MERCH MAGAZINE

from the

bpma
British Promotional Merchandise Association

MARCH/APRIL 2026

SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

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WELCOME

In the BPMA's 60th year, it is interesting to pose the question, what can we learn from the past?

It was one of the areas that BPMA Chairman Clive Allcott and Total Merchandise boss Jason O'Connor addressed when they sat down for this issue to debate the future of the industry (p20).

In a fascinating discussion, these students of promotional history outlined how you could take lessons from the past to apply to the future. Technological change has happened before and it is happening again. Those who got an early foot in the door – with the internet for example – fared better than those who dithered, it seems.

Will that be the case with continued automation in the industry, and the uptake of AI technology? Time will tell, but the past is a useful guide.

When it comes to sustainability – the theme for this issue – it is interesting to see how far we have come. Just a few years ago, there were a mere handful of products that the sector could tout as 'green'. Now, most categories have a credible competitor that boasts credentials that will appeal to the buyer that wants that alternative.

Buyers have become more savvy in what they want, and the framework around promotional products, such as legislation, testing, and certifications, has become more robust.

And new BPMA-supported research has revealed that promotional merchandise has a good story to tell in this respect (p8) .

When it comes to its carbon footprint, merchandise is among the most effective and sustainable media available. For a sector that became too used to be labelled as anything but sustainable, that's quite a shift.

This issue also takes a look at the changing nature of both suppliers and clients. Tech gadget company Gomi is one of a new breed of companies taking a more sustainable approach to manufacturing (p9).

We also take a look at the emergence of influencers as a new market for merch (p34).

Finally, we would like to dedicate this issue to David Long who passed away recently. As well as being a pioneer of the sector, he was an early proponent of the importance of sustainability for merchandise. He will be missed.

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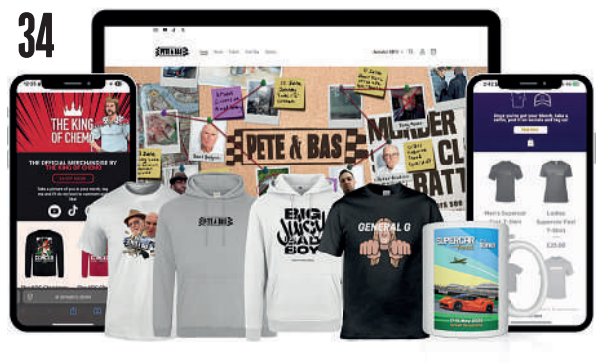

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Merch Magazine is available to the whole promotional merchandise industry.
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British Promotional Merchandise Association
Fetcham Park House, Lower Road, Fetcham, Leatherhead, Surrey, KT22 9HD
All phone enquiries: 01372 371183
www.merchmagazine.co.uk
www.bpma.co.uk

Editorial
editor@merchmagazine.co.uk
Advertising and Media Pack
advertising@merchmagazine.co.uk
Editorial Services
Stuart Derrick

Design and Production
ATG Media,
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GIVE TO GAIN

This year's International Women's Day (IWD) on 8 March encourages investing in female empowerment. Merch Magazine spoke to inspirational women about IWD and this year's theme Give to Gain

SARAH HOWARTH

SALES & COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR, WILD THANG

For more than two decades, Sarah has been part of Wild Thang, an internationally operating B Corp certified branded merchandise, uniform and fulfilment partner. A board member, she is passionate about developing client-focused solutions but says that the moments she is most proud of are often people-focused.

"Seeing team members who joined us early in their careers grow in their roles with some progressing into senior leadership is something I'm incredibly proud of. Watching women in our business grow in confidence, commercial strength and influence is hugely fulfilling."

She advises other women not to shrink themselves to make others comfortable. "Be warm, be collaborative, but own your expertise and your seat at the table."

She adds: "And most importantly, support each other and other women. When we lift each other up, we all move forward."

NATALIE EICHMANN

WINNER BPMA RECOGNITION AWARD

Coming from a family of strong women provided a foundation of resilience, independence, and a belief that hard work would open doors, even when Natalie was one of the few women in the room.

After a quarter of a century in merchandise, the winner of the BPMA Recognition Award says she has learned the importance of trusting her own voice and speaking up, particularly in moments where self-doubt crept in. She uses that experience to help others find and use their own voices.

"International Women's Day is a reminder that confidence and success don't happen overnight. It's about celebrating growth and encouraging the next generation of women to back themselves, even when they're still figuring things out," she says.

"Stay curious, back yourself, and don't underestimate the value of your perspective."

CATHY BENWELL

CO-FOUNDER, A GOOD THING

A Good Thing is a UK-based nonprofit platform that connects businesses with charities. It has been on the Net Zero 50 List two years in a row, and co-founder Cathy was the only woman in the charity sector top 5 this year.

Inspired by a deep desire to fight against injustices, Cathy sees IWD as a joyful day to celebrate the many wonderful things that women right across the world are doing in their everyday lives to change other people's lives for the better.

In the sustainability sector, women's voices should be heard to help shape policies, initiatives and agendas, she says. "Research consistently shows that women bring long-term and community-focused decision-making to the table. And that's what's needed to help make change stick, and to help move from ideas to implementation."

SARAH SAYED

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, BX MERCHANDISE

Sarah started a boutique promotional merchandise agency in 2007 with a simple belief that the industry could do better.

As a female founder of a minority-owned business, she wanted to bring ethics, sustainability and purpose to a sector dominated by disposable products and short-term thinking.

"Today I am proud to work with global clients while staying rooted in my community and committed to creating opportunities for young people and diverse talent," she says.

International Women's Day is a moment to pause and recognise how far women have come, and how much further they still need to go, she says. She advises women to back themselves and seek out people who want to see them grow.

"Communities like BPMA are filled with women who understand the journey and are willing to support you," she says. "Every step you take creates space for another woman to follow. Your success is not just your own."

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

AMARA SHARIF

FOUNDER, PEPALA

Pepala is a non-profit organisation that transforms surplus items from UK businesses into educational opportunities for children in Malawi. Last year it sent 70,000 educational items that would otherwise have ended up as landfill, to help bridge this educational gap.

Pepala founder, Amara says that girls face additional disadvantage in Malawi where almost 25% are not in education. In countries like Pakistan the figure is even higher at approximately 50%. Educating a woman doesn't just transform her life; it transforms her family, her community, and generations after her.

"For me, International Women's Day is a reminder that while progress has been made, the work is far from finished. It's a call to keep pushing, keep advocating, and keep showing up," she says.

"Women thrive when we uplift one another," she adds. "At Pepala, I'm proud to work with a majority female team – each of us different, each bringing something unique. Those differences are our strength."

KERRY SUNDERLAND

KEY ACCOUNT MANAGER, PROMOTRADE

The winner of the inaugural BPMA Emerging Talent Award has overcome significant personal challenges in recent years, which have tested her resilience and deepened her sense of purpose.

For Kerry, IWD is about valuing the women who drive their workplaces forward with leadership, innovation, and dedication, while also holding together their homes.

"International Women's Day is a reminder to celebrate progress, but also to continue championing inclusion, flexibility, and opportunity so that women, in all their roles, are supported to thrive," she says.

"Celebrate your wins, no matter how small, and allow yourself grace when things don't go as planned," she advises.

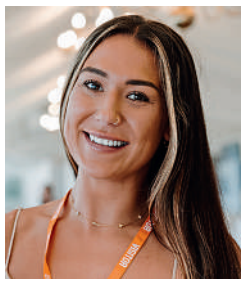
ROXANNA FRANCOMBE

PARTNERSHIPS EXECUTIVE, PLANET MARK

From working in the environmental sector, Roxanna has learned that positive change for the planet comes through collaborating with others to foster a community of likeminded people and organisations.

"Nurture the friendships where you can, listen to one another and share both the highs and lows. When the path is rocky, it's your community that will help you to move forward," she says.

GORDANA PAVLOVIC



SENIOR ACCOUNT MANAGER, CLONE

Describing herself as "a super passionate person", Gordana is driven by creating tailored experiences where clients feel supported and understood, ensuring every project achieves meaningful impact.

"To me International Women's Day is about visibility and celebration, but also action. It's a reminder to keep pushing so women are treated with respect, given the space to excel and are properly supported," she says.

Her advice to other women? "As women we often have to fight for our place, our voice and our opportunities. But since we've fought so much, we are the strongest of warriors."

BARBORA MAYER

HIGH- VALUE FUNDRAISING MANAGER, COMIC RELIEF

Working for Comic Relief, Barbora helps super motivated fundraisers to dream big when it comes to their fundraising ambitions.

Living and working in different countries has taught her resilience, independence and strength, she says. "It's one of the things I'm most proud of as a woman: knowing that I can choose a new path, step into the unknown and still thrive."

Women are capable of more than they realise, she says. "Trust that you belong in every room you walk into. Don't wait to feel 'ready', take opportunities that stretch you."

COLOURS OF SUCCESS

Choosing a vogueish colour can boost your brand, says Clive Allcott

What have the following got in common?

2020 – Classic Blue

2022 – Very Peri

2023 – Viva Magenta

2024 – Peach Fuzz

2025 – Mocha Mousse

Well done, if you spotted that they have all been Pantone colours of the year. In 2026, they are joined by Cloud Dancer (Pantone 11-4201), described as "a billowy, balanced white imbued with serenity and calm, meant to reflect desires for tranquillity, clarity, and a fresh start in a fast-paced world".

That's all very well, but how does it affect the promotional clothing market?

