

MERCH MAGAZINE

from the

bpma
British
Promotional
Merchandise
Association

MAY/JUNE 2026

A hand is shown holding the word "BRAND" in large, glowing, white letters. The background is a dark blue space with many small, bright white stars. The hand is positioned in the center, with the fingers spread, holding the word. The word "BRAND" is the central focus of the image.

BRAND

IN YOUR HANDS

INSIDE

SPORTING GOODS
Get in the game to win
P17

EASTERN PROMISE
The merch view from Asia
P12

BE PREPARED
Managing supply chain disruption
P25

MERCHMAGAZINE.CO.UK

The rise of brand experience PAGE 8

NEW!

BIC® 4 Colours® ECO

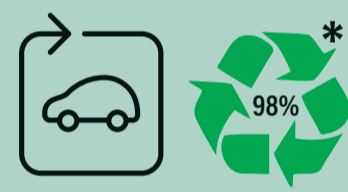


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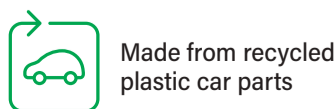
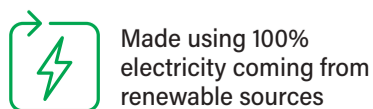
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WELCOME

There is good news on the state of the industry from the respected Sourcing City State of the Market report. The UK and Ireland market for promotional merchandise was up by 8.3% to a new high of £1,334m last year.

Compared with the sorry state of growth in other sectors, that is a reason to be cheerful for the merchandise sector.

However, the industry can ill afford to rest on its laurels. There are clouds on the horizon with global disruption affecting the long supply chains of our industry.

In this issue of *Merch Magazine*, JuteBag's Parit Shah calls on companies to be more aware of how the fluidity of world events is feeding through into merchandise costs (p25).

With the Middle East situation looking unsettled going forward, it makes sense to maintain an open dialogue with suppliers. According to the government, the UK could face higher energy, food and flight ticket prices for at least eight months following the end of the US-Israel war with Iran. It's a situation that needs monitoring and lines of communication kept open.

Thankfully, sport can provide light relief in these testing times, and the biggest global sporting event, the World Cup, is due to start in June with Home Nations interest in the shape of England and Scotland. The Commonwealth Games is also looming – yet another reminder of the power of sport to engage.

It's not just a quadrennial opportunity. Sport is all around us and a great way for

brands to insert themselves into people's lives. More than one million people apply to run the London Marathon every year, 15.7 million regularly play football in England, and a similar number cycle every month. Brands can be part of this, as we investigate in this issue (p17).

Also in this issue is a reminder of how brands can use merchandise to build experiences that endure. Some of our longest lasting and strongest brand associations are tied up with product media. Where would we be without the Comic Relief red nose, the Meerkats, or Happy Meal toys?

Merch helped build these brands, and it's worth remembering that rich heritage and what it can teach us about the future.



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Merch Magazine is available to the whole promotional merchandise industry. It is the official magazine of the British Promotional Merchandise Association (BPMA).

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BRIDGING THE... GAP

Schools in East Africa are being helped through a new initiative that allows BPMA members to provide a helping hand

BPMA Members have helped bring educational support materials to thousands of pupils at schools in Malawi.

Work by BPMA partner Pepala saw materials given to almost 5,000 students in the East African country. Members have donated thousands of items of remaindered merchandise that would have ended up as landfill without Pepala's intervention.

In total, 70,000 items were redirected in this way with students receiving backpacks containing items to support their learning journeys, such as pens, pencils and essential school supplies.

Pepala also collected 10,000 reading books which enabled it to build two libraries for schools – the first time the children have had access to a library.

FROM WASTE TO WANTED

As well as educational equipment, BPMA members, such as Promo Sports reached out to provide hundreds of footballs for schools that lack such basic items.

Promo Trade donated 1,500 drawstring backpacks for pupils who were often fashioning their own schoolbags from pieces of waste material. Allwag connected with Pepala through the A Good Thing platform to donate a range of excess merchandise.



CHX donated 500 Ecoscribe pencils designed to be long lasting so that children can keep using them instead of constantly replacing worn-down pencils. As well as being practical, the pencils are made using recycled materials and designed with sustainability in mind.

Other BPMA contributors included Brand Addition, Pink Sheep, Steel City, Laltex, Premier and ESM Branding, with additional participants including Britvic, KPMG, various libraries, schools, and book publishing companies.

Pepala's Amara Sharif said partnering with the BPMA and its members has created a meaningful pathway for members to pass on merchandise to children in one of the poorest countries in the world.



TRACKING THE STORY

Members have posted items directly to Pepala, enabling it to efficiently package and pallet shipments to Africa, and some have even offered to offset shipping



costs. Donors are informed every step of the journey, from the moment items leave UK shores to the moment they reach classrooms in Malawi.

"Pens, notebooks and bags are everyday items in the UK, yet for many students in Malawi they are a luxury; most do not even own a school bag. My dream is for every student to have a backpack filled with essential stationery, which I see as a basic human right. The BPMA has helped us bridge that resource gap by connecting us with a powerful, credible network of suppliers who have been nothing short of incredible."

To find out more about Pepala, go to Pepala.org.uk

TOTES AMAZING

Summer's ideal promotional item has bags of style, says Clive Allcott

Cotton bags are one of the most underrated but highest-performing items in the promotional merchandise mix especially for summer. If you position them right, they become a daily use branding asset, not just a giveaway.

In many campaigns, a good cotton tote bag delivers more impressions per pound than apparel. It's summer where cotton bags really shine. They can be used in multiple situations as a grab and go lifestyle item that never looks out of place.

Unlike flyers, they have repeat use, sticking around for months or years as beach carry bags, for travel essentials, as festival carriers, or helping with the daily shopping.

Their large print area is great for bold, creative branding, and their reusability aligns with sustainability messaging with most bags today being certified organic.

WHAT STYLE IS YOUR BAG?

Don't just opt for a generic tote segment. There are several key styles available

The classic 5oz cotton shopper made from lightweight cotton remains the biggest seller. Available in multiple colours, natural is the most popular. It is a budget friendly, affordable product making it perfect for mass giveaways.

Made from thicker 6oz to 10oz 'canvas' cotton, the premium heavyweight shopper has a structured feel for a longer lifespan. This will often hold a better print due to the weight of the bag and is associated with retail feel and quality.

Gusseted shoppers have a wider base for greater capacity so they can hold more items especially groceries and beachwear. This practicality can lead to

more frequent use and therefore more brand exposure.

EYE-CATCHING ITEM

Don't lose sight of the promotional effect and help clients with trend driven designs that will deliver this repeated use.

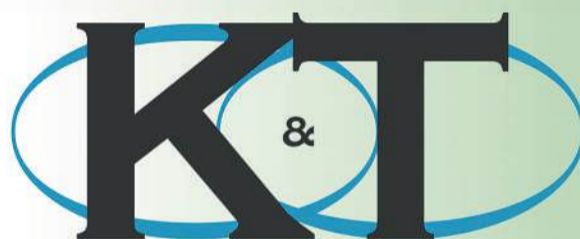
Bold, simple graphics which are easy to read from a distance work well, as does minimal branding – nobody wants to carry a giant logo. Eye-catching effects can include creative typography or illustrations, and experiments can include off-centre printing, or edge-to-edge visuals.

There are other ways to include the tote bag into a marketing give away. Can it be the packaging for a T-shirt? Or make it part of the giveaway, such as a welcome kit holding a notebook, pen and water bottle.

A cotton bag can be a high return marketing investment, a lifestyle accessory, a sustainability statement, or a bundle anchor product.

Happy selling

Clive the bag and clothing Guru. ■



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ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

Brands increasingly want to create meaningful experiences for their customers, and merchandise is in the frontline

Depending on who you believe, the average number of marketing messages you see every day varies from below 100 to as high as 10,000.

Whatever the actual figure, it's a lot and begs the question how many really make an impact.

Perhaps a more pertinent question might be to ask how many marketing communications you feel, touch, hear, smell or taste? That number is a lot lower and one of the reasons why merchandise punches above its weight when it comes to making an impression.

