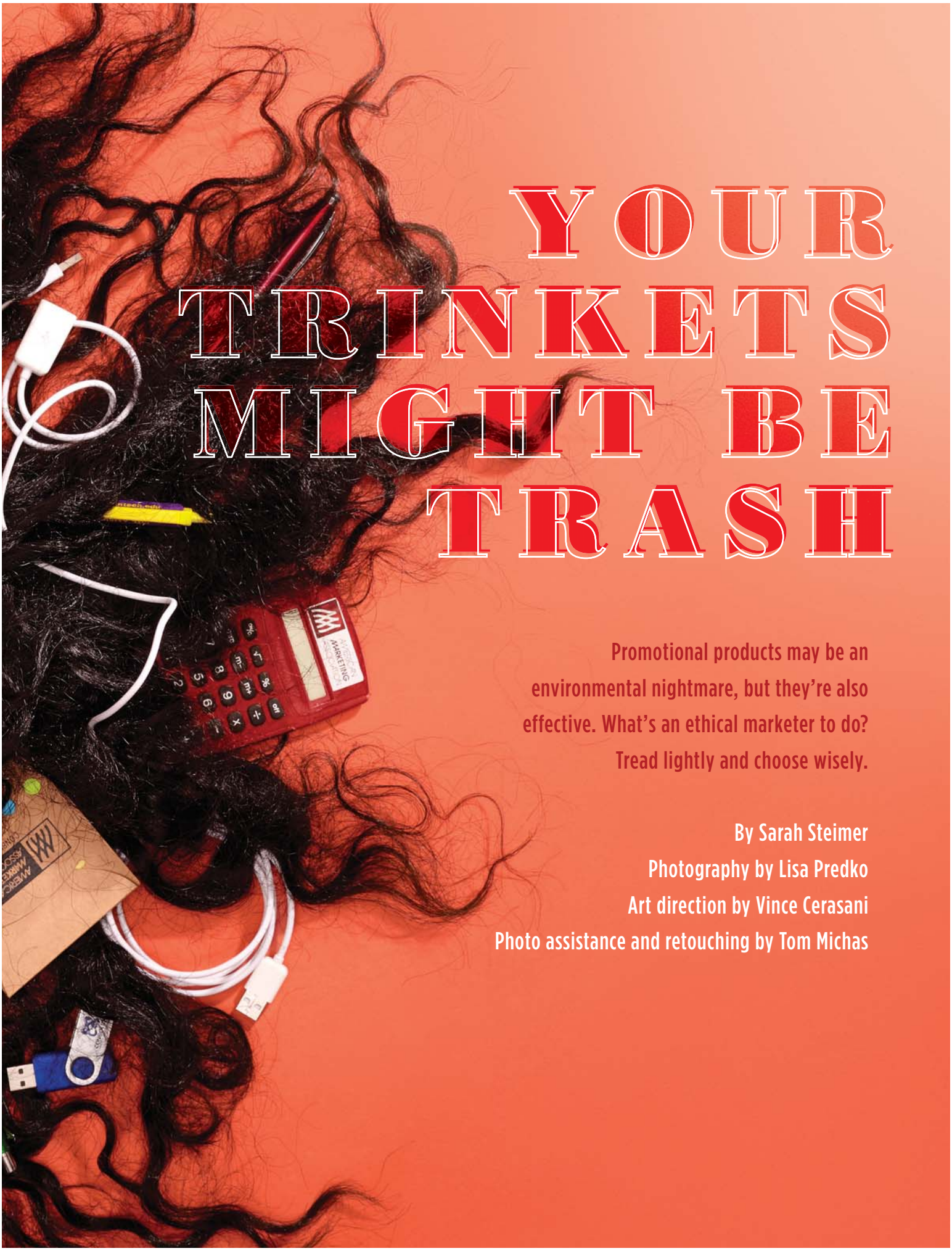


YOUR TRINKETS MIGHT BE TRASH

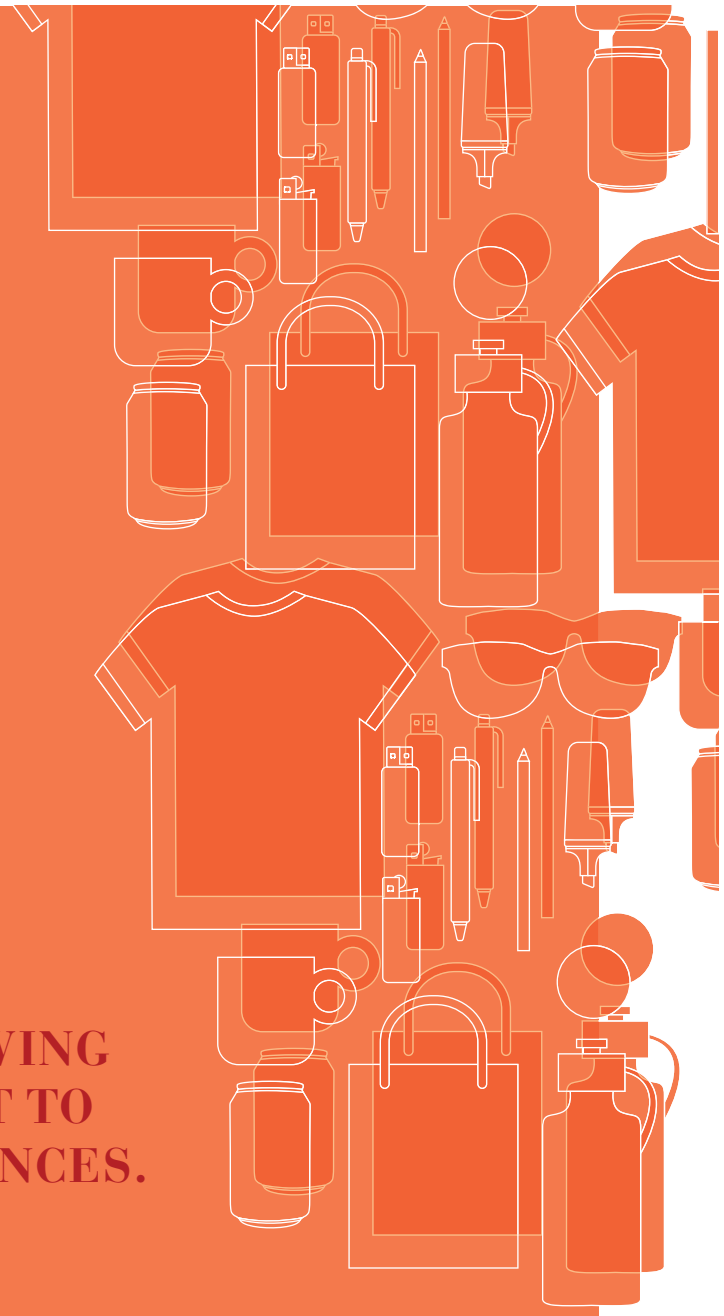
Promotional products may be an environmental nightmare, but they're also effective. What's an ethical marketer to do? Tread lightly and choose wisely.