The answer is quite an eye opener as Pantone's colour of the year isn't just a design headline, it has real influence on fashion, branding, and marketing, and that includes the promotional clothing industry. Here's how and why it matters.

TREND SIGNALLING

The colour of the year often sets the tone for what colours become popular or acceptable in fashion and accessories the following year. Promotional clothing buyers and designers use it to predict which colours will feel current, giving choice to apparel that buyers will actually wear and love.

If your branded T-shirts, hoodies, or polos use a trending colour, they're more likely to be kept and worn boosting brand visibility.

INCREASED DEMAND

Consumers and corporate buyers often notice colour of the year announcements (especially those who follow design and fashion). Which means promotional products featuring that colour will be more highly regarded as fashion items. Customers may ask for the colour by name or you can use it as a selling tool to match a brand to a season's top trend.

ALIGNMENT WITH STYLE

Using the colour of the year in promotional clothing can signal that a brand is stylish and forward-thinking, with a connection to broader cultural and design trends. Cloud Dancer's description of serenity and calm sounds perfect to align with campaigns where brands in wellness and sustainability might lean.

MARKETING LEVERAGE

There are also some added benefits for your social media and marketing team. Promotional businesses can latch on to the noise around the announcement to publish trend articles or posts, and create campaigns around the colour, generating social media engagement and additional marketing heft.

And don't worry is you miss the boat this year – there's always 2027.

Happy Selling, Clive the branding and bag Guru.

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MERCHANDISE STEPS UP

Today's promotional merchandise walks a fine line between creating brand awareness and telling a sustainable story. Merch Magazine looks at how it is getting the balance right

The rise of sustainability as a business priority has been one of the defining issues of the past decade, and merchandise has not been immune to the debate.

Merchandise suppliers have been quick to respond to the growing demands from clients for promotional products that don't cost the earth. While research has consistently shown that merch delivers a great bang for the buck, a new international research study has underlined its relatively low carbon footprint compared to other media.

The study measured carbon emissions of branded products across their full life cycle – from raw materials, to manufacturing and shipping, product use, and end of life disposal – in comparison to digital, TV, radio, outdoor and print advertising in the US and Europe.

MEMORABLE MERCH

It shows that branded merchandise delivers strong brand recall with a lower carbon footprint per impression than other advertising media.

When measured by 'emissions per memorised impression' – or how often people remember a brand they have seen – promotional products were narrowly second only to billboard advertising.

The study allows brands and marketers to compare the relative channels using consistent metrics and realistic assumptions.

Data was collected from large distributors in the US and Europe, and applied to a carbon tracking tool, with a methodology certified by Bureau Veritas in accordance with ISO 14067 and dedicated to the promotional industry.

More distributors and suppliers are to be encouraged to participate in future research, to expand datasets and create clearer road maps for reducing the industry's carbon footprint.

The research was jointly commissioned by the European Associations Cooperation (EAC), alongside the Advertising Specialty Institute (ASI) and Promotional Products Association International (PPAI).

Phil Goodman, CEO of the BPMA, which is member of the EAC, welcomed the study. "The findings reinforce the immense power of branded merchandise from both a sustainability and effectiveness perspective, and will be a useful tool for distributors to open new conversations with their clients and prospects."

So, what does this look like on the ground?

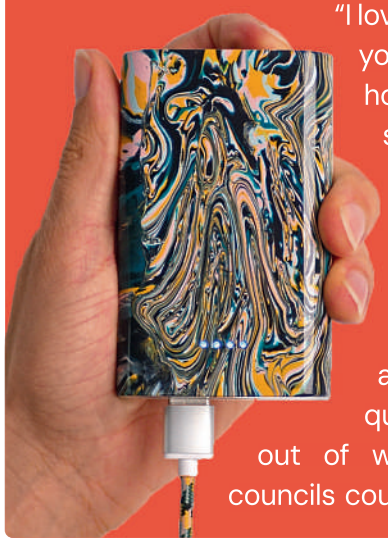
Read on over the next pages to find out how companies are stepping up their recycling rates, reducing waste, streamlining operations, and giving back. Most of all, they are continuing to innovate with great new products that people want to use, which is the point in the first place. If a product isn't desired, then there's little point in it being made in the first place.

FROM TRASH TO TECH

When it comes to sustainability, gadgets are still in the foothills, but one company is looking to change that.

Gomi is a Brighton based start-up that specialises in creating tech products using the waste around us rather than simply mining new raw materials.

Self-confessed techie and Gomi founder, Tom Meades says the business sprang from his final year degree design project.



"I love the latest tech but you have to be aware of how polluting it is. As a student, I didn't have much money and most technology ages so quickly," he says. "I started making repairable and really good quality components out of waste material that councils could not recycle. Stuff that was going to landfill."

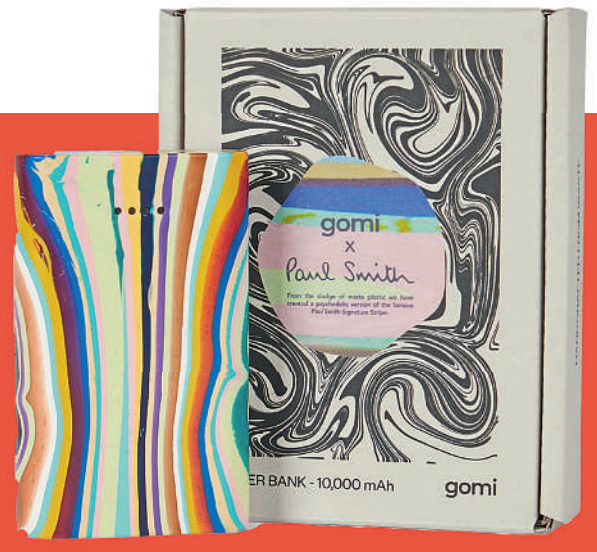
The company uses plastic waste to create new, longer lasting, and repairable plastic products including speakers, power banks and tech tags.

It has designed its own machine to turn out products using a compression technique which exerts 40 tons of pressure.

Because each batch of plastic is different, each product has a unique marbled look. This has been used to good effect by brands such as Paul Smith which has reproduced its classic coloured stripes design featuring 20 separate colours. Gomi has also produced branded items for shoe company Vans.

As well as using recycled materials for the casings of its tech products, the company designs in longevity with features such as screw fittings so the products can be easily dissembled and fixed. It offers a two-year warranty that allows users to send them back in that time for free repairs.

Gomi also practised what it preached by



repurposing 50,000 batteries from Lime bikes. The individual cells were stripped out of the bike batteries, tested for capacity and reused in products.

In the promotional space, Gomi has worked with Fluid Branding, turning pens into power banks.

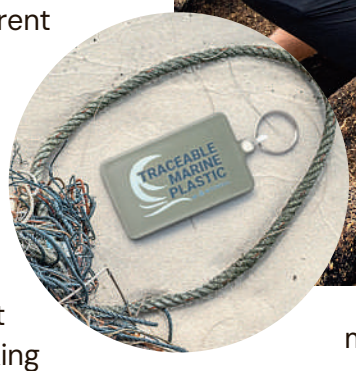
According to Meades, sustainability in itself is no longer a USP. "We speak to lots of distributors and they want to be able to tell a story. We can help with content, filming the process to share with their customers. We can even have people here to make their own products."

For the future, Gomi has raised £300,000 and will be using it to launch three new products this year: a universal wireless charger, a tracker tag, and phone cases.

NET PROFITS

Cornwall based supplier CHX has manufactured recycled promotional merchandise for nearly 30 years. But recent years have demonstrated that recycling alone no longer satisfies the market.

Distributors are increasingly fielding enquiries from customers seeking specific sustainability credentials: marine plastic recovery, bio-based alternatives, and transparent material provenance.



Its latest efforts have included the launch of Traceable Marine Plastic. This is made from rescued fishing nets and ropes, recovered by partner Waterhaul, and identifies every batch of plastic pellets it produces, with a unique code linking directly to the specific recovery project.

Extending the environmental impact beyond material recovery, 5% of profits from all Traceable Marine Plastic products are donated to Surfers Against Sewage, supporting ongoing marine conservation efforts.

CHX has used its plastic expertise to allow companies to recycle other merchandise products. When lanyard supplier Preseli approached it with recycled rPET pellets created from used promotional lanyards, the material presented significant manufacturing challenges.

The pellets contained considerably higher impurity levels than CHX's standard materials, with inconsistent properties from residual dyes and inks.

CHX applied its injection moulding expertise to develop manufacturing processes specifically for this difficult material, adjusting temperatures, flow rates, and tooling designs to accommodate the impure rPET.

The result was the LAN-KEY keyring – the

UK promotional industry's first product manufactured from recycled lanyards, which is now part of Preseli's stock range.

CERTIFIABLY SUSTAINABLE

More and more merchandise companies are looking to demonstrate that their claims of sustainability can be proven, by undertaking respected certification schemes.

The factory of Reading-based PromoTrade has achieved Carbon Neutral Certification, marking a significant milestone in its sustainability journey and ongoing commitment to responsible manufacturing.

The certification, through Carbon Neutral Britain, was independently verified and confirmed in December and reflects months of dedicated work, rigorous assessment, and a determination to reduce environmental impact.

Sanjay Bhalla, CEO of PromoTrade praised the efforts of the company's head of compliance, Suzanne Atkins who led the initiative.

"Achieving and maintaining carbon neutral status requires more than ambition – it requires structure, accountability, and constant review, all of which Suzanne has championed throughout this journey," he said.

