network)
- Interactive gifts can get guests involved. For a launch of a book about weight loss camp, each guest got autographable camp pillowcases, so they could create a memento for the guest of honor author (Stephanie Jo Klein, Klein Creative Communications)
- Event-goers got birdhouses wrapped in flower pots, with miniature gardening tools (Hali Shipon, MissGift.com)
- Prior to a sales meeting in Bermuda, invitees were sent a tube consisting of sand, confetti in the shape of martini glasses, sun block and sunglasses (Wendy Parsley, Quint Strategies)

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- Chocolate, chocolate and more chocolate. Several gift-givers said they often include logo-ed sweet stuff in bags. Beware warm weather, however!

New product/service companies are often a great source of gift bag items. They are looking for widespread exposure and often don't have the budgets to buy “traditional” advertising.

Some marketers make the mistake of filling bags with coupons and promotional materials from their sponsors. Unless the value is extremely high, most of this “paper” goes straight into the trash. If you do include coupons, ask your sponsors to package them in a creative way — special envelopes, attached to a small gift item, etc. No one wants a bag full of paper as a gift!

Remember, all guests are created equal! Be sure to secure enough of each item and even allow a few

extra for unexpected guests or problems with merchandise. Guests really do notice when they don't get exactly the same items as their fellow guests. According to Stephanie Astic, Founder of Astic Productions, a company that produces high-end fundraisers for non-profits, “I have even gotten calls from guests who are upset because they received a different shade of lipstick from their colleague. Unless you can get enough of the same item to fill all the bags, select something else,” she advises.

WHAT'S ON THE OUTSIDE COUNTS TOO!

From tote bags to oversized shopping bags (paper, plastic and cloth) to buckets, baskets and boxes, the options for packaging client gifts are virtually unlimited. Be sure that your outside packaging is durable, portable and eye-catching.

Again, think through how your guests will transport their “loot” home from the event. If they are flying back or taking public transportation, you don't want to inconvenience them with hard-to-carry or awkwardly shaped items. All-Ways Advertising often provides collapsible “weekender” bags at out-of-town events, so guests can use them for the items they've collected during their trip.

WELCOME OR FAREWELL...WHEN DO YOU GIFT?

As you're planning your event, think through the most appropriate time to hand out your gifts. Although putting a treat on every chair for a sit-down dinner could be logistically convenient for the event planner, guests may become distracted early on in the evening as they comb through their bags and discuss the contents.

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Gifts upon parting have several advantages, but just make sure you have a process and enough staff in place to ensure that every guest receives a bag upon departure and that you are able to enforce a “one per customer” policy. Stephanie Jo Klein, President of gift bag marketing firm, Klein Creative Communications, once created custom bracelets with “gift redemption tags” on them. Guests turned in the tags for a gift bag, but got to keep the bracelet.

You might also consider sending gifts after an event. If you have an accurate attendee list, post-event gifting can be a great way of re-establishing contact with your prospects, thanking them for attending, soliciting feedback and finding out how else your company could serve them. Although this requires some extra planning and expense, the gift then becomes part of a longer-term marketing strategy, rather than a point-in-time occurrence.

Ultimately, that's what business gifting is all about – a way to build awareness, and impress, inspire and motivate your clients and prospects. As long as you don't lose sight of your "swag strategy," you'll deliver a great gift – every time!

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