By Sarah Steimer

Photography by Lisa Predko

Art direction by Vince Cerasani

Photo assistance and retouching by Tom Michas



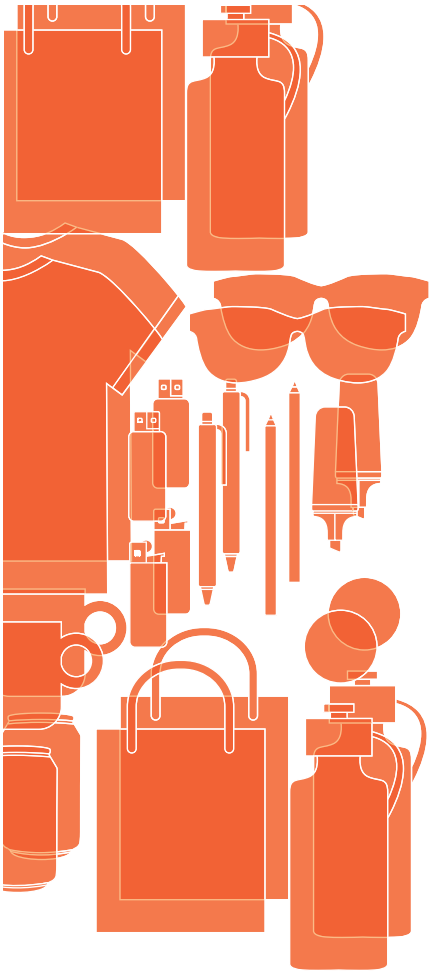
WHEN MEREDITH THOMAS WAS GROWING UP, HER MOM WENT TO A LOT OF CONFERENCES.