He also heralded the efforts of the UK factory team, from reviewing operational processes to implementing practical changes on the ground, to ensure that sustainability is embedded into everyday operations.

PromoTrade achieved Carbon Neutral status in 2024, and its second certification year focused on emissions reduction rather than offsetting alone. Key initiatives included optimising inbound logistics by reducing reliance on air freight and transitioning to lower-carbon transport modes such as road and sea where feasible.

Atkins said that the most complex element was the collection, validation, and calculation of emissions data across Scopes 1, 2 and 3.

"Ensuring data accuracy and completeness is time-intensive and requires consistent engagement and cooperation across all departments within the organisation," she said.

With many clients face increasing ESG and sustainability requirements from their own stakeholders, PromoTrade's Carbon Neutral certification provides assurance that they are partnering with a supplier that actively manages and reduces its environmental impact, she added.

Meanwhile, Geiger has placed in the top 1% of organisations assessed worldwide for sustainability performance.

The world's largest privately held and family-owned promotional products distributor has achieved a global Platinum rating from EcoVadis.

The rating evaluates companies across four pillars: environment, labour and human rights, ethics, and sustainable procurement.

For the first time Geiger has a consolidated Platinum rating across its global operations. The US and UK businesses had already achieved Platinum ratings individually in 2025, while its German operations earned Silver.

This achievement reflects the standard Geiger holds itself to as it supports customers with responsible branded merchandise programmes worldwide.

David Geiger, president of Geiger, said: "Operating under one rating allows us to assess our practices consistently across the world, while continuing to improve locally. Sustainability is not a one-time goal for us – it's a multi-generational commitment."

JUNIPER REWRITES THE BOOK

British manufacturer Juniper has had great success with its 'build your own notebooks' which allow customers to create a product to their own specifications.

However, as sales grew so did the amount of offcut materials it was left with. Every 1,000 A5 notebooks generates 11m^2 of waste material.

Once upon a time, this went into general waste and ultimately to landfill, but since 2020 the company has made a conscious decision to focus product development and ranges on sustainable product solutions.

The company also decided to increase and expand its UK made capacity and over the last five years it has introduced more than 50 new small items that can utilise this waste. Working closely with waste partners, it has achieved a target of zero waste to landfill, by paying extra for the now small amounts of residual unrecyclable waste to be incinerated for energy.

Other initiatives include switching 70% of polyurethane sales to rPET, as well as measures like, switching to LED lighting, investment in new energy efficient compressors, improving insulation, and switching to electric vehicles. In the process, Juniper has cut its carbon footprint, and been awarded Platinum status from Ecovadis.

"Many clients assume off cut material is free and as such we should reduce prices," says Andrew Langley, managing director of Juniper. "In reality working with small off cuts is a lot slower and if anything adds to net costs. We therefore charge the same as virgin cut material. The real impact we have seen so far has been the feedback and positivity from the end client knowing they are contributing to recycling waste."

This has led to some distributors upselling additional products, such as coasters, bookmarks or key fobs made from the waste of the client's notebook order.

"Our biggest success to date with this has been an order for over twenty thousand pieces of a UK made key fob, for the tour of a globally renowned rock band, who are famous for their adherence to sustainability," says Langley. " It was all made from our COMO rPET waste, from notebook production."

Occasionally Juniper will have to top up with fresh material if it doesn't have enough waste for a larger order. Although brands often require their own colours, Langley says there is an opportunity to make a virtue out of using recycled waste off cuts and take a mix of colours, as a means of demonstrating commitment to sustainability.

"We are always willing to take photos and videos of production orders to demonstrate how we take waste and repurpose, for any social media content," he adds.

WEARABLES FOR KEEPS

Sustainability is now a given in promotional merchandise, but the challenge is how to make responsible choices that hold up in the real world of timelines, budgets, and end users.

Bosscher International designs and produces custom wearables such as socks and knitwear for brands across Europe.

Roxy van Vooren, senior sales representative, Bosscher says that the most meaningful sustainability gains come from practical decisions made early, and from focusing on products that are valued.

For example, its slippers are made to be genuinely comfortable, so they quickly become part of everyday life at home. They're also well-made and durable to remain a branded reminder for longer.

"Buyers are now asking different questions. Will people actually wear this? Does it feel good enough to keep? Will it still look right after dozens of washes? Those questions have reshaped how we think about product development," she says.

Organic cotton, recycled fibres, and responsible yarn choices are now widely expected. However, materials only deliver impact when they are matched to the right product and use case. Small design decisions, such as fit, colour choice, or subtle branding, can extend a product's life far more than changing a fibre alone.

"We've had open conversations with clients where we advised against certain recycled options because they would not perform as required. Those moments matter. They build trust, and they prevent well-intentioned choices from becoming waste," she adds.

Bosscher stresses long-term partnerships with production facilities, consistent quality control, and responsible energy use to influence waste levels and reliability.

According to van Vooren, sustainability works best when it is part of the brief from the start. It loses impact when added at the end. Fewer, better-made products usually outperform higher volumes of cheaper ones. Honest conversations build more trust than perfect-sounding claims.

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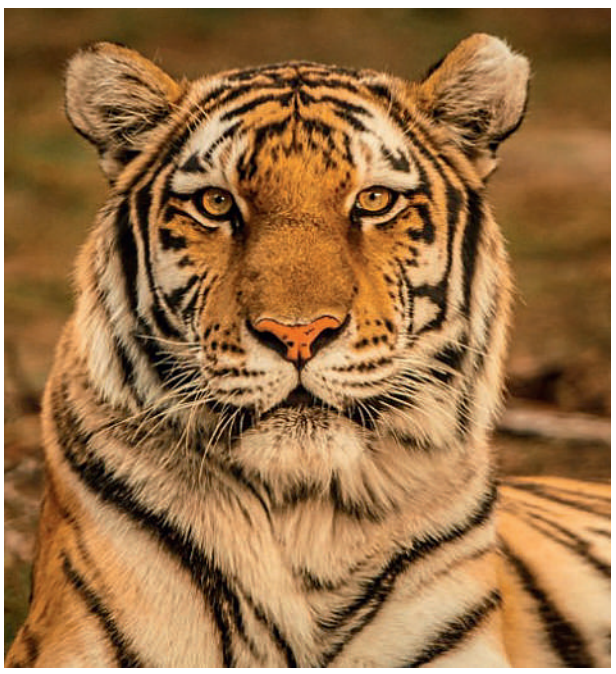
A ROARING SUCCESS FOR BIODIVERSITY

Conventional cotton is a common material in promotional clothing, but farming it carries a cost. Heavy pesticide use degrades soil, contaminates water, harms wildlife, and affects the health and livelihoods of farmers themselves. In landscapes where agriculture and biodiversity collide, such farming practices are being called into question.

However, real change is slow, local, and often stitched together by unlikely partnerships, as shown by Neutral's Tiger cotton T-shirt.

The clothing company works with farmers in the Madhya Pradesh region of India, supporting them through the transition from conventional to organic cotton. The shift removes toxic chemicals from the land, allowing soil health, water systems, and wildlife to recover, without crippling farmers.

The area features two of India's oldest nature reserves, which are sanctuaries for the endangered Bengal tiger. Between them stretch vast cotton fields farmed by around 14,000 smallholder farmers. The farmland forms a



vital wildlife corridor, allowing tigers to move between reserves, maintaining genetic diversity and the fragile balance of the ecosystem.

WWF India, the C&A Foundation, and Neutral, which produces 100% certified organic cotton apparel, joined forces to help cotton farmers actively support tiger conservation, making their fields bridges instead of barriers.

Converting to organic agriculture takes three to four years – the time needed for chemical residues to leave the soil. During this period, yields drop, income shrinks, and the risk to farmers is real.

To remove the financial barrier, Neutral pays farmers a premium during the conversion period, providing stability when it's needed most.

Bengal tigers are apex predators and depend on a thriving ecosystem beneath them. By keeping herbivore populations in check, they protect vegetation, water systems, and the entire food

web. Save the tiger, and you save the system. By maintaining a healthy, chemical-free corridor between reserves, organic cotton farmers play a quiet but critical role in ensuring the tiger's survival.

First introduced in 2019, Neutral's Tiger Cotton range is made from 100% organic cotton in conversion and made into T-shirts, polo shirts, sweatshirts, hoodies and bags.

LEGISLATION BURDEN EASED FOR SMALLER COMPANIES

Only the very largest companies will have to publish sustainability reports after the EU rolled back on planned reform of regulations on sustainability reporting (CSRD) and the corporate obligation to due diligence (CSDDD).

The aim of the decision is to reduce the administrative effort and strengthen the competitiveness of European companies.

Only EU companies with more than 1,000 employees and a turnover of more than €450m will have to produce the reports. The obligation to curb negative social and environmental impacts in the supplier chain will only come into force companies with more than 5,000 employees and a turnover of more than €1.5bn.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament has postponed the Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR). The regulation aims to prevent deforestation associated with the consumption of cocoa, coffee, palm oil, soy, timber, rubber, charcoal, printed paper and beef products.

Bigger companies have until 30 December, 2026 to comply with the obligations, while micro and small enterprises must do so by 30 June, 2027.

The European Parliament determined that responsibility for submitting a due diligence declaration should lie with the companies that first place the respective product on the EU market and not with those that subsequently distribute it.

Amendments proposed also reduced the obligations for small and micro primary producers, who will only have to submit a single, simplified declaration.