Brands are increasingly seeking a more experience-oriented approach when it comes to communicating with their customers. With increased digitalisation, brands need additional means of cutting through to bamboozled audiences, and physical brand experiences can enhance and boost communication, providing real, physical touchpoints. Brand communication you can touch.

According to Petra Lassahn, director of promotional products show, PSI: "Advertising only generates 20 to 25 percent of the brand impact – other touchpoints generate the strongest impressions."

It's a message that the promotional industry will be taking to German digital marketing exhibition, OMR, in Hamburg this May, with a punchy masterclass titled, 'Why Advertising Fails and Brand Experience Wins'.

"As an industry, we demonstrate at the OMR that multisensory touchpoints that people experience physically strongly impact brand perception and significantly increase the effect of digital touchpoints," she says.

With that in mind, let's look at some of the classic campaigns that showed how merchandise could really connect with customers.

COMIC RELIEF RED NOSE

Prior to the first Red Nose Day in 1986, charity flag days were a relatively sedate and boring way of fundraising. The plastic Red Nose helped set the seal on the event as a zany way of raising money while having fun. Crucially, it connected fantastically with younger people who previously might not have known how to get involved. The ever-evolving noses have become synonymous with the charity, which has raised £1.5 billion in its 40 years.

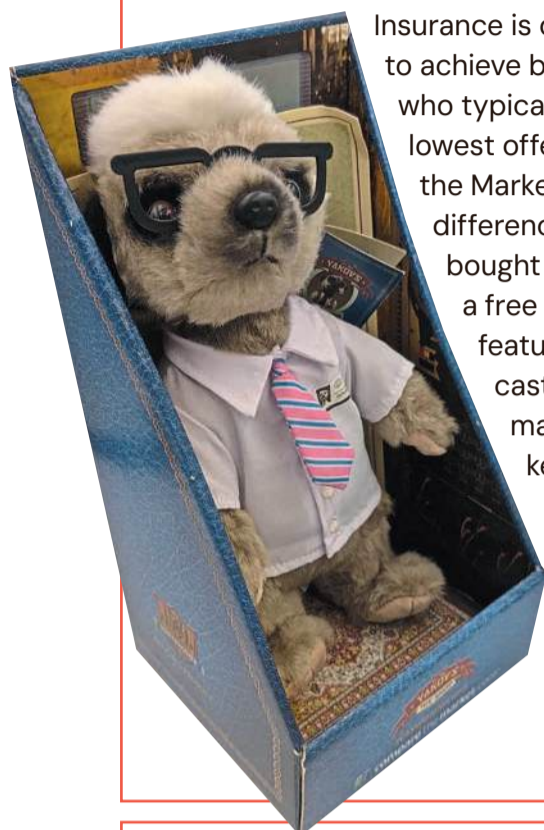


ANDREX PUPPY

The toilet paper brand first used a labrador dog in its advertising in 1972 and since then has periodically featured promotions that allowed consumers to claim cuddly toy versions. These have been hugely popular – a link up with the Guide Dogs for the Blind charity in 2006 saw more than 135,000 toys claimed by token collecting punters. A 2024 gift with purchase promotion in Tesco saw shoppers go puppy wild again, demonstrating that a great idea doesn't age.



COMPARE THE MEERKAT TOYS



Insurance is one of the hardest sectors to achieve brand loyalty with consumers who typically shop around for the lowest offer. Comparison site Compare the Market created a point of difference by offering customers that bought a policy through its portal a free cuddly toy of the Meerkats featured in its ads. A revolving cast of characters and outfits made them collectable and kept the consumers coming back for more. The business moved from being one of several players in the sector to being its leading brand. Simple!

PG TIPS MONKEY

The tea brand famously used chimpanzees in its TV advertising from the 1950s through to the early 2000s, and this followed through to promotional collectables such as trading cards and figurines. In 2007, the brand enlisted Monkey, a character previously used to promote ON Digital, as a brand ambassador. With sidekick Johnny Vegas, he featured in TV ads as well as covetable on-pack giveaways including plush toys and Monkey mugs.



Digital, as a brand ambassador. With sidekick Johnny Vegas, he featured in TV ads as well as covetable on-pack giveaways including plush toys and Monkey mugs.

AND DON'T FORGET...

These are just a taste of the creativity of merch providers. Who remembers?

- Coca-Cola's selfie stick
- Batchelor's Cup a Soup mugs
- Levi's Flat Eric
- Esso's Tiger in Your Tank tail
- The Homepride Fred collection
- Golden Wonder Pogs
- I Ran the World T-shirts
- James Bond bullet hole stickers
- Walkers' beanie bears
- Budweiser year T-shirt

NAT WEST PIGGY BANKS

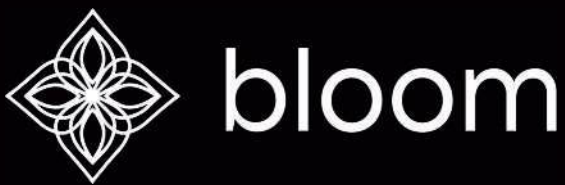
The high street bank got a jump on its competitors in 1983 when it started an account aimed at young savers with a series of ceramic piggy banks that were tiered according to how much they had managed to save. With just £3 in their account, they received baby Woody, with subsequent piggies being issued as saving targets were reached. At £100, Sir Nathaniel Westminster was sent to savers. By 1985, more than one million pigs had been issued and the complete set of five is very collectable.



MCDONALD'S HAPPY MEALS TOYS

The Golden Arches launched its first Happy Meal in 1979 creating an eating experience that has satisfied families ever since. Kids receive their own meal in a cardboard lunchbox alongside a special gift. This has fuelled many imaginative partner promotions including Star Trek (the first movie tie up), books, beanie bears, Pokémon, Hot Wheels, Barbie and more. The company has even started producing adult Happy Meals with a recent tie up with Friends, proving that grown-ups love collectable merch as much as kids.