Thomas, an assistant professor of marketing at Florida State University, remembers branded conference swag lying around the house. She returned to college after trips home with branded totes and other promotional items in tow. As many college students know, the send-off haul is often one part care package and one part "don't return with this."

"Once you get home, you don't want them anymore," Thomas says of conference swag. Promotional products have a way of appearing to be prized loot, but once the sunglasses, flash drives, stress balls, pens and T-shirts make it home, they often fail to—as Marie Kondo would say—spark joy. The items that looked so shiny and bright, sitting in big bowls or fanned out at conference booths, now look cheap and out of place among the carefully chosen products in your home or office. They're dumped in the trash, exiled to the junk drawer or sent off with the college student.

The disposable swag problem has been acknowledged by the promotional products industry itself, with some companies and conferences actively trying to fix it. But many more outside of the industry sat up and took note in November 2018 when Fast Company published an article titled, "It's time to stop spending billions on cheap conference swag." (The page title hits even harder: "The $24B promotional products industry is an environmental nightmare.")

"When you think about all of the energy and resources that go into making just one of the tote bags that I have just thrown into the trash—only to end up in a landfill—



the impact is staggering," Fast Company's Elizabeth Segran writes. In her search across promotional product websites, she found that "They're all competing with one another to sell products at rock bottom prices. The companies buying these things are looking to get them out to as many people as possible, while maximizing their marketing budget." She likens the industry to fast fashion, which has come under fire for its unsustainable products and use of factories with poor labor practices.

The arguments and comparisons made were unflattering, and the industry was quick to respond. While some were fairly straight rebuttals—Paul Bellantone, president and CEO of Promotional Products Association International, said that environmental responsibility is one of PPAI's core pillars—other responses included more acknowledgement of the issue: A blog post from commonsku, an order management software company for promotional products distributors, wrote that, "Elizabeth was right about a few things." A January feature story in Promo Marketing Magazine, titled, "'We could get rid of cheap swag altogether.'" went a little deeper: "Despite the best efforts of a handful of forward-thinking companies, organizations and individuals, the perception that promotional products are mostly cheap novelty stuff—the proverbial trinkets and trash—is alive and well. And, more than that, it's a perception rooted in reality."

But the industry was sure to point out the other reality of these items—they tend to work. By PPAI's estimates:

- 65% of advertisers cite promotional products as highly effective in reaching consumers and contributing to brand recall.
- 88% of marketers recommend promotional products.
- More than 80% of promotional products are used for more than a year.
- Eight out of 10 consumers pass along promotional products versus throwing them in the trash.

Segran herself acknowledges the appeal of promotional products. She begins her Fast Company article by confessing that she has canceled her New Yorker subscription and re-subscribed just to get a new version of the magazine's tote bag. Some giveaways are enjoyed and even coveted, the ideal promotion for the brand. But many still get tossed, which not only fills landfills, but chips away at hard-wrought brand equity.

Marketers have two options when choosing promotional products to represent their brand: They can be the New Yorker bag—sought-after, functional, reusable and building positive brand awareness—or they can be the cheap earbuds tangled and forgotten at the bottom of the bag, destined for a landfill.

THE PROBLEM WITH BAD SWAG

If promotional products—cheaply made or not—are being tossed as often as Segran suggests, it's certainly not a good look for the promotional products industry. But it's also bad optics for brand managers. Companies pour time and money into perfecting the brand, agonizing over voice, fonts and colors. But a bad promotional product can derail that brand story and instead suggest a disconnect in messaging. For starters, a tossable giveaway can highlight a disconnect between claims of corporate responsibility and company actions.

"There are so many companies right

DO YOU WANT YOUR BRAND REPRESENTED WITH A FIDGET SPINNER? IS THAT WHO YOU ARE?

now trying to be good corporate citizens and they're finally discovering that events are where their members or their guests, where their stakeholders see them," says Nancy Zavada, president of MeetGreen, a sustainable conference management company. "There's a quote that says events are windows to a company's soul because you get an opportunity to peer in and see how a company might actually be doing. If you say that you're going to save oil as an organization and then you have plastic bottles sitting up on the speaker's podium, that's a disconnect."