WE SALUTE YOU

Merchandise and merchandise professionals were hailed at the industry's premier award ceremony – the BPMA Annual Awards

Top large distributor, Total Merchandise

A tribute to David Long

Tui made merch part of its marketing

Two time winners Chilli

The BPMA Awards Dinner 2026 delivered a spectacular evening of celebration for the promotional merchandise sector.

Taking place at the CBS Arena, Coventry, the ceremony followed a busy first day of Merchandise World, with 600 guests arriving energised and ready to celebrate the very best of the industry.

The Association hosts the Awards Dinner annually to recognise and reward the professionalism, passion and hard work within its membership and the wider industry.

A total of 17 awards were presented on the night. This year also saw the introduction of two new awards: the BPMA Emerging Talent Award, recognising individuals who have entered the industry within the last three years, and the BPMA Recognition Award, honouring longer-standing individuals who have made a notable impact.

The awards commenced with a special recognition of David Long, founder of Merchandise World, who passed away in December.

A FITTING EVENT

Following networking drinks, the evening's awards were presented by BPMA Chairman Clive Allcott and BPMA CEO Phil Goodman, assisted by host comedian Hal Cruttenden, whose high-energy performance kept guests thoroughly entertained between dinner courses. As the evening unfolded and award winners were revealed, the energy in the room tangibly buzzed.

Goodman congratulated all the finalists and winners, as well as thanking those who attended.

"The BPMA Annual Awards 2026 was amazing. Record numbers attending, Hal Cruttenden keeping us all on our toes, and a genuine night of reflection, celebration and recognition. Our industry deserves the highest calibre event to recognise the achievements of members, and it felt like everyone had made an extra effort," he said. "The opportunity to acknowledge the dedication and achievements of David Long was a truly moving start to proceedings, and the respect in the room was tangible."

CONSISTENT DELIVERY

The BPMA Awards have long been considered the most prestigious awards as they are voted for by those within the sector.

With quality and consistency particularly valued qualities in the sector, it was notable that there were several companies that

ROLL OF HONOUR

Supplier of the Year up to £2m – Just Pads
Supplier of the Year £2-5m – Preseli
Supplier of the Year £5-10m – Impression Europe
Supplier of the Year £10m+ – Laltex
Distributor of the Year up to £500k – Chilli Promotional Products
Distributor of the Year £500k-1m – ASP Promotions
Distributor of the Year £1-3m – Mojo Promotions
Distributor of the Year £3-5m – Big Bear Promo
Distributor of the Year £5-10m – Allwag Promotions
Distributor of the Year £10m+ – Total Merchandise
Distributor Marketing Campaign of the Year – Tui Sand Shaker
Supplier Marketing Campaign of the Year – Senator Pink October
Briman Award – Geiger
BPMA Product Awards Grand Prix – First Editions' Foamo reusable cup
BPMA Emerging Talent Award – Kerry Sunderland, Promo Trade
BPMA Recognition Award – Natalie Eichmann, Gilt Edged Promotions
BPMA Lifetime Achievement Award – David Long, founder of Merchandise World

Preseli were delighted by Supplier win

Laltex triumphed in the large Supplier category

Emerging Talent winner Kerry Sunderland

A big win for Big Bear Promo

Impression Europe stood out on the night

received repeat rewards, demonstrating how they have delivered exceptional service over a number of years.

Preseli completed a hat trick of supplier awards this year following on from 2024 and 2025. It shared: "The award is a major endorsement of all the hard work that Preseli colleagues put in on a day-to-day basis. The win is shared amongst us all, whether in North Wales, Hong Kong, France, Leicestershire, Oxfordshire or Yorkshire."

Impression Europe thanked its clients and industry partners for the continued trust and

bpma

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2026

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The BPMA Annual Conference will be returning on Wednesday 17th June 2026 at a new location, Fawsley Hall, Northamptonshire. This event brings together industry leaders, suppliers, and distributors for a day of insight, innovation, and networking.

Register your interest and be the first to know when bookings open

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British Promotional Merchandise Association

MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

This year's awards saw the first presentation of two new award for individuals who really go the extra mile. Kerry Sunderland, key account manager, PromoTrade, won the Emerging Talent Award for industry professionals who have been in the sector for up to three years. A well-liked and respected member of the promotional merchandise community, Kerry's dedication to her role has made her an industry favourite.

"I'm so grateful to the promotional merchandise industry for the warmest welcome I could ever have imagined," she said. "The support, encouragement, and genuine generosity I've experienced have made my job feel effortless and truly enjoyable."

The Recognition Award for those in the industry for more than 10 years, went to Natalie Eichmann, managing director of Gilt Edged Promotions.

Natalie, who has been with the company for more than a quarter of a century, said: "With such strong competition, this means a lot and I'm grateful to be recognised among so many talented professionals. Thank you so much and well done to all the finalists and winners on the night."

Senator's Pink October was hailed best Supplier marketing

Deserved recognition for distributor Mojo

Just desserts for supplier Just Pads

Grand Prix product award went to Foamo

Recognition Award winner, Natalie Eichmann

A fitting ceremony

support which saw it win supplier of the year (£5-10m) for the second year running.

Director, Josh Stephenson said: "This recognition means a great deal to us because it reflects the trust and collaboration we have with the people we work with every day."

In terms of consistency, Laltex's win in the over £10m turnover category was its fifth year running as top large supplier.

In the distributor categories, Chilli Promotional Products won for the second year running in the up to £500k turnover sector.

"This is a national award, and what makes it even more meaningful is that it's voted for by our supply chain," said Chilli director, Jody Fletcher. "The message we received this morning said: 'Your win is a fantastic achievement and reflects the respect you've earned within the industry'. We couldn't be more grateful."

Following the presentation of this year's awards, guests took to the dance floor to the sounds of live band, The Indie Killers, providing a great celebration of a fantastic year for the merchandise sector.

The BPMA would like to thank the incredible support of the award sponsors: Geiger, BIC Graphic, Impression Europe, Preseli, PF Concept, XD Connects and Victorinox.

MATERIAL DIFFERENCE

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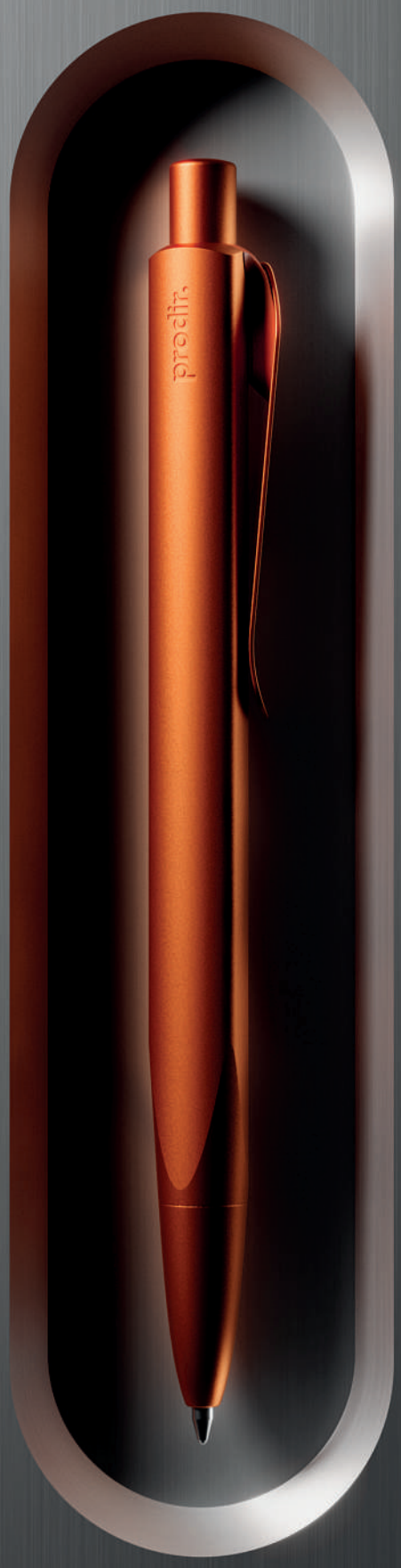

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Geiger won the Briman award for backing British makers

THE CUP WINNER

The evening also saw the BPMA Product Award Grand Prix presented to reusable cup Foamo, which was developed by First Editions and is manufactured in Britain.

Managing director, Mark Alderson, said the award capped a thrilling year in the launch of an innovative new product that he hoped would shake up the sector.

"What a journey Foamo is on. Thank you to everyone who has supported us along the way. Keep your eyes peeled, there's plenty more in the pipeline," he added.

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"AI AND SUSTAINABILITY REPRESENT THE FUTURE..."

From automation and supply chain consolidation to sustainability pressures and nurturing talent, Jason O'Connor discusses the future of merchandise with BPMA Chairman Clive Allcott

JASON O'CONNOR:

How has your experience across different industries shaped your view of where promotional merchandise is heading?

CLIVE ALLCOTT:

The film industry taught me never to underestimate technological disruption. When I was at MGM setting up video retail in the UK, we were selling VHS tapes for £57.50 each and generating substantial turnover. If you'd told me that in the future people would be downloading films instantly on their phones, I'd have laughed at you. I thought video was untouchable.

Fast forward a few years and I was reading pieces where distributors said their customers wanted delivery in less than three weeks. At the time, we thought it was never going to happen.

But look at the Amazon effect now. We've got to do almost same-day or next-day delivery. That mindset shift is massive, and those grey hairs have taught me that if you don't look to the future and embrace change, it'll pass you by completely.

JO: ***Let's talk about APIs. Everyone's throwing the term around, but are we actually ready for them?***

CA: Here's the uncomfortable truth: I think we're all kidding ourselves. Everybody talks about being API-ready, but I don't think most companies have the genuine capability.