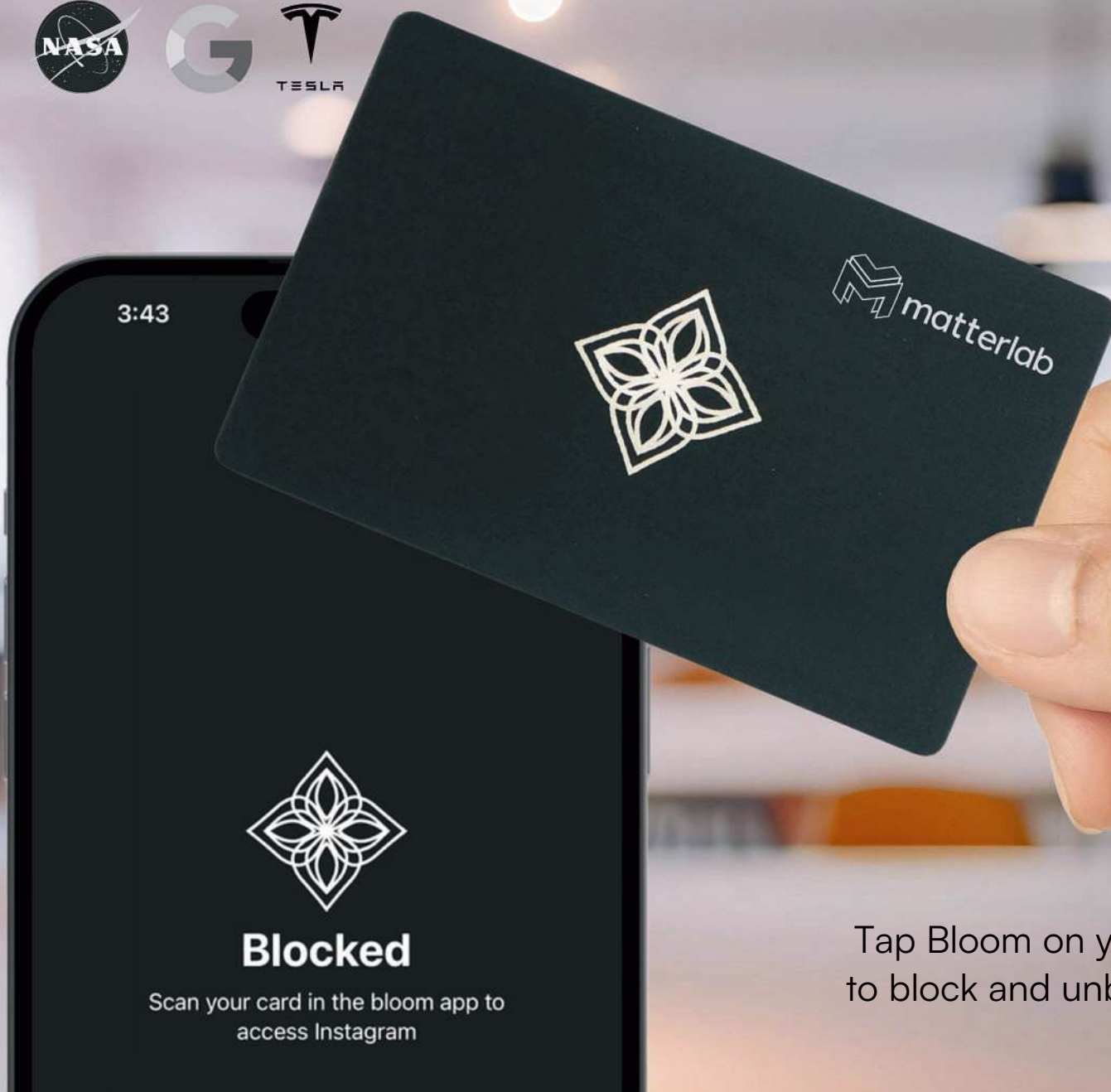


One Tap To Remove All Distractions

Bloom is the innovative new stainless steel keycard that locks your distracting apps and websites on your smartphone, helping you to manage your screen time.

Now available to custom brand, making it perfect for clients that want to give a product that promotes digital wellbeing and work-life balance.

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Tap Bloom on your phone to block and unblock apps.

“The Bloom app and card was one of the best purchases I could have made for myself. The system of having a separate card is SOOO smart.”

“I’ve tried every app there is to block me from getting on apps. Nothing has worked but this. I always end up uninstalling the app or removing the block. But not with Bloom.”

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KELLOGG'S CROCKERY

Breakfast cereals are a daily ritual for many people and locking them into a particular brand with merchandise has a long history, not least by cereal giant Kellogg's. It has produced many ranges of bowls featuring iconic character such as Tony the Tiger, Snap, Crackle and Pop, and the Kellogg's cockerel. Redeemable with collected tokens or free with purchase, they continue to claim a space in millions of kitchen cupboards.



TANGO DOLL

With its anarchic advertising, Britvic's Tango went from being an orangey also ran to one of the biggest soft drinks in Britain. Its merchandise was equally rule bending, not least its Gotan doll – a rubber character from TV ads that could be redeemed by calling a premium rate phone line of gibberish. What did it all mean? Nobody was quite sure but thousands had to have one and were duly enticed.



INNOCENT MERCH

The smoothie manufacturer developed a series of collectable fridge magnets that were free with multipacks. As well as acting as a reminder of the product chilling away, the magnets were also educational, collectable and fun. The brand also took a bizarre tangent with its knitted hats which raised £3.6m in funds for Age UK.



TURNING PRODUCTS INTO EXPERIENCES

For distributors, focusing on the experience behind a product can help transform a simple giveaway into something more memorable

In the promotional merchandise industry, the conversation is shifting from products to experiences. Brands are increasingly looking for items that do more than simply carry a logo. They want merchandise that creates a moment, sparks emotion or becomes part of the recipient's everyday life.

A promotional product is no longer just a branded item. It is an opportunity to create a moment. Whether it encourages relaxation, brings people together through nostalgia or supports life on the move, promotional products that tap into real experiences can deliver stronger engagement and longer-lasting brand impact.

Laltex has identified a number of areas where merchandise can help brands go beyond the logo to connect:

Wellbeing – products that encourage people to slow down and switch off can create a positive association with a brand. Lighting a soy candle turns an ordinary moment into a chance to relax and reset, making it a thoughtful option for wellbeing campaigns or employee gifting.

Unplugged moments – encouraging people to step away from devices continues to resonate. A wooden noughts and crosses set brings a sense of nostalgia while encouraging interaction and conversation.

Festivals and outdoor living – wearable merchandise becomes part of the experience itself, particularly at events. Bucket hats are strongly associated with festival culture and relaxed summer events, and become part of the atmosphere while providing practical sun protection. For active lifestyles, a foldable cap is ideal for running, travel and outdoor adventures.

A playful desk experience – even small moments of interaction can help promotional products stand out in everyday work environments. The Puzzle Ball Pen combines a writing instrument with a maze puzzle, providing a quick mental break during the working day while keeping the brand visible.

The joy of growing – promotional seeds create an experience that develops over time, from the moment a surprise delivery arrives until the plants grow, keeping the brand part of an ongoing experience.

Products that become the brand part of these everyday experiences allow brands to form a closer and longer lasting relationship with the recipients.

ROBERTSON'S BADGES

Times change, but one of the most successful promotions of all time was the token collector scheme for Robertson's jams and marmalades. It resulted in more than 20 million badges being redeemed before the increasingly controversial brand mascot, the golly, was ditched in 2001. The scheme continued for a number of years, featuring Roald Dahl characters and Paddington.





THE VIEW FROM ASIA

Vietnam-based ODM Group works closely with global clients on developing promotional products from its base in Ho Chi Minh City. CEO, Conor O'Donovan explains some of the lessons from Asia's innovative promotional merchandise market

Many of the ideas we see aren't complex. They're incremental changes in how merchandise is designed and used. For UK teams, the opportunity is not to reinvent, but to adapt what's already working elsewhere in ways that fit local audiences and budgets.

A few practical patterns are emerging – they are less about major trends, and more about small executional shifts that help campaigns perform more effectively.

Some of these are already well established locally and may translate well into markets like the UK.

MAKE POS WORK HARDER

In busy retail environments, visibility is critical. In Vietnam, Nescafé created a sampling booth shaped like a coffee mug – simple, but instantly recognisable. It shows how point-of-sale can function as part of the experience, not just a display. Even modest changes in structure or storytelling can make POS more engaging without requiring large budgets.

WHEN THE GIFT DRIVES SALES

Gift with purchase is widely used but often treated as an add-on. In Vietnam, we've seen lower-cost items – such as children's gifts bundled with family products – play a more active role in influencing decisions. The

impact comes less from value and more from relevance to the end user. This approach can be particularly effective in FMCG and retail bundle campaigns.

WHY INTERACTION MATTERS MORE

Hands-on formats are becoming more common. At a recent trade environment, we saw crochet kits paired with QR-linked tutorials, encouraging people to engage with the product over time. Rather than a passive giveaway, it becomes an activity. Introducing simple elements of participation – assembly, customisation, or guided use – can extend both lifespan and brand recall.

CHANGING MATERIALS

Material development is also progressing steadily. At trade shows in Vietnam, recycled polyester and FSC-certified components are already being used across everyday products. These are increasingly treated as standard options rather than premium upgrades. For teams working on sustainability briefs, engaging earlier in the supply chain can open up more practical choices.

TURNING LOYALTY INTO SOMETHING PHYSICAL

Some brands are also making loyalty more tangible through collectable items earned



over time. These create a visible sense of progress, shifting engagement beyond digital points. In retail or membership contexts, physical rewards can make participation feel more immediate and rewarding. Evian partnered with Snoopy for a limited-edition on-pack promotion in Vietnam's 7-Eleven stores. Customers collected stamps by purchasing bottles to redeem an exclusive Snoopy tote bag. The simple 'buy, collect, redeem' mechanic encouraged repeat purchases while adding a sense of fun and collectability to an everyday product.