Telling a corporate responsibility story through items must also be authentic. There's no shortage of available promotional products that call eco-consciousness to mind: pens that resemble a bamboo stick or stress balls shaped like the earth. Although often categorized as a green or "eco" product on websites and sold alongside truly recycled items, they're often eco-friendly in appearance only. "The promotional products industry has a lot of greenwashing," Zavada says.

The solution seems to be doing your homework and spending a little extra on items that align with the quality your brand stands for. You could reach out to someone like Denise Taschereau, CEO and co-founder of Fairware Promotional Products, who can get nearly any promotional product for her clients from an ethical supplier. Her company has been at the forefront of the ethically sourced promotional products movement, often pushing to change the supply chain itself (the latest trending request, she says, is recycled ocean plastic). But just because something is ethically made, doesn't mean it will resonate with the user. Here lies the second disconnect: Just because it's sustainable, doesn't mean it relates to the brand. Sure, Taschereau could get you 400 fidget spinners made with recycled plastic and manufactured with union labor in the Bronx—but how does that toy relate to your company?

"Do you want your brand represented with a fidget spinner? Is that who you are?" Taschereau asks. "Maybe you're super playful and fun, maybe that is the right thing. But if it's not, then are you a fad-based company? Are you a company that is okay with having your brand based on something that will probably be obsolete within the season?"

One of Taschereau's top cringe products—and maybe one of the most popular promotional products—is the stress ball. "We get these sustainable brands that call us and they're like, 'We want stress balls.' No you don't," she says. "Sometimes we'll talk to their sustainability people and say, 'You need to talk to your marketing people because they're about to give something out that is so off-brand that it's going to do damage.'" But recently, Fairware got a request from a research center that works with patients with mental health issues, specifically around

stress. The organization requested brain-shaped stress balls. "I actually thought, you know what, there's a fit."

Perhaps the worst possible impression a bad promotional product could provide is a trash can filled with logos. Sponsors vie for the chance to be the constant visual in conference photos, the logo on the bag that everyone is carrying. But make a poor promotional product choice and your logo can only compete with discarded coffee cups.

"Visibility is a huge factor and the last thing you want is for people to see your brand in the garbage," Thomas says. "That's a horrible connotation, especially if there's a lot of them there. You'd be better off not to have sponsored anything than for that to happen."

REIMAGINING THE TRINKETS

As people become disillusioned with wasteful promotional swag, there has been some movement to the opposite end of the spectrum: no giveaways at all. UKGovCamp, a public sector "unconference," announced in 2018 that it was going swag-free. Instead, it would give companies the option to sponsor food and drinks, daycare for attendees' children or a bursary to cover attendee travel costs. Capital One had a #GoSwagless campaign in 2018, urging companies to use the budget and resources normally allocated to giveaway items to support a nonprofit. Other brands have opted to sponsor experiences at events, rather than give out items.

But it's tough to argue with the ROI figures that PPAI cites. And despite minimalism trends, people do seem to enjoy getting free stuff. As an example, Taschereau references a viral 2013 video of Paul McCartney at a New York Nets game: The former Beatle, with an estimated $1.2 billion net worth, was captured trying to catch a free T-shirt (he did finally snag one two years later).

If people are inclined to grab whatever swag you lay out—or shoot from a cannon—the promotional product suppliers and the companies ordering from them are charged with thinking ethically. "It's been a long, slow curve," Zavada says. She started MeetGreen 25 years ago and has watched the industry slowly take up the sustainability cause. "It's moving faster right now. …. The radical transparency of social media has had a big impact."

One of the biggest industry movers on ethical standards came through the creation of the Quality Certification Alliance in 2009. The organization certifies supplier processes as they relate to product quality, product safety, supply chain security, social accountability and environmental stewardship. According to its website, QCA has certified 27 suppliers.