If we look at the American market they are miles ahead. Talking to them at PPAI summits and meetings, they're all geared up with API feeds. Orders are processed automatically with nobody touching them. They don't need account managers calling suppliers because everything's automated. That's a massive difference to where we are in Europe.

At DTB, we've invested heavily in moving ourselves forward technologically. Saying that, 90% of the API set-up is easy. It's the last 10% that's like climbing Everest and that's the problem everybody's going to experience.

JO: ***Total Merchandise is launching its first API connection and it's taken months. We're planning to get about 60 suppliers on by mid-year, and now I know the size of that task – it's considerably bigger than just mentioning it in conversation.***

CA: Exactly. And I'm really concerned for people in our industry who aren't giving any real weight to these tasks. At some point, platforms like Sourcing City and Sourcing Machine will figure out a way of connecting with distributors, because it has to be the way forward. Technology is the future.

JO: ***The sustainability conversation seems to be everywhere. How should we be thinking about it?***

CA: Sustainability is a God-given business opportunity, but we're not approaching it right. Europe is implementing more than 140 sustainability regulations while America has about 30. We're choking ourselves with bureaucracy while they're undersubscribing. There needs to be more of a global united front to create something manageable.

Sustainability is a such a huge topic and we're still only on version 1.2 or 1.3. In the clothing sector especially, it's about procuring a better product in the first place rather than a throwaway item. Something with longevity – something you'll wear for two to three years. That's far more important than ticking all the organic boxes.

JO: ***That's interesting, because we sell an obscene amount of cotton shoppers, and I'm convinced customers see 'cotton' and think it's automatically eco-friendly. They're not asking how much water was used or what the carbon footprint is – they just see it's cotton, it's cheap, and they buy it.***

CA: And that's the consumer education gap right there. But here's the thing: there's going to be a point in the next few years where most things will have full traceability from cradle to grave whether its fully recycled or virgin stocked. We'll get there naturally. The challenge is that if we looked at what we all have to do now – the paperwork, the jumping through hoops, creating the story – it takes up so much time. The smaller companies aren't going to be able to follow the bigger industry outfits because they don't have the resources.

JO: ***Are you worried about supply chain consolidation? These generalist suppliers are getting massive.***

CA: I'm very concerned about it – so much so that I'd welcome a discussion openly. The generalists are getting larger. MidOcean's been bought by Platinum Equity, who also own XD Connects and the Sols Group. You also have PF and Laltex who are becoming so big that the specialists might not survive. We might end up with four major suppliers and no specialists. Whilst the big players are great businesses, this is something that the industry has to think about.

JO: ***I immediately thought of PF when you mentioned this – they're massive in Europe. Laltex has taken on mugs and they've got seeds now – they bought out Horti Gifts to get its seed division. All the people that created their own specialist niche could suddenly become irrelevant very fast.***

What about suppliers going direct to customers? Is that threat real?

CA: Let me be clear: suppliers are not equipped to go direct. It's the last thing we want to do. We struggle just looking after distributors one at a time, let alone dealing with end customers' whims. That's your specialty as a distributor.

But here's the reality: as soon as the opportunity comes for a distributor to get a big order and go direct to the Far East, or

take in their own machines, it's acceptable. Unfortunately, it doesn't work the same way for suppliers.

JO: ***I think the second someone does it obviously, the whole industry will turn their backs on them. They'll have to decide where their bread is actually buttered.***

So how is BPMA making itself more relevant? What's the plan?

CA: The end goal is simple: we want that stamp of approval from end users that distinguishes BPMA members from those that aren't. "I will only buy from a BPMA member" – that's the ultimate preference. And here's the reality: you'll never do that alone. We could throw all the money we want at it and still not get there.

That's why we've tied up with PPAI and become part of the EAC – the European Association Committee. All the associations throughout Europe are now working together. Rather than working as 12 or 15 individual associations, we'll have a common tone and unified messaging.

JO: ***That's really good, because we deal with a lot of Europe-wide companies doing European projects. It's just a shame Brexit happened – this would've been more advanced by now.***

CA: Brexit was a pain, no question. But here's what's happening: PPAI is investing and supporting the EAC, which gives us a global reach. They're launching a global campaign to communicate the strength of merchandise in the marketing mix, and because so many distributors are headquartered in the US, it will resonate globally.

JO: ***What about bringing younger people into the industry?***

CA: This is critical. I've created the ambassador programme specifically for this. We're going out to the youth of our industry, to divergent voices, and making BPMA mean something at a granular level. We want account managers, executives, administrators – people doing the day-to-day work – to know what BPMA is and get involved.

They've been given a budget to create their own events – whether that's going for a walk or taking the Eurostar to Europe for a trip. It's about creating value in the association, the collective, the networking. And it's a great succession path to getting on the board.

JO: ***You touched on something important there – this industry has lacked youth and vibrancy for years. It's improving now, but we need fresh ideas from people who aren't trapped in "this is how we've always done it" thinking.***

CA: Absolutely. We need grey hairs for experience, but unless you temper that with youth coming forward with new ideas, it's not going to happen. I love when people come in with ideas that make us all think, why didn't we think of that? It's so simple, but it needed someone a bit green, with a different perspective. That's where the future lies.

My goal over my two years as chair is clear: I want a board that's made up of people who are good enough, regardless of age. I want it to be more divergent, more inclusive, representing our whole industry. And ultimately, if you do anything within promotional merchandise, you should be a member of the BPMA.

JO: ***You mentioned the magazine relaunch – what's the thinking there?***

CA: We've rebranded as *Merch Magazine* and taken it back to print, which might seem counterintuitive, but it's strategic. Print has longevity – it goes from desk to desk, people pick it up, it passes on. A downloaded digital copy might only stay on one device.

And here's the key: we're making it white-label. That magazine becomes your magazine. Distributors can top and tail it and send it to their customers. What a great way to expand your reach, especially to larger customers. It's a statement about what we are as an industry – 60 years old and still innovating.

JO: ***I'll give you credit – when I saw the broadsheet format, coming from publishing myself, I thought this feels a lot better than the last iteration. Going back to print was brave, but you've done it very well.***

Where do you see all this heading in the next few years?

CA: Look, there are massive challenges ahead. For example, distributors are taking in kit. Business owners are entrepreneurial by nature and they want the next thing. But there aren't many options for growth, so distributors buy kit and suppliers acquire other businesses.

AI and sustainability are the two things we've been given that represent the future. Those who invested in the internet when it first came along went on to greater things. I feel sustainability and AI are those kinds of opportunities now. We just need to embrace them rather than bury our heads.

JO: ***I always think about the Sinclair C5 – amazing concept, decades before its time. If you brought it out now, it would be ginormous. Sometimes it's about hitting the market at exactly the right time with the right product.***

CA: That's it exactly. The film industry taught me that lesson. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have seen all the signs. We have those signs now with AI and sustainability. The question is: are we paying attention?

Jason O'Connor is managing director of Total Merchandise. Clive Allcott is BPMA Chairman and commercial director of DTB

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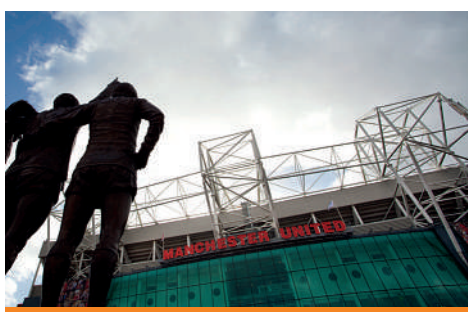

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UNLEASHED POTENTIAL

Neurodiversity in the workplace can be a strategic advantage. A new BPMA partner claims to put assessment within reach of more companies

Being a business that cares about neurodiversity inclusion has long been seen as a 'nice to have', but not really a top priority. However, recent research is starting to make companies across multiple industries see that empowering neurodiversity in the workplace isn't just a moral imperative; it's a modern strategic advantage.

In recent research by global accountancy giant Deloitte, poor mental health and failure to support and include neurodivergent employees is estimated to cost UK businesses £51 billion annually due to lost productivity and higher staff turnover.

The same report also found that for every £1 spent on wellbeing, employers recorded an average return of £4.70 in increased productivity.

PROFITABLE INCLUSION

It is workplace research like this and an autism diagnosis that set Jamie Wallis, a former Dow Jones employee and national magazine editor, on a pathway to creating an affordable-for-all neurodiversity workplace assessment and launching his business NeuroKind.

"In late 2023, my son was diagnosed with autism," says Wallis. "Not knowing much about neurodiversity at the time, it was a bit of a shock and a steep learning curve, but what really hit us hard was the statistic that an estimated 86% of autistic adults are unemployed – I read it and cried. This was not the future we had pictured for our son."

PROFITABLE INCLUSION

Wallis carried on researching neurodiversity in the workplace and started to find reports from sources like the Harvard Business Review that showed organisations that actively promote neuro-inclusivity were generating 19% more revenue.

This indicated that neuro-inclusion could be a key to innovation and generating growth. However, the caveat was that the companies that tended to be neuro-friendly were able to spend thousands on neurodiversity audits, coaching and pricy conferences.

"In our initial fact finding, the high cost to becoming neuro-friendly was continuously proving to be the main prohibitive factor to many businesses becoming neuroinclusive," says Wallis.