The ODM Group is a global promotional merchandise and marketing solutions agency that works with global brands to design, source, and manufacture custom promotional products

MERCH POWER

Two new studies into promotional merchandise underline its potency



from customers, and differentiation increasingly depends on how clearly and credibly product information is communicated, with the most popular products remaining similar over recent years.

The UK and Ireland promotional merchandise market continued to grow in 2025 with a solid increase of 8.3% from the previous year.

Figures from the annual market report put together by Sourcing City show a market size of £1,334m and 3,008 distributors active in the UK and Ireland.

With underlying inflation resulting in price increases and rising input costs, the increase in market size is partly due to higher prices, as well as sales increases.

However, buyer intent, as measured by product level enquiries, remained high throughout the year, indicating a relatively buoyant market despite a tough financial environment.

INTEGRAL TO MARKETING

Analysis of enquiry timing gives an insight into when purchase decisions are made. The report notes that seasonality is less pronounced than in the past with demand spread throughout the year. This indicates that promotional merchandise is increasingly embedded in ongoing marketing activity rather than confined to fixed campaign cycles, the report claims.

The number of distributors has increased over time, driven by start-ups, specialists, and entrants from adjacent sectors.

As supplier numbers increase, intensifying competition for distributor attention, differentiation based solely on product or price is increasingly difficult to sustain, the report claims.

Margin pressure remains a defining feature, driven by input costs, inventory financing, and service expectations. Sustainability credentials are now baseline expectations

THE US PICTURE

Meanwhile, the ASI 2026 Ad Impressions report has been released by the US promotional industry trade association.

Its research looks at the cost effectiveness of merchandise and provides data for distributors to compare the relative merits of merchandise with other advertising media.

The first part of the research focuses on the US market and looked at 19 product categories to show what impact these products had on consumer's attitude to brands.

It also looked at European markets with results due for release in mid-May. This builds on existing work ASI has done with European partners on overall market size, and carbon emissions studies to show the power of promo.

Top takeaways for the US include:

- The cost per impression of promotional products despite inflationary pressures in recent years. Impressions are typically costing a few cents, or even fractions of cents.



- Consumer attitudes to promotional merchandise are very favourable. Around 80% of consumers who receive merch report a positive attitude to an advertiser, far outstripping the attitude to TV advertising.
- With concerns about sustainability, there was a positive response to how consumers said they would deal with merch they didn't want – only about 10% said they would throw it away. The majority reported they would give it to somebody else.
- Merchandise has a long shelf life with a majority of people hanging on to useful products. Around 50% of people who receive a promo umbrella keep it for five years. Interestingly, the product they keep for the lowest amount of time is a calendar – 13 months.
- While relative sales of particular categories of merchandise remain fairly constant, consumer tastes change. T-shirts remain the most welcomed item of merch (and account for more than \$4bn in sales a year) but outerwear, blankets and food gifts all climbed the preference ladder.

ASI's senior executive director of research Nate Kucsma said he hoped that ASI members would use the research to highlight the effectiveness of merchandise against other elements of the marketing mix.

"When you are talking to clients, the more specific you can be the better," he said. "There is data in here that really goes down into individual product categories. The numbers can also be used for social content keeping you front of mind with clients. It's ready to go content." ●



POPULAR PRODUCTS

The top product enquiries on Sourcing City were:

Bags	91.3m
Pens	70.7m
Travel mugs	55.3m
Sports bottle	49.8m
Jotter	48.6m
Keyring	43.7m
Mug	32.5m
Charger	29.6m
Fan	16.2m
Note pad	13.6m

“BUSINESS OWNERS HUNGER FOR A CHALLENGE, AND WE’RE UP FOR THE NEXT ONE..”

Wild Thang sales director Sarah Howarth tells Jason O’Connor why they’re still going for it after 30 years



JASON O’CONNOR:

I watched a video on the Wild Thang homepage yesterday and I was really bloody impressed. The one where a drone is flying around your office.

SARAH HOWARTH:

We got the drone footage when we had to have part of the building knocked down and rebuilt.

We owned a building on one of the main roads running into the city of Liverpool and there was a compulsory purchase order on the building because they were widening the roads. So, during the period of Covid and Brexit – just to push us fully over the edge – we took down a mezzanine and knocked down the front of the building, which was where our sales and admin teams are based. We were still operating. The working environment was tough, so we really appreciate it now.

And then we stepped foot into our new building and everyone had to go home because of Covid. We were like: “Are you kidding?”

JOC: *It’s funny, isn’t it? Because I think a lot of people don’t understand all the stuff that happens behind the scenes running a business, and the curve balls that we get*

thrown. So, Wild Thang is 30. Did you start the business?

SH: My brother Andrew Dwerryhouse founded the business with his friend. They had a screen printing carousel above my dad’s engineering company in Liverpool, on a £1,500 Prince’s Trust loan. My dad’s conditions were they could have the premises but has to look after it, maintain it and clean it.

Andrew’s friend decided to move on and then my older brother, Chris, joined and they moved into Liverpool city centre. And then not so long after that, my husband, John Howarth, joined. From there, we had an accounts person start, who has become central to our business and decision making, and I then joined a few years later. We’re all still there – I’ve been there for 21 years.

JOC: *I’m 21 years deep as well. I think a lot of people are probably tired after 21 years. But what gets us out of bed every morning is the thrill of making change or doing something differently – wondering what the day ahead is going to bring.*

SH: Yes, that’s one of the conversations that we have as a team. We had a big event to celebrate our 30th birthday: a technology and ESG conference in the day and a celebration in the evening. We brought partners, clients, suppliers and family together. It was really quite overwhelming, being in the room with

all these people who have played a part on the journey.

As business owners, you hunger for a challenge – and we’re up for the next challenge. Maybe it’s the hardships you go through that make you so resilient and strong, because we’ve been through so much that nothing can stop us now. We’ve spent 30 years building good foundations, so good luck throwing another Covid or Brexit at us because we’ll just navigate around it.

But it’s a wild industry. It’s so changeable and I think it’s evolving right now in a big way.

JOC: *We’re making lots of changes at the moment. It doesn’t happen immediately but you can start to see the green shoots of what the next year could look like. What changes have you seen recently that you think will be really big in the industry?*

SH: Considered buying. There’s definitely been a lot more of this from our clients. For us, certifying as a B Corp and going on that journey has been about trying to educate our teams and our clients. Let’s talk about what you’re delivering and why you’re delivering it, what messaging you want, what you want to achieve, and let’s really consider creative items that are going to have some longevity.

You can see from our suppliers now that even the cheapest pen has a lovely finish and a gorgeous colour. Recycled materials

are coming in. Everything's just a bit more considered.

Technology and advancing our systems is also big for us. We've got the manufacturing facility here and on-demand is a big area that we're driving forward with.

JOC: *This is fulfilment for schemes, I take it?*

SH: Yes – but not necessarily just schemes. Retail shops for clients. Because we have the manufacturing facility, we do have some clients who we do retail B2C for. That's not the norm as the majority of our work is B2B, but we know the demand is there because we speak to our clients every day.

Some of our customers are big corporate clients who require bulk purchasing – be it for staff engagement, marketing activation, recognition schemes and so on. Then we have other clients – smaller charities, for example – who want stores where people can purchase items to support them. The smaller charities can't afford to stockhold multiple items, so we're discussing creating on-demand stores that give them an income stream that they take a commission from and we can manage. It's been a realisation that we can offer this and manage it with the software we've got internally – it's a great solution. Automation is

the future, isn't it?

JOC: *We struggle with this. We're an internet company but I think the human touch is still so important. I think it's getting the best-of-the-best tech and adding in all the other ingredients that make your transaction really work for you. We can never be Amazon and fully automate the whole thing. I want customers to feel like the transaction is personal to them.*

SH: By automation, I mean more behind the scenes – the kind of systems that go through our production facility and connect everything, backed by the human touch. Building great partnerships is key to delivering great solutions for our clients.

It amazes me how different all the distributors are, with positioning built around your ethics, your culture, your direction, your clients. In an industry where we're all doing the same thing, we're all doing it differently. We can learn a lot from each other, but I feel it is important we each stay true to the brands we've built, which then creates unique experiences.