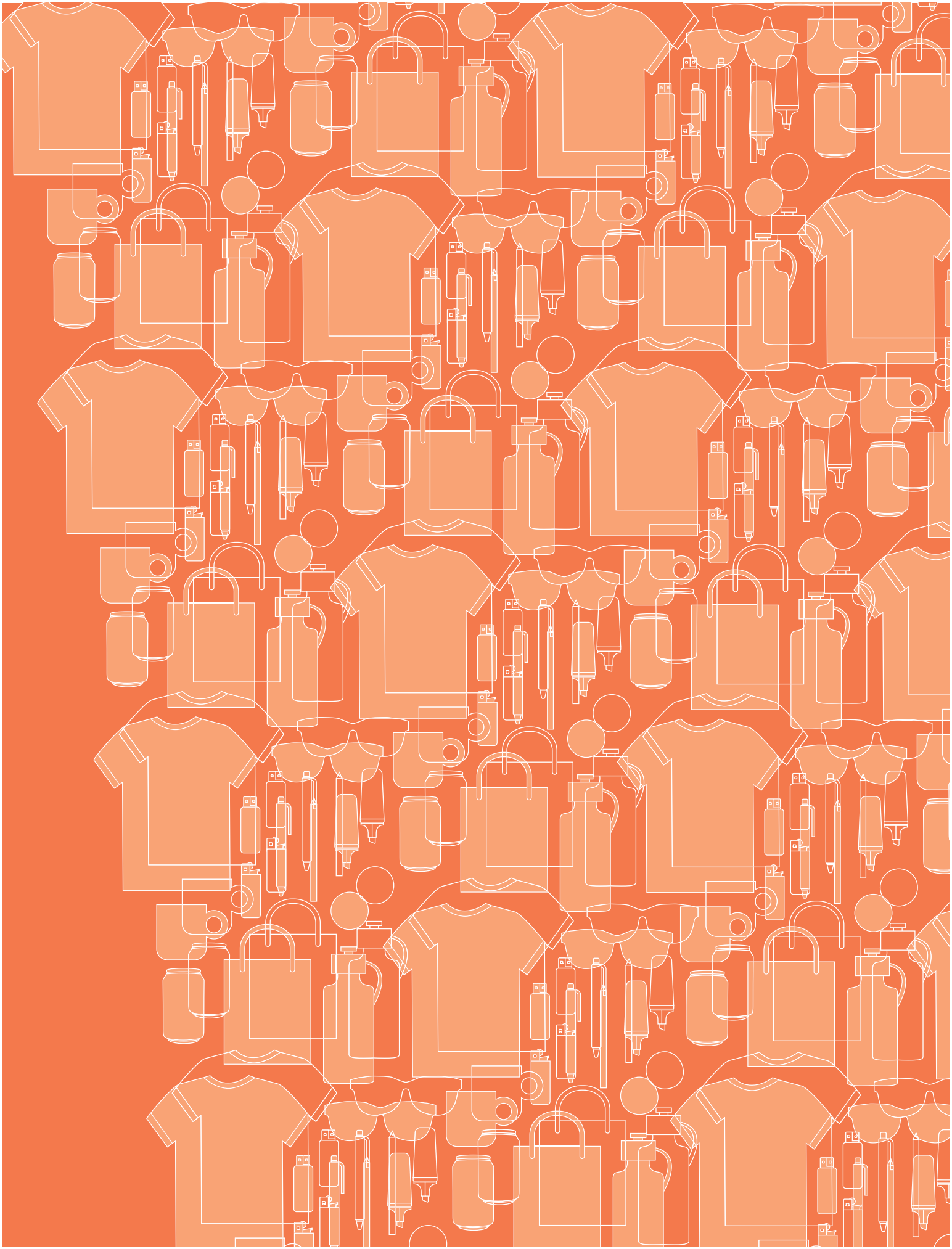
Choosing a more ethically produced product comes with a price tag. A 100% post-consumer recycled fabric tote bag sold by 4imprint, the largest distributor of promotional products, costs $4.45 each at a quantity of 100. A bag of the same size (and with far more color options) made of the thermoplastic polypropylene is sold by the same company for $2.19 each at a quantity of 100. Is it worth spending extra on better-made products when people seem willing to snag whatever you lay out? Yes: Because consumers don't make emotional connections with junk.