Working with an advisory board made up of leading neurodiversity workplace coaches, Wallis developed NeuroKind to try and change this situation. The aim was to develop an affordable-for-all neurodiversity workplace self-assessment to enable organisations of all sizes across the globe to be able to jump start or build upon their neuro-inclusion journey while showing their customers and industry that they champion neurodiversity in the workplace.

ACCESSIBLE ASSESSMENT

Launched in October 2025, companies of all sizes and industries from countries including America, France and across the UK have taken the NeuroKind assessment, including BPMA member Pinksheep.

"In our industry, people and relationships between staff and clients are so important and how we communicate with each other is key," says Phil Law, sales director at Pinksheep.

"We are always looking to continuously improve our workplace environment and customer offering, and we were really excited by what NeuroKind offers businesses like us."

The sustainable merchandise specialists have found working with NeuroKind is making a difference. "The NeuroKind assessment and report has been hugely helpful to Pinksheep. The assessment and report were full of actionable tips and advice that has given us a pathway of next steps that we believe will not only help us as a team but also enable Pinksheep to work in the best way possible with our clients as well."

Not wanting to stop there, NeuroKind have also released a 60-page neurodiversity in the workplace guidebook, a work with me employee passport, and a neurodiversity company code of conduct, which they include as part of joining NeuroKind.

"We have been blown away by the response and feedback from clients who have taken the assessment," says Wallis. "We want to make it easy and affordable for any organisation to create workplaces that empower people to feel happy and included, while aiding company growth and innovation. Everyone deserves to work in a company where they can reach their full potential."

BPMA members can receive a 15% discount on their NeuroKind Assessment. Start your journey by contacting jamie@weareneurokind.com today. For more information on NeuroKind, visit weareneurokind.com.

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PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT

Insolvencies are on the increase, but how you deal with them can improve your chances of recovering cash, says Mike Collins

"So what! I don't even like their burgers."

This may have been your first thought when you heard the news that high street restaurant chain TGI Friday's had entered insolvency. Sadly, TGI is not the only victim of this ever-uncertain economy. In fact, it is the 20th high street brand to enter insolvency this year so far.

Insolvency doesn't just affect the immediate company. The pain of being owed money is passed down and down the supplier chain and can and will impact every single supplier, no matter how big or small, and no matter how far removed you think you are from the immediate challenge.

PROTECTIVE ACTION

In order to avoid the ripple effect of insolvency affecting your business, there are three key actions you need to take:

1. Try not to focus only on 'big spenders'. Have an even spread of large and smaller clients.

2. Limit risk through sensible invoicing. Break down larger invoices into smaller staged chunks.

3. Be aware of your current exposure. Be vigilant and organised when managing your risk.

However, there is an unfortunate growing trend of insolvencies so far in 2026 and the likelihood is that the more clients you attract, the more possibility you'll have of experiencing a customer insolvency first hand.

But not all insolvency is necessarily the end of the road for your cash.

PICK YOUR BATTLES

There are two main types of insolvency – liquidation and administration.

Liquidation is the proverbial 'dead duck'. It's deemed the company has no future and it becomes a fire sale of the assets and good will of a business. Sadly, there is very little prospect of any unsecured creditor being paid. Usually the only people that see money from a liquidation are the liquidators themselves.

Administration is a little different and could be more worthy of your time. An administration is where the company is deemed a 'going concern' and so the plan is to either continue to run it under alternative means, or to sell the business to others and continue to trade.

However, the main difference is to the creditors. An administration can bring a dividend, or pay-out, to creditors as a percentage of the money owed. Ideally we'd all like to be paid 100% of our debt but when you're dealing with a nearly insolvent company, some money is better than none.

Add these dividends to some clever accountant actions, such as reclaiming VAT already paid, or lodging some bad debt write-off and there could be some benefit from an administration.

IT'S PERSONAL

That said, there can be a remedy to any company insolvency in the form of a personal guarantee held against the directors of the business.

By holding a personal guarantee, you negate the challenges any insolvency can bring because your debt automatically switches to the individual and they become liable for your debt, not the lame duck business. The facility to do this both subtly and seamlessly is readily available to users of AccountAssyst.

Although insolvency is undeniably bad, some are worse than others. If it's a liquidation, lodge your claim and move on. If it's an administration, pay a little time to the matter as it could just yield you some money back. But if you really want to maximise your chances of recovering your debt, speak to us about sourcing personal guarantees to secure your debts.

Call your promotional goods liaison Ian Jenkinson on 07860 197476 or email ijenkinson@directroute.co.uk for business cash flow advice.

Mike Collins is managing director of AccountAssyst

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LET'S DO BUSINESS

Merchandise World is the place for ideas, innovation and contacts in the promotional industry

The promotional year started with a bang with industry must-attend show Merchandise World boasting its busiest ever first day.

A bustling event at the CBS Arena in Coventry saw the show achieve several new post-Covid highs. There were 187 exhibitors and a total of 1,490 visitors, with 90% of attendees pre-registered.

Ella Long, CEO of organiser, Sourcing City said: "Our team works exceptionally hard to deliver an event that genuinely adds value, and it's hugely encouraging to see the show continuing to grow in both scale and quality."

She added: "My greatest satisfaction comes from watching real business being done and meaningful relationships being strengthened."

This has fed through into record re-bookings for next year, with more than 100 committed, up 40% than the same time last year.

SUSTAINABLY BETTER

As always, the show represented an opportunity for companies to demonstrate their latest innovations, with sustainability remaining an important focus for suppliers.

Cornish manufacturer CHX has a long-standing interest in sustainability and this year was no exception. It was showing its Traceable Marine Plastic, which is used to produce promotional products made from plastic sourced from discarded fishing nets and ropes on Cornish beaches.

The material, produced by start-up Waterhaul, can be traced via QR code to specific beaches

and clear ups. It also donates 5% of income from these products to the Surfers Against Sewage charity.

CHX was also showcasing a range of bio polymer products made from sugar cane waste. The bio plastic has enhanced biodegradability at the end of its life.

Also showcasing its ocean saving credentials was PF Concept which launched its new Cirrus and Alto tumblers, both made with 50% Prevented Ocean Plastic.

Each tumbler reuses the equivalent of 10 disposable plastic cups collected from Asia, helping prevent plastic waste from reaching our oceans.

Visitors were able to try the tumblers for themselves as they were used throughout the Merchandise World cafes.

BRIGHT FUTURE

Given the wintry weather, it was hard to focus on the sun, but did you know that the UK will be on the edge of solar eclipse later this year? For brands looking to this sunny opportunity, the advice is to ensure that you wear proper eyewear, as manufactured by Celestech.

The Barcelona business can make 350,000 pairs of safe solar vision specs every day. There will be a major eclipse over Spain on 12 August this year. This will be followed by the 'solar eclipse of the century' on 2 August 2027 with the Moon close to its nearest point to Earth for this eclipse.

This will have the longest total eclipse over land for the 21st century. The best spot will be about 37 miles south east of Luxor in

11 THINGS WE SPOTTED AT MERCHANDISE WORLD

1 Exceptio Sock School proved that every day is a learning day when it comes to two footed merchandise.
2 Also putting their best feet forward, ID Sneakers provided kicking footwear for the Merchandise World team.
3 Screenworks celebrated its 35th birthday by showcasing its latest branded clothing solutions. But was there cake?
4 Promo Trade backing start-up drinkware company Cupple as it moves into the merch sector.
5 Taking a stroll along Laltex Lane – for all your promotional needs.
6 Sustainable wins from the team at Preseli turning Merchandise World lanyards back into new merchandise.
7 CHX's sustainable cardboard stands that can be recycled after the show.
8 Everyone having their picture taken with Bizz Badge's Bertie the Badger as the company showed off its range.
9 BPMA partners Pepala, BPIF and AccountAssyst on hand with advice on reusing merchandise, training, and credit control.
10 Smart Games getting jiggy with custom jigsaws, offering total brand immersion in mailable, interactive, and playful form.
11 Spice Kitchen showing what's hot in the culinary world.

Egypt and there will be a totality lasting for six minutes and 22 seconds.

BUSINESS GOALS

A promotional opportunity that will be more familiar to many brands is this summer's FIFA World Cup in North America. The tournament has been expanded to 48-teams for the first time and there is British interest in the form of England and Scotland's participation. Wales and Northern Ireland are facing qualifiers in March so could join them.

Should they all get through, interest in the tournament will be even bigger than it is set to be. The King has even approved a Bank Holiday in Scotland.

AMT Trade highlighted a range of sports balls at Merchandise World, which it supplies through a small number of trusted factories.

With the tournament starting on 11 June, branded footballs are selling fast according to AMT, which has a range of options from full size to miniature, from promotional to premium. With typical lead times ranging from 2-4 weeks, there is still time to place orders and achieve delivery.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Ecommerce company GetConnect launched a rebrand at the show to strengthen its commitment to the promotional products sector. As part of that commitment it has also become a member of the BPMA.

Previously known as GetJohn & Co, the B2B eCommerce integration platform also unveiled a new team, including operations director Conor Evans. He brings extensive experience in scaling operations and customer success to his new role.

The company has developed sophisticated integration technology that automates order processing, supplier connectivity, and inventory synchronisation for distributors operating in the promotional products sector.

GetConnect claims its software is specifically designed for the promotional products sector to overcome the integration challenges that generic ecommerce platforms can't solve.

MORE IN SEPTEMBER

For those who can't wait until next year, there are only about six sourcing months before the mid-year edition of Sustainable Merchandise World at the Milton Keynes Arena. We'll see you there.