JOC: *if you could give advice to someone on the up in the industry, what would it be?*

SH: Have very clear, defined standards across your team – around your culture, your ethics

and what and how you're delivering for the client. And broaden your networks. We've learnt so much from expanding into the European and US markets.

We should all be aspiring to be better and raise standards within our incredible industry. I am loving the steps the BPMA has been taking over the last couple of years. If we collaborate and communicate well together, we can achieve that and it will benefit us all.

JOC: *That's a great message, I love that. Last question: imagine you see someone from school who you haven't seen in years and they ask what you do. How do you answer that?*

SH: That's a funny question as a lot of my closest friends don't really know exactly what we do. I don't like the notion that "we just sell pens" because it's like, guys, you have no idea. Before you know it, you're going down a rabbit hole. Like most business owners, we don't get much time to switch off so when I do, I try to avoid talking about work. I'd rather just be enjoying a rare spicy margarita and doing my very best to relax. ■

Jason O'Connor is managing director of Total Merchandise

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■ November 2025

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PLAY TO WIN

With the World Cup and Commonwealth Games happening this summer, promoters should remember the power of sport, says James Franklin

Global sporting events, whether the World Cup, the Olympics, or major international tournaments, create a unique moment when the world's attention converges on athletic excellence, national pride, and shared excitement.

For businesses, this surge in enthusiasm presents an opportunity to elevate brand visibility. Sporting events naturally generate a sense of unity and celebration. When a business aligns itself with that energy through branded sports products, it taps into the positive emotions people already feel.

A custom-printed football, basketball, rugby ball, or cricket ball becomes more than a promotional item – it becomes a symbol of participation in a global moment. People associate your brand with the excitement of the event, the camaraderie of watching matches with friends, and the pride of supporting their team. That emotional connection is far more powerful than traditional advertising.

YOUR BALL

Promotional balls offer exceptional visibility. Unlike flyers or digital ads that disappear quickly, a branded sports ball is highly tactile and constantly in motion. It gets passed around, played with, displayed, and

photographed. Every time someone kicks, throws, or catches it, your logo is front and centre, creating repeated exposure that feels natural rather than intrusive. A brand becomes part of the environment, reaching audiences it might never have targeted directly.

Sports equipment is also durable so will be around for months or years. Long after the event has ended, a branded product continues to circulate, extending the life of any marketing investment. It keeps a company top-of-mind in a way that short-term campaigns can't match.

SPORTING CHANCE

Custom sports products also appeal to a wide demographic. Sport transcends age, gender, and culture, so sporting goods are universally relevant. They also work beautifully for giveaways, competitions, sponsorships, and community events, allowing a brand to engage people in a fun, interactive way.

Aligning a brand with a global sporting event signals ambition and relevance. It shows that a business is forward-thinking, energetic, and connected to worldwide trends.

Ultimately, custom sports balls and sports products offer a rare combination of emotional impact, practical value, and long-term visibility.

BACK OF THE NET

14 Promotions sporting highs include:

Last minute supply of 150K mini footballs for a brewery promotion around the World Cup when the distributor was let down by a supplier. It even inflated the balls in-house in just 10 days.

Manufactured balls for HSBC's World's Biggest Football Mosaic – a World Record at the time.

Produced 2,000 balls that were dropped by Ian Wright from a helicopter.

Supplies footballs to record breaking football freestylers including, Ben Nuttal, Jamie Knight, and Sam Madden.

Branded 55 custom table tennis tables for Google.

Provided the Barmy Army (Cricket) merchandise to take to the last Ashes Test series in Australia.

They transform your brand from a name on a screen into something people can touch, use, and enjoy. As the world gears up for the FIFA World Cup on 9 June 2026, businesses that embrace this approach will stand out in the crowd, connect deeply with audiences, and leave a lasting impression. ●

James Franklin is managing director of 14 Promotions Trade – Promo Sports

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5 WAYS TO GET IN THE GAME

Sport presents year-round opportunities for brands to get involved. Ben McCarthy explains how

PLAN AHEAD

Remember, the big sports events are confirmed many months, sometimes years in advance. Plan a campaign, update your website, arrange samples, and get proactive. Suppliers love working with distributors who are pushing their products. Take advantage of better prices with longer lead times.

TRUST THE RESEARCH

We know that sports merch is commercially very powerful and has a huge reach. How does merchandise work alongside large sporting events? The BPMA found out. Read its report (see box), share the findings with your customers. Educate them on how beneficial merchandise can be to their brand.

WHAT'S POPULAR?

Trends can come and go, but there have been some buying patterns that you just can't ignore. Promotional footballs are hugely popular during the big tournaments. Hand waving flags are great for stadiums and cup finals. Bucket hats continue to be a fan favourite. And who wouldn't want a bamboo fan while watching the tennis? Next time you are watching sport, start taking notice of the amount of branded merchandise you see.

MERCH MARKS THE MOMENT

Recent BPMA research found that across all sports surveyed, merchandise purchasing is active, emotionally driven and strongly linked to identity. Of those surveyed, 94% said they had purchased sports merch at least once.

Apparel is the dominant category, with 74% of Six Nations rugby fans responding that they were most likely to purchase it, and 88% of Formula One fans saying apparel was the merchandise that appealed most. Major events create the biggest spikes in intent to buy merch.

Price is the lead decision-making factor, but official licensing, quality and durability are also critical. Importantly, merchandise is rarely short-term: fans retain products for years – more than five years for 53% of respondents.

The BPMA research underlined how different sports present different

opportunities for brands, with particular audiences, viewing habits, and tastes. For example, NFL football in the UK is followed as a less partisan sport than others with less team loyalty than with football for instance. Consequently, 62% are prepared to purchase event specific merchandise even if they don't follow a particular team. In comparison, 47% of football fans bought merchandise following a major victory or milestone, showing that purchasing is linked to performance, and there is opportunity for reactive sales.

For the promotional merchandise industry, the message is clear. Products that combine official credibility, considered design and robust quality standards are best placed to deliver both immediate commercial impact and long-term brand value.

BPMA research is a member benefit and can be accessed at bpma.co.uk/research

WHY IS SPORT SO IMPORTANT?

With sports merchandise valued in the billions, it's undeniably good for our industry to watch closely for opportunities to sell. Supplying merchandise such as footballs which encourages the recipient to get active can lead to great health benefits. Studies closely link playing sport to a healthier lifestyle with both

physical and mental health improved. Some research even suggests that just watching sport can enhance wellbeing. It's a message that we could be sharing.

SO, WHAT'S COMING UP?

2026 is going to be a big year for sport. There will be plenty of chances to combine the power of merchandise and sport. In June the World Cup kicks off, and Wimbledon begins. In July, The Commonwealth Games comes to Glasgow, and the increasingly popular cricket competition The Hundred starts again.

You will also see F1, golf, rugby, netball and boxing. ■

Ben McCarthy is trade sales director of AMT Trade which supplies bespoke sports balls and event merchandise





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THE REAL THING

Visitors to Haptica Live got hands on with the power of promotional merchandise

Merch is becoming more and more important in the marketing mix, with power to cut through the digital and AI slop that increasingly clogs up our lives.

That was the hard-hitting message at Haptica Live, the exhibition of haptic advertising that took place for the 14th time, in Bonn.

For those who don't know, haptic advertising is another way of describing media that we can touch, feel, hear, smell and taste – basically everything that falls into the realm of promotional merchandise.

PRODUCTS WITH PUNCH

More than 100 exhibitors were displaying a multitude of products at the World Conference Centre Bonn. They were visited by 1,000 visitors representing marketing, sales, procurement, HR, advertising agencies and the promotional products trade.

Exhibitors offered an impressive diversity of creative products. Companies presented ballpoint pens made of ocean plastic, brightly coloured branded carry-on cases, ambient advertising on pizza boxes, Swiss Army knives and tools for tradespeople, inflatable sofas, and backward-running hourglasses to name just a few of the ingenious items.