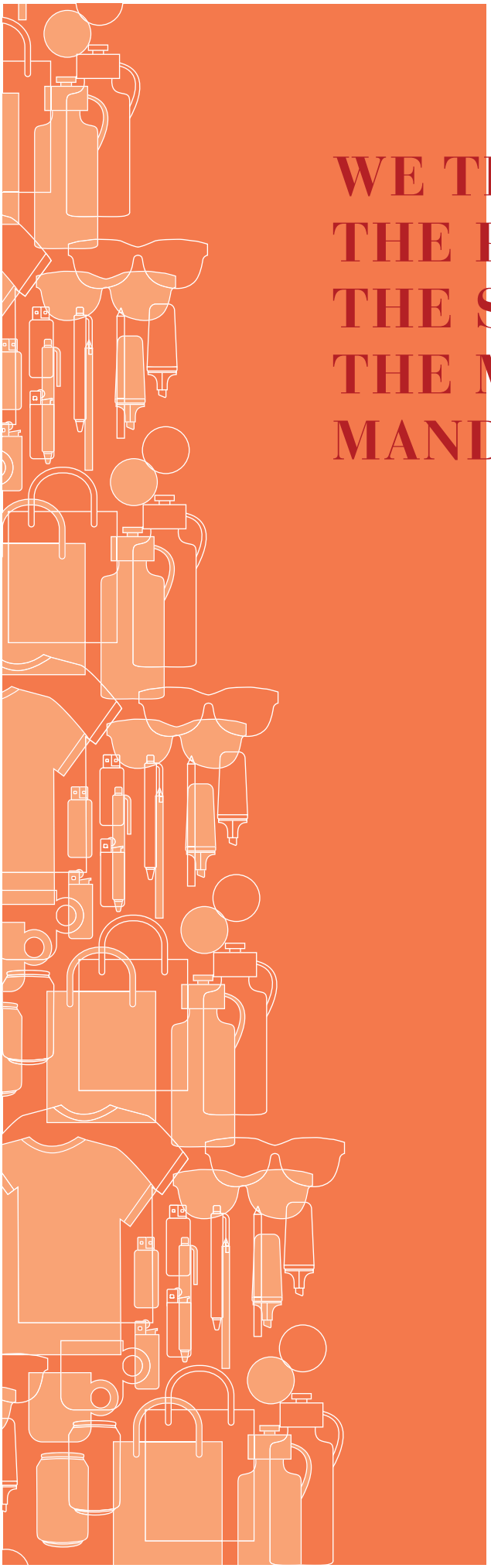
Todd Weaver, a professor of business at Point University, has studied sustainability and anti-consumption. He says people who purchase repurposed goods find the items to be more interesting because they have a story. Those consumers are more likely to keep the repurposed items and value them more highly. Weaver points out that if the goal of swag is to give something away to promote your brand, and the consumer is expected to have an ongoing engagement or connection with the item, "It would certainly make sense to give them something that's not just like everything else that they get."

A generic, cheap gift can signal that the potential lead or client isn't special.

"Just like all consumption, so much of it is tied up into people's identity and self-concept," Weaver says. "The things that we consume, oftentimes we're consuming them for symbolic or identity-expressive reasons—especially if the goods are going to be consumed in a public or social setting." This latter point may explain why so many giveaway T-shirts are hidden away at home for use as sleep shirts. Sure, they're not so bad—but they're not cool enough to wear in public.

Weaver references the 2017 Cone Communications CSR Study, which found that 63% of Americans are hopeful that





WE TRY TO MATCH THE PRODUCT WITH THE STRATEGY OR THE MISSION AND THE MANDATE

businesses will take the lead to drive social and environmental change. Consumers aren't likely to pick up a copy of your CSR report, but they'd be more likely to believe you support the cause if your promotional giveaways suggest as much.

ACCURATE REPRESENTATION

A consumer doesn't want to believe their business is only worth a 49-cent promotional notepad, and a company shouldn't want to be represented by a forgettable trinket. Promotional products should match the company's strategy and mission.

"If we're working with someone like Aveda that has biodiversity as a core guiding principle, we wouldn't bring a recycled tote bag to them," Fairware's Taschereau says. "We need to bring an organic cotton tote bag to them. If we're dealing with a recycling company, we're going to [recommend] recycled polymers. We try to match the product with the strategy or the mission and the mandate."

But not every company buying promotional products is the size of Aveda, and the

suppliers are also often small companies. The reality is that marketers working on a shoestring budget—and who hear the siren song of ROI claims around promotional products—will be drawn to buying 300 pens for 59 cents each. The other reality is that the fierce competition within the promotional products industry means often having to focus on price over quality. As noted in the Promo Marketing article, "smaller (promotional products) companies … can't refuse sales so easily, especially not on the basis of some intangible, far-off concerns."