BPMA Education Programme

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LIQUID ASSETS

The market for drinkware is set to remain buoyant for the foreseeable future. Here's why

Within the promotional products sector, drinkware continues to be one of the most reliable and resilient categories. The UK consumes more than 200 million cups of tea and coffee every day, creating constant, high frequency touchpoints for branded mugs, tumblers and bottles. Few other product categories offer the same level of repeated exposure.

What makes drinkware especially powerful is its versatility. It performs equally well as a premium corporate gift, a loyalty item or a high-volume trade show giveaway. That flexibility is one of the reasons the UK drinkware market is forecast to grow at around 6% CAGR through 2031, supported by rising beverage consumption, growing health and hydration awareness, and continued demand for reusable and personalised products.

REDUCE SINGLE USE

Sustainability is now the biggest driver of innovation in the category. With an estimated seven million single-use coffee cups and 35.8 million disposable water bottles used every day in the UK, end users are actively seeking alternatives. This has accelerated the shift toward materials such as recycled PET, stainless steel and ceramics, which are now becoming standard rather than premium options. For the promotional industry, this represents a clear opportunity, to align branded merchandise with the environmental values that buyers and consumers increasingly expect.

BESPOKE FINISH

At the same time, the market has moved decisively toward higher quality, ultra-personalised drinkware. Buyers are no longer satisfied with a logo placed on a stock product, they want colour matched coatings, wraparound decoration, and finishes that reflect brand identity with precision.

Suppliers are responding to this demand with technologies like Keramikos and Thermalmate's, UK based, Pantone matching ColourCoat spray line and 360 digital printing, enabling full coverage decoration that turns drinkware into a true brand asset rather than just a functional giveaway.

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WORKING FOR A GLOBAL FUTURE

The trade associations for four of the largest merchandise markets are working to analyse its value globally

BPMA Chair Clive Allcott and CEO Phil Goodman spent three days at the PPAI's headquarters in Dallas last December as part of a global association summit. The event also had representation from the PPPC of Canada and APPA of Australia.

High on the agenda was the ambition for the group of four associations to deliver a Global Impact Survey, analysing the effect and value of the branded merchandise industry across the globe, with each Association being able to drill down into local data to support their members.

Additionally, the Associations are seeking to develop an integrated marketing campaign to raise the profile of branded merchandise as an effective marketing discipline in its own right.

BPMA CEO, Phil Goodman said: "Having the opportunity for all four associations to meet annually is really productive. 2024 was the inaugural; international meeting, and year two was even more successful with two new initiatives being developed as a direct result of these collaborations that will directly benefit BPMA members. We are a truly global industry so it makes sense for four of the largest markets to collaborate for the greater good of their respective members."

BPMA members will be kept abreast of development of the two campaigns with results and activation scheduled for Summer 2026.

BPMA Chair Clive Allcott added: "The second international summit built upon the success of our 2024 meeting. We have developed a solid and mutually respected relationship with the PPAI and our friends in Canada and Australia Indeed, we were proud to host senior representatives from both the PPAI and APPA at Merchandise World in January. Long may the collaborations continue. I'm excited to see the outcomes of our discussions later this year."

EUROPEAN MERCHANDISE SUMMIT

Merchandise professionals are being invited to save the date for the second International Leadership Summit (ILS) on 8-10 June.

The event brings together senior leaders and young leadership personalities from across the European and global promotional merchandise industry.

At a time when international cooperation, regulation, and market dynamics are becoming increasingly complex, the ILS offers a trusted space for strategic dialogue, exchange of perspectives, and cross-border collaboration.

Building on the strong momentum of previous editions, the 2026 Summit will once again be organised in cooperation between the European Associations Cooperation (EAC) and PPAI.

A detailed programme with speakers will be released imminently. Key topics for discussion will include:

- **Research insights and education**
- **Sustainability and responsible value chains**
- **Digital transformation and innovation**
- **Cross-border politics and market frameworks**
- **Leadership in times of change**

The event will be held at Dolce by Wyndham Hotel & Resort, near Brussels.

More details at ppai.org/event/international-leadership-summit/

THE APPRENTICESHIP ADVANTAGE

BPMA members can benefit from BPIF Training packages to upskill staff at all levels in their organisations, says Matt Child

In a fast-moving promotional merchandise market, success depends on more than great products and strong supplier relationships. Skills, leadership capability and operational excellence are becoming the real differentiators. That is where BPIF Training comes in and why it is increasingly relevant to BPMA members.

BPIF Training is the training and skills arm of the British Printing Industries Federation and has partnered with the BPMA to deliver apprenticeships and one day training courses to its members. While its roots are firmly embedded in print, its scope has expanded to support a wide range of businesses across manufacturing, supply chain, customer service and operations, many of which align with BPMA members.

WHY TRAINING MATTERS

BPMA members operate in a complex environment that blends sales, sourcing, logistics, branding, compliance, customer service and print. BPIF Training develops the practical, work-ready skills that businesses need to improve productivity, manage costs, grow talent internally and future-proof their workforce.

Rather than generic classroom learning, BPIF Training focuses on applied learning, with skills that staff can use immediately. For BPMA members facing skills shortages, rising wage pressures and the need to retain good people, this makes training a strategic investment.

WHAT TRAINING IS AVAILABLE?

A broad portfolio is highly relevant to the promotional products sector, including:

- Apprenticeships at multiple levels, from entry-level to senior management
- Leadership and management development, including team leader, process leader and operations manager
- Customer service and business administration training for sales, account management and operational support teams
- Supply chain and logistics programmes covering procurement, planning, warehousing and distribution
- Lean manufacturing and continuous improvement for businesses looking to improve efficiency and reduce waste
- Print specific training covering pre-press, press and finishing via the print operative and print technician apprenticeships
- One day intro workshops covering; print, lean, customer service, negotiation and persuasion, finance for non-finance managers, training for trainers and team leading.

All of the apprenticeships are funded through the apprenticeship levy scheme, making them accessible to businesses of all sizes. If an apprentice is under 25, full funding is given for the apprenticeship and while an apprentice the employer does not pay NIC. For apprentices over 25 levy payers get full funding while SMEs pay only 5% of the overall cost.

HOW TO GET STAFF ON TO SCHEMES?

BPMA members can engage directly with BPIF Training's employer engagement team, Matt Child (matt.child@bpif.org.uk) and Yasmin Brotherson (yasmin.brotherson@bpif.org.uk) , who will help assess business needs, identify suitable programmes and guide companies through the funding and onboarding process.

Training is delivered through a blended learning model, typically combining:

- Workplace learning and projects
- One-to-one coaching and mentoring
- Online learning modules
- Online and face to face workshops and peer learning sessions

This flexible approach allows employees to learn while continuing to contribute to the business.

IS FINANCIAL SUPPORT AVAILABLE?

Yes, and BPMA members may be surprised to learn how much support is available.

Levy-paying employers can use their existing apprenticeship levy funds

Non-levy employers typically receive 95% government funding, paying just 5% of training costs

Some additional incentives are available for recruiting younger apprentices such as a payment of £1,000 for apprentices employed under 19 and there is no NIC for apprentices under 25.

Matt Child is employer engagement & partnership manager at BPIF Training. More information at BPIF.training.

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MORE POWER TO YOUR GADGETS

New alternatives in the power bank sector offer stylish alternatives for merchandise campaigns, says Alan Doyle

Power banks remain a high-performing category within promotional merchandise, but buyer expectations are changing. Beyond capacity and price, marketers are now evaluating safety, form factor, and how well a product supports modern and sustainable brand positioning.

This shift has brought renewed attention to battery chemistry – specifically the contrast between conventional lithium-based power banks and emerging semi solid-state battery power banks that use advanced electrolyte systems.

Lithium-based power banks continue to dominate the market due to their established supply chains, competitive pricing, and reliable performance. For volume-driven campaigns, they remain a practical solution. However, lithium-ion batteries rely on liquid electrolytes, which limit how thin devices can be made and introduce safety considerations such as overheating, swelling, and stricter transport compliance – factors that can impact both logistics and brand confidence.

A SLIM ALTERNATIVE

Semi solid-state battery technology offers a compelling alternative, particularly for design-led promotional campaigns. By using a more stable electrolyte structure, these batteries support significantly thinner and lighter power bank designs without compromising performance. This ultra-slim profile is highly attractive to marketers seeking promotional products that feel contemporary, premium, and genuinely useful – power banks that resemble modern tech accessories rather than bulky giveaways.

From a safety perspective, semi solid-state batteries also deliver tangible advantages. Their improved thermal stability reduces the risk of leakage or combustion, making them well suited for global distribution and high-profile corporate gifting. Longer cycle life further extends product usability, ensuring sustained brand exposure over time.

GO-TO TECH

For buyers, the appeal is clear. While semi solid-state power banks typically carry a higher unit cost, they enable slimmer designs, enhanced safety credentials, and stronger alignment with innovation-focused branding.

As promotional merchandise continues to move towards form-driven, lifestyle-compatible products, thin, solid-state-style power banks represent a category poised for growth, offering buyers and marketers alike a smarter, safer, and more design-forward option.

All of this can be coupled with sustainable shells like recycled plastic, aluminium or even natural materials, meaning that the ever-popular power bank is about to get a face lift that will continue to make it a go-to promotional tech accessory for years to come.

Alan Doyle is account manager of Xoopar

XOOPAR GOES DIRECT

Tech brand Xoopar is now operating directly with clients in the UK market through a dedicated UK operation led by Manika Rai and Alan Doyle.

For clients and partners, the new set up means a faster, more responsive, and more globally connected service model. A wider stream of new products will launch into the UK, with Xoopar promising faster turnaround, including 48 hour express delivery on selected UK stocked items.