With 2026 being a World Cup year, the theme of football was also very prominent including a Haptica table football game, Tipp-Kick games, and official FIFA and German FA licensed merchandise.

BRANDS TO LIFE

A Best Practice Show demonstrated how haptic experiences can bring brands to life through ten carefully curated, multimedia campaigns. These ranged from a raclette grill shaped like a Swiss mountain railway, to a Vitamalz record player, McDonald's scented candles, and a Telekom Christmas sweater that can be coloured in.

Visitor, Kristin Wunderow of Cologne-Bonn Airport, said that being able to see brand examples up close was rewarding.

"We are looking for new inspiration for our



marketing here at the trade fair. It is totally different from simply ordering products online. Here, you can examine them closely, hold them in your hands, smell them and truly experience them."

Other suppliers enhanced their displays with live presentations and interactive booth activities. Visitors could have notebooks personalised at Leuchtturm 1917's stand, admire transfer printing on T-shirts by Fruit of the Loom, or watch the recycling specialist, Polyperformer, demonstrate how injection moulding works with granules made from recycled trade fair carpets, flowerpots or dental cups.

Meanwhile, Ecobrand offered home-made mini Dutch pancakes, Troika demonstrated the possibilities of laser engraving, and at Needit, visitors could win electronic parking discs on a claw machine.

MERCH MAKES BRANDS

In addition to the exhibition, Haptica's lecture forum included a keynote speech by Prof. Dr. Michael Kleinjohann, who presented a 30-minute condensed version of his recently published book, *Haptic Advertising. Merchandising. Licensing.*

The following presentations by Nina Krannich of Toi Toi & Dixi and Sabine van der Boom of Underberg demonstrated how this can actually look in practice. The mobile toilet company has employed an unlikely merchandise strategy with products such as 'Toi-letter' flip-flops to build a relationship with users and to personalise the ultimate utilitarian brand. Underberg has adopted a similar approach with an iconic stemmed glass for its cult herbal bitters, providing a graphic lesson in haptic brand management.

● *Haptica returns next year on 17 March 2027 at the WCCB.*



ADVERTISING FOR REAL

Haptica produced a report underlining the strengths of tangible product media, including:

Emotionality – GWW research found that the emotional impact of promotional items is higher than TV commercials.

It's hot – 80% of Gen Z are happy to receive promo items.

A conversation starter – merch gets people talking.

Efficiency – a promo cap contact costs a quarter of a cent according to an ASI study.

Sustainability – measured by emissions per brand recall, promotional merchandise ranks second only to, or on par with, outdoor advertising.

Longlasting – two-thirds of promotional items are used for more than a year, and 40% for two years or more.

Memorable – PPAI found a brand recall rate of 90% (aided) and 83% (unaided).

Higher sales – free gifts influence purchase decision more effectively than discounting.

Brand building – a study by the Polish association PiAP, found 91% of users utilise promotional items to improve their image.

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BEYOND THE SPREADSHEET

Automation can help promotional merchandise companies work smarter, says Tim Randall

The promotional merchandise industry has always been operationally demanding. Distributors routinely manage dozens of active orders across multiple suppliers, each with its own pricing structures, production timelines, decoration methods, and communication preferences – all while keeping clients informed and margins intact.

For years, the industry managed this complexity through spreadsheets, email chains, and sheer determination. That approach has a ceiling, which more distributors are hitting.

Automation is increasingly how the most successful merchandise companies are breaking through. Not automation in the generic sense, but systems built specifically around how promotional merchandise businesses actually operate.

DON'T FRUSTRATE — AUTOMATE

Something as straightforward as automatically chasing a quote a client hasn't responded to can save hours each week. When a quote is accepted, the right system creates the order, raises the invoice, sends it to the client, and posts it into your accounts platform, without anyone manually triggering each step. Ollie Richardson at merch company, JustGood puts it simply: "The automated POs alone save us a ridiculous amount of time."

This is the thinking behind Zigaflow. Designed specifically for the promotional merchandise sector, the platform handles multi-supplier quoting, artwork approvals, supplier

acknowledgements, and order tracking as standard.

When an order comes in via a company's website, Zigaflow can automatically generate multiple purchase orders, allocate stock, and send the invoice to the client without manual intervention. The system can even allocate incoming quotes to sales team members based on their current workload and the value of the enquiry – removing the coordination overhead that slows response times.

SPEED IS THE KEY

In practical terms, that means a distributor quoting an embroidered workwear order with three different suppliers and two decoration methods can get a professional, accurate quote

to their client the same day – not the following week. In a sector where three distributors are often quoting the same brief simultaneously, the one who responds first – with an accurate, professional quote – wins more often than not. Speed is the differentiator, and that's where the time savings compound.

For suppliers, the benefits are equally tangible. Automated order status communications have proven a significant win, reducing the volume of inbound enquiries that pull teams away from production. Structured purchase orders with consistent, accurate information mean fewer back-and-forth clarifications, fewer errors, and fewer delays.

Rohan Bigham at Brand Stamp sums up the operational impact: "We haven't missed a single order since we started using Zigaflow. That used to be a regular occurrence before."

End clients notice the difference as well. Faster turnaround, proactive communications, and fewer mistakes all translate into a more professional experience – the kind that builds long-term relationships and repeat business.

The companies scaling successfully in this industry share a common trait: they have systems that grow with them. Taylor Tassie, CEO of Totally Branded, says that Zigaflow allowed its sales consultants and customer service team to focus on selling rather than spending the majority of their day on repetitive administrative tasks.

"Automation isn't about replacing the expertise and relationships that define great merchandise businesses. It's about giving people the tools to apply that expertise without being buried in administration." ■

Tim Randall is CEO of Zigaflow





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THE HIDDEN COST

Geopolitical instability is increasingly a factor that needs to be planned for in sourcing decisions, says Parit Shah

The promotional products industry is comfortable talking about price. Lead times, unit costs, and minimum orders are the metrics that drive buying decisions.

We talk far less about why prices move, and what the increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape means for the products in client proposals.

As a business with its own manufacturing operations in India as well as a UK distribution presence, we see both ends of this equation. And what we're seeing should matter to every distributor sourcing cotton-based promotional merchandise.

BEYOND THE FREIGHT INVOICE

When buyers think about global disruption, such as the Russia-Ukraine war or Middle East tensions, the instinct is to look at shipping costs. However, freight volatility is only one element of a broader risk assessment.

According to McKinsey, 45% of the global apparel and textile industry's trade value is at risk from supply chain disruption. The true cost of conflict is embedded far upstream, long before a product ever reaches a port.

ON THE FACTORY FLOOR

Textile manufacturing is energy-intensive at every stage, and global conflict has driven volatility in oil and gas prices that flow directly into factory operating costs.

Some cotton dyeing mills in India have closed entirely as rising energy costs make processing unviable. When capacity leaves the market, it doesn't come back quickly, and it puts pressure on those mills that remain.

Meanwhile, rising fertiliser costs, tied to energy markets, have pushed up input costs for farmers and, ultimately, the price manufacturers pay.

NOT SHIP SHAPE

Freight costs are the visible tip of a much larger iceberg. It is no longer just a question of how much it costs to ship a container from India to the UK. It is a question of whether that container actually arrives where and when it's supposed to.



Container vessel traffic through the Suez Canal dropped by approximately 75% in 2024 compared to 2023, and data from mid-2025 shows there has been no meaningful recovery. More than 2,000 ships diverted around the Cape of Good Hope adding 11,000 nautical miles, ten days of travel time, and approximately \$1 million in additional fuel costs per voyage.

A shipment from our Indian factory, bound for Europe was summarily offloaded in South Africa. Regional conflict meant urgent perishable cargo had not been unloaded earlier and that took priority.

This kind of disruption is not exceptional. For distributors, it means that lead time promises made in good faith can quickly unravel.

CURRENCY AND LABOUR

Two further pressures are quietly building. Exchange rate volatility creates



unpredictability for exporters, who simultaneously face higher costs for imported inputs. As energy and food prices rise, wage expectations in manufacturing regions follow.

Distributors need to understand that they are no longer dealing with isolated cost pressures but a system of interconnected variables.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Shorter quotation validity windows are not supplier tactics – they are rational responses to pricing uncertainty. Locking in pricing ahead of delivery is now in your interest as much as your suppliers. Building more buffer into lead time commitments to your clients is no longer overcautious; it is prudent. Open conversations with suppliers about what is driving costs will produce better outcomes than treating price as an adversarial negotiation.

If clients are still framing sourcing conversations purely around unit price, you are well placed to shift that narrative. Resilience, lead time reliability, and supply chain transparency are now as commercially relevant as cost.

A MORE INFORMED INDUSTRY

India remains a strong sourcing base for cotton promotional merchandise. But the operating environment has changed and the businesses that will navigate it best are those who look beyond the headline price and understand what is driving it.

Disruption often occurs in quieter, more structural, and more cumulative ways than expected. It is felt first on the factory floor, then in shipping schedules, and eventually in prices and lead times.

Getting ahead of it starts with asking better questions, sharing honest answers, and building supplier relationships that can absorb the shocks that are now an established feature of the world we're operating in. ●

Parit Shah is director of JuteBag Trade



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TIME TO THINK

A new app blocker product promises to help users take back control of their mobile devices



Barely a week goes by without a new report about the impact of the excessive use of smartphones on mental health and wellbeing. According to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, average daily screen time for adults is three hours and 21 minutes, rising to almost five hours for under-24s.

With increasingly blurred lines between work and personal lives it's easy to end up replying to emails and workplace chat late in the evenings or at weekends.

There are screen time controls available on phones, but the reality is that few take the time to manage the settings or, more importantly, switch them on.

BLOCK IT

To address this, a new product category is rapidly gaining momentum – app blockers. Some are solely software-based and still require users to set up an app and switch it on or off, but now a range of products are on the market that combine software with physical devices to help address the problem.

The Bloom keycard is one example. Users install the free app, choose their settings,

then tap their phone with the card to 'block' and 'unblock' social media, websites and other apps. They can leave the card at home or the office, so they're unable to give in to temptation, or it can be kept in a wallet, so it's on hand if needs be.

Users can choose different settings for work and home, and schedule five-minute breaks for a time-limited digital fix. Bloom estimates the product has saved its users 32 million hours of screen time.

Calverley, which is known as the supplier of Tile Bluetooth trackers to the industry, has signed an exclusive agreement to offer custom-branded Bloom keycards to promotional merchandising distributors.

DIGITAL WELLBEING

Founder and CEO, Will Ripley, is excited about the potential of the product and says: "Bloom will have strong appeal to brands that want to associate themselves with digital wellbeing, especially talent-led industries such as professional services, technology and finance."

Bloom's black stainless-steel keycard can be engraved with client logos and custom sleeves provide additional brand impact. ●

SCREEN TEST

Almost half (46%) of Generation Z have taken steps to limit their digital activity as a step towards improving their wellbeing.

However, 28% of Gen Z in a study of 4,000 individuals from the UK, US, France and Germany, said they had difficulty in reducing screen time despite recognising it as something that would benefit them.

A fear of missing out (FOMO) was reported by 40% of respondents as being behind their inability to rein in time online, but work requirements are another reason it is difficult according to more than a quarter (27%).

As well as reducing stress and anxiety, 43% of Gen Z and 38% of Millennials think that reducing screen time will improve concentration and productivity. There is also a desire to spend more meaningful time with family and friends.

The infrastructure behind the promotional products industry

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HERE COMES THE SUN

Summer can be a time for letting the tech take the strain, and there are more options than ever, says Alan Doyle

This month we focus on demand for promotional items during the long summer days ahead and how your clients can benefit from tech in their upcoming campaigns.

Sustainability is now a given rather than a selling point so of course all the new tech ideas reflect recycled and better materials. Our focus as an industry is now to shine the spotlight on how lifestyle tech items deliver value and hence return for the marketer.

As summer approaches, marketers are preparing for a season filled with travel, outdoor events, festivals and brand activations. With consumers spending more time away from their desks and on the move, promotional products that support everyday lifestyles can deliver exceptional brand exposure. Increasingly, that means turning to promotional technology.

SEASONAL CHARGE

Tech-based promotional items have an advantage over many traditional giveaways in that they quickly become part of the recipient's daily routine. When a product solves a real need, it is far more likely to remain in use for months or even years. For example, a charger helps travellers stay organised and enhances entertainment. Each use reinforces brand visibility with multiple impressions over time.

Summer creates ideal conditions for portable technology that supports a mobile lifestyle. Compact power banks remain one of the most effective promotional tech items, especially as consumers rely heavily on smartphones for navigation, photography and social media while travelling. Wireless earbuds and mini-Bluetooth speakers are also popular choices, fitting naturally into outdoor activities such as exercising, commuting or relaxing in the park.

Travel creates new opportunities for tech-focused promotional products. Bluetooth item trackers are increasingly used by holidaymakers to keep track of luggage, keys or bags during busy journeys.

PORTABLE ASSISTANTS

Meanwhile, the rapid growth of artificial intelligence is influencing the next generation



of consumer technology and how people travel. AI-powered assistants are increasingly helping users plan trips, organise itineraries and discover destinations more efficiently. A growing number of travellers now use AI tools to research holidays, generate travel plans and find recommendations tailored to their interests.

This trend is driving the development of new AI-enabled gadgets designed to make travel easier. Pocket-sized AI assistants such as the Rabbit R1 are built around voice interaction, allowing users to ask questions, search for information or complete tasks without switching between multiple apps. These portable digital assistants may help travellers manage their needs on the move.

Another emerging category is AI smart glasses, which combine cameras, microphones and voice assistants to provide contextual information in real time. Travellers can ask questions about landmarks, translate signs or receive directions without constantly checking a phone, creating a more seamless travel experience.

NO SPEAK THE LINGO?

Language barriers are also being addressed through AI-powered translator devices. Dedicated handheld translators can provide real-time two-way voice translation across dozens of languages, allowing travellers to communicate easily in restaurants, shops or tourist attractions. For international travel during the busy summer season, these devices are becoming increasingly valuable tools.

For promotional buyers, these developments highlight an important opportunity. By selecting tech products that align with real consumer trends – travel, connectivity and AI-powered convenience – brands can position themselves directly within the moments people enjoy most during summer.

The result is promotional merchandise that isn't simply handed out and forgotten, but genuinely used in everyday life, delivering lasting brand recall and a measurable return on marketing investment. ●

Alan Doyle is account director at Xoopar



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PLAN FOR EVERYTHING

When a customer stopped paying its bills, earlier preparation proved invaluable in bringing it to task, says Mike Collins

Regular readers will know that here at Direct Route/Account Assyst, we're passionate about sharing practical credit management insight to help businesses avoid the frustration of unpaid invoices.

We also recognise that advice like this can sometimes be met with scepticism. "You're only saying this to promote your services", or "Does this actually work in practice?"

In truth, we welcome that challenge. It allows us to demonstrate that what we recommend is not just theory – it's what we do, day in, day out, on behalf of our clients.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

A recent case highlights this.

We were instructed by a construction supplies company to recover a five-figure unpaid balance from a limited company. Initial recovery efforts followed a standard process – formal chases, correspondence, and attempts to engage. However, the debtor company adopted a familiar approach: no response, no acknowledgement, and complete avoidance.

At this point, many businesses find themselves stuck. When dealing with a limited company, the legal responsibility for the debt sits with the business itself – not the individuals behind it. If that company has no assets or ceases trading, recovery prospects can quickly diminish.

In this instance, our client had taken an additional precaution at the outset. Through their Account Assyst package, they had secured a personal guarantee (PG) from the company's director.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Whilst personal guarantees are not widely used across all areas of the promotional products industry – particularly where long-standing relationships and trust are central – they can play an important role in specific situations. For example, when onboarding new customers, extending higher credit limits, or where trading confidence is still developing.

Here, the PG provided a crucial alternative route.

We issued a formal, compliant demand directly to the director, referencing their personal undertaking to cover the company's liabilities. When this failed to generate a response, legal proceedings were issued against the individual.