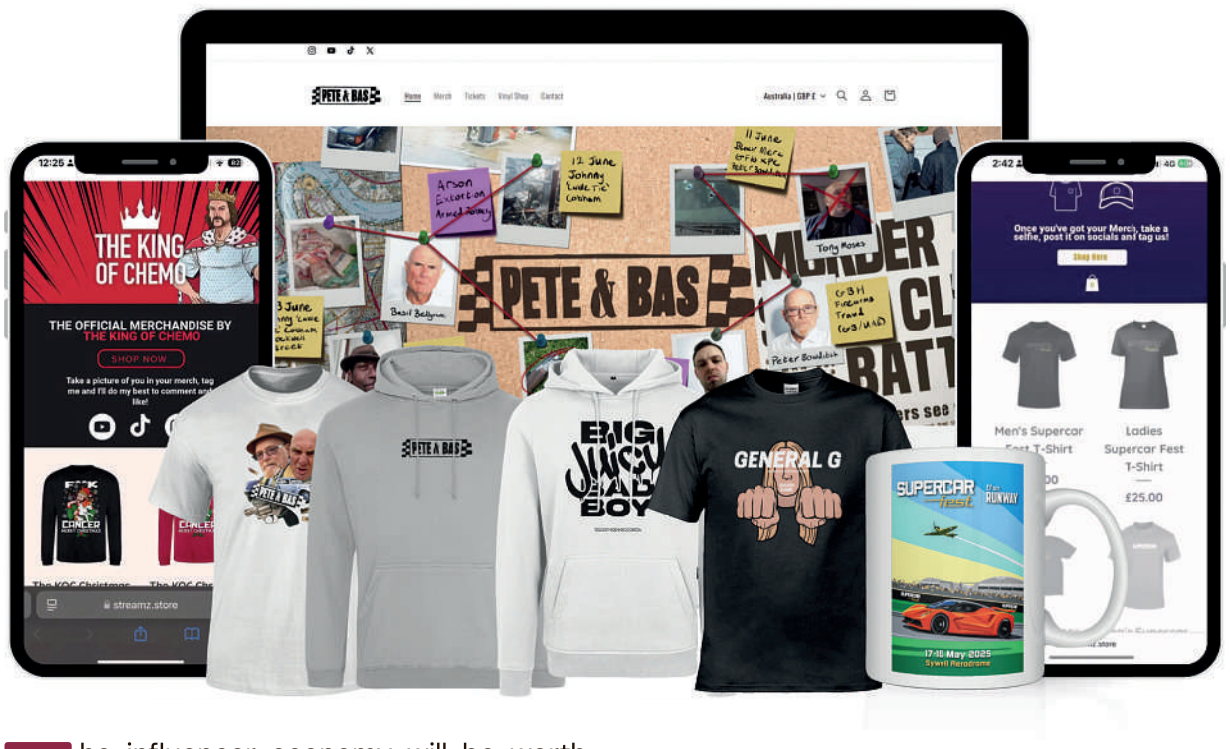
The company will be able to offer global programmes through its international partnerships. US partner, iClick, can deliver to a US address within 3–5 days.

Account manager Alan Doyle said consistency is key. "Each location uses the same print machines, ensuring identical decoration quality worldwide. We're also working towards a single PO process with multiple delivery notes, giving clients a smooth and efficient logistics experience."

Product highlights include the Octomini lightweight cable; the award-winning ICE Tag smart tag, and universal travel adapter, the Luggie.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Influencers are finding that merchandise can provide welcome revenue as well as amplifying their message. Supplier Streamz wants to help them do it



The influencer economy will be worth almost $500 billion by 2027, according to Goldman Sachs.

In the UK, YouTube creators alone contributed £2.2bn to the UK economy in 2024, supporting 45,000 jobs, claims a report by Oxford Economics. That's bigger than the entire promotional merchandise sector.

One British start-up hopes to bring the two worlds together by becoming the number one supplier of promotional merchandise to UK influencers.

Streamz launched during the Covid downturn of 2020 and has developed a business model that aims to help influencers and creators harness the power of merchandise.

The business started when co-founders Archie Connor and James Graham noticed that although their local gym supplied merchandise, their lack of expertise in ordering led to a mismatch of sizes and popular colours, with leftover items representing profit left on the table.

NEW MODEL MERCH

Both founders had previously created web businesses and offered to help the gym by building it a website that offered print on demand items. What started as a one off became an approach that the company could take to other companies.

"Initially it was a side hustle, but over time it grew quickly with other gyms, local charities and businesses attracted by the lack of upfront cost and the hassle-free nature of the offer," says Connor.

He describes the move to influencers as being a "happy accident". It was not the founders' world but they saw that with many celebrities creating their own product lines, it was an approach that more influencers wanted to tap into.

REVENUE AND REACH

"For influencers, merchandise offers two main things. Firstly, it's a revenue stream that can be very lucrative. But it's also great for their brand awareness. They need to get as many people as possible to know about their brands and merchandise does that. We can help them do that with a zero-risk model," says Connor.

The print on demand approach means there is no upfront layout for most influencers who partner with Streamz, and they can start to sell their own branded merchandise straight away.

Streamz' Influencer clients include Pete and Baz, a pair of rapping pensioners, King of Chemo, a stage 3 cancer sufferer who has raised £700,000 for charity, and comedian Dan Foord.

The working relationship is close with influencers viewing Streamz as their merchandise team, according to Connor.

"We consult with them on drops and designs and things like that, leaving them free to do what they are good at – monetising their followers. It's hassle free," says Connor.

Streamz has gradually honed what it sees as working in the influencer space. Having initially presented a catalogue of options to its partners, it now takes a more selective approach.

FOCUS ON QUALITY

"We were offering them about 3,000 items but found that people were overloaded with ideas and the quality slipped. If you're asking people to spend their own money on merchandise then it has to be of high quality."

Looking forward, the goal is to become the number one supplier in the influencer space in the UK. It's a lucrative sector and it's also enjoyable to work in, says Connor.. Word of mouth is strong among influencers which is another reason that merchandise works so well.

From starting out as relative novices in the influencer sector, Streamz has developed an understanding of its dynamics. Creating a foundation selection of goods and then coming up with regular drops of limited-edition products which deliver spikes in traffic, has proved profitable.

The end of 2024 saw the brand have one of its most successful end of year periods, with influencer sales of £260,000 in the four weeks prior to Christmas.

Event merchandise is another area that the business hopes to build on, with its experience in bulk ordering.

But it's alerting influencers to possibilities of merchandise that remains a focus, and the sector seems eager to listen.

"You can see their eyes open when we explain how it works to them," says Connor.

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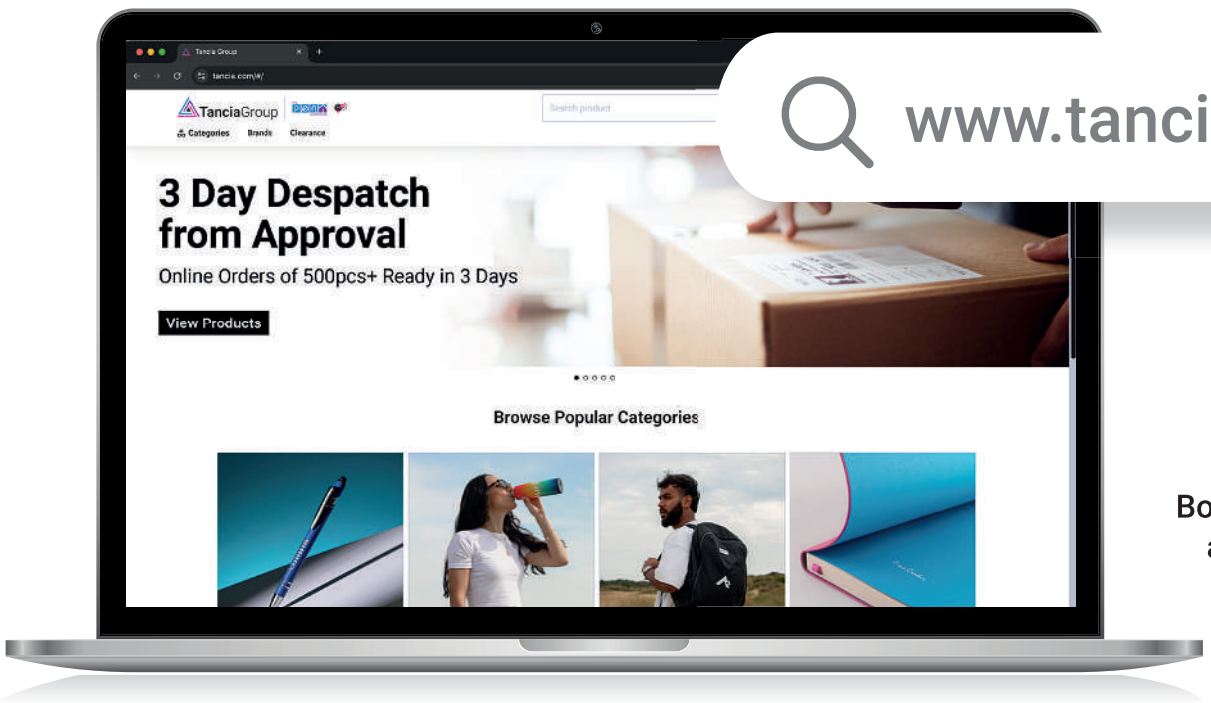

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