The outcome was decisive.

A County Court Judgment (CCJ) was secured against the director, impacting their personal credit profile. This prompted swift action, and our instructed solicitors received payment in full – covering the original debt, legal costs, and accrued late payment interest.

Without the personal guarantee in place, the situation could have ended very differently.

The key takeaway is not that every transaction should be backed by a personal guarantee. In our industry, relationships, reputation,

and ease of doing business remain vital, and unnecessary barriers can be counterproductive.

PROTECT YOUR BUSINESS

However, where there is increased exposure – such as new trading relationships, larger order values, or early warning signs around payment behaviour – having the option of a personal guarantee can provide valuable protection.

Think of it as a form of business insurance. You hope you never need it, but if circumstances change, it can be the difference between a difficult situation and a successful recovery.

Ultimately, effective credit management is about balance – protecting your business without disrupting commercial relationships.

As always, we're here to support you with any credit management challenges you may face. ●

Mike Collins is managing director of Direct Route/Account Assyst. For further guidance, contact your promotional goods liaison, Ian Jenkinson, on 07860 197476 or ijenkinson@directroute.co.uk.

Local Support Contact Details

Please contact a member of our local support team for advice on any matter related to debt and credit management.

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CREATIVITY TAKES CENTRE STAGE AT BPMA CONFERENCE 2026

The BPMA conference returns on 17 June with a new venue and an exciting line up of speakers and sessions

Held at the historic Fawsley Hall Hotel in Northamptonshire, the 2026 conference will feature eight separate sessions across three satellite rooms, covering a wide range of key topics.

This year's keynote puts the focus on creativity and will be delivered by Fredrik Haren, known as The Creativity Explorer. He is a global keynote speaker on business creativity, innovation and change who, in the past 25 years has delivered more than 2,000 presentations, lectures and workshops around the world, inspiring a million people from the stage to become more creative and to look at the world in a new way.

The one-day conference will feature sessions ranging from Managing Gen Z and building competitive advantage through sustainable supply chains, to updates on Digital Product Passports (DPP) and the latest EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR).

There will also be separate distributor and supplier forum sessions addressing issues pertinent to these groups.

To book a slot at this unmissable event, go to bpma.co.uk/events ●



ACTION ON DIVERSITY

The advantages of a diverse workplace are increasingly clear, Chloe Wallace will tell the BPMA conference

Here goes, not another talk on DEI.

But this won't be a theoretical conversation or a tick-box exercise. My focus is commercial, grounded in real-world business experience, and centred on what really drives bottom-line performance.

At the BPMA Annual Conference, I'll be challenging some of the assumptions we've become comfortable with and focusing on what genuinely makes a difference.

This session is about moving beyond rhetoric and into reality. The advantages of a diverse workforce are clear, and you can benefit if you are prepared to approach it with honesty, evidence, and commercial focus.

Here's what delegates can expect:

DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT IS THE REAL ADVANTAGE

Representation matters, but it's not the end



goal. The real value comes from how people think, challenge and contribute. If your teams all approach problems in the same way, you're limiting decision quality, innovation and ultimately commercial performance.

THE REALITY OF GENERATIONAL AND AGE DIVIDES

Age bias remains one of the most prevalent and overlooked issues in UK workplaces. Younger workers are often labelled 'digital natives', yet digital poverty means access to technology and opportunity is far from

equal. At the same time, older workers are frequently perceived as resistant to change or unteachable. These assumptions are not only flawed, but they are also actively eroding better organisational outcomes.

BEHAVIOURS THAT QUIETLY UNDERMINE DIVERSITY

Non-inclusive environments are rarely the result of one-off incidents. They are shaped by everyday behaviours – who is heard, who is interrupted, who is given opportunities, and who is not. Left unchallenged, these patterns reinforce sameness and limit the diversity of thought organisations say they value.

DATA MUST COME BEFORE ACTION

Too often, organisations move straight to solutions without fully understanding the problem. Effective diversity strategies start with evidence. You don't need more tools, software or systems because you already have data that you won't be using. What do your recruitment, progression, pay and attrition data tell you? Where are the gaps, and what are they costing your business? Without that clarity, interventions risk being well-intentioned but ineffective

Chloe Wallace, the founder of OneSource HR, is speaking at the BPMA conference

BPMA AMBASSADORS PUT THE BEST FOOT FORWARDS

The first BPMA Ambassador event has been organised by the Northern Ambassador Team, kicking off a series of regional events that aim to spread the BPMA message far and wide. Team Wild Thang and The Outdoors Company's Dan Rogers organised the BPMA Connection Walk in the beautiful Peak District. Support by Gildan UK helped make it possible for a group of walkers to enjoy light exercise, fresh spring air and meaningful conversation.

Set against the scenic backdrop of the Cock Hill Circular Walk, the Ambassador event was all about making connections beyond the boardroom for relaxed, informal networking designed to bring together BPMA members and non-members from the region and further.

BPMA Ambassadors were appointed for this year to build stronger relationships in four UK regions, improving visibility and awareness of the Association as part

of its ongoing development strategy. Ambassadors represent the South, Midlands, North, Scotland & Northern Ireland.

Further events are already in the works. The first of these is the BPMA Legacy and Future Leaders Exchange, organised by the Southern Ambassador group led by Josh Stephenson (Impression Europe) and Daniel Hill (Zagwear).

Held at the Flight Club in Shoreditch on 13 May, the networking event will strengthen the ties between experienced industry players and emerging talent.

Meanwhile, the Scotland and Northern Ireland Ambassador Group is organising a group to take part in the UK's largest ever yoga class. The event is to be held on 13 September at the SEC in Glasgow to raise £250,000 for the Beatson Cancer Charity. More details on all Ambassador events can be found at bpma.co.uk/events.





A WILD RIDE

Merchandise and branding specialist Wild Thang stayed on the front foot as it celebrated its first three decades

Liverpool-based merchandise company, Wild Thang has celebrated its 30th year in business while focusing on future challenges and opportunities for the merchandise sector.

Clients, partners, suppliers, industry leaders and innovators came together for an event that reflected on Wild Thang's history from a Prince's Trust-funded start up in 1996 to an award-winning, international producer of branded clothing, merchandise and print.

Held at the Liverpool Hilton, The Wild Thang expo and conference delivered a programme that covered how ESG, product, and technological developments are revolutionising the merch sector.

Founder and managing director, Andrew Dwerryhouse said the event aimed to showcase how business can be done

differently, speaking of the centrality of ESG in Wild Thang's culture.

"It has been 30 years, and we are no overnight success. Very few companies reach that milestone and we are very proud of our small beginnings," he said. "What we have done over those 30 years is try every year to get a little bit better. Being part of the community and making a difference to people's lives has always been central to everything we do here."

The expo saw contributions from a range of organisations including Stanley Stella, Stahls, the King's Trust, Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, the Clatterbridge Cancer Charity, and the BPMA.

Phil Goodman, BPMA CEO, recalled how Dwerryhouse had been supportive in his early days at the Association.

"I'll never forget how kind Andrew was to me at a time when he saw I was nervous and new. He reached out and offered some really, really kind words," he said. "I came to learn how Wild Thang operates as a business. They do things properly and are authentic... They are among the best of the best in this industry."

The Bootle business counts blue chips such as McDonald's, Paddy Power, Sony and Formula One as clients, and plays an active role in the region's business culture. It has also expanded operations to the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and New Jersey in the US.

It has invested more than £2m in upgrading and expanding its premises, adding solar panels to power the business. Such efforts into sustainability saw it awarded B Corp status last year.

Following the day's engaging content and networking, an evening celebration allowed guests to enjoy an electric atmosphere, with fantastic food, hospitality and laughter.

Three decades of Wild Thang memories were brought to life with the help of host Claire Simmo, with music from across the decades, to remember the moments, milestones and people behind the 30-year journey.

There were also a few surprise awards, with Laltex named as Supplier of the Year, and Wild Thang's Leigh McLaughlin awarded Employee of the Year. ●



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