Make giveaways a central part of the promotional strategy plan, Taschereau advises. Rather than make a last-minute decision before a conference, marketers can take time to better intertwine their brand story or strategy with the giveaway. Take Patagonia, for example: The famously eco-friendly retailer was rolling out a new workwear line to compete with Carhartt. As a promotion, it gave away branded carpenter pencils, an item that aligned with the new product line (and likely cost very little).

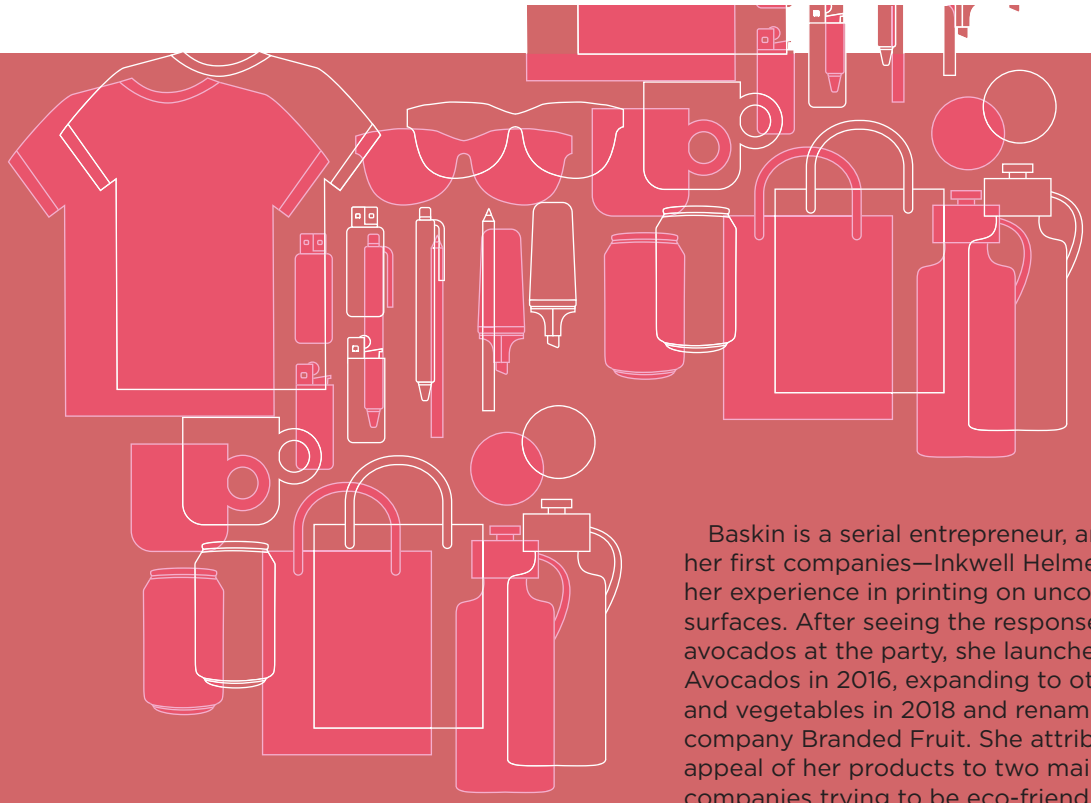
Successful marketers use their limited marketing funds to give away a smaller number of well-made promotional items. "There's this mentality of, 'I'm supposed to give away something to everybody who walks by my booth' or 'I'm supposed to have T-shirts for new employees,'" Taschereau says. "It's just really thinking strategically about merchandise."

Thomas, now attending conferences herself, hearkens back to those useful totes from her mother she was sent to school with. She's planning an event at Florida State in May, and functionality is a high priority for her giveaway plans: Her team is considering branded umbrellas as a nod to the region's rainy spring season. They'll be optional, of course, so they're not foisting unwanted products on anyone. "There's more of a focus on not burning people out with these things that they don't want anyway," Thomas says. "And if they do get something, it seems to be with functionality in mind."

Thomas suggests smaller logos could create a more appealing aesthetic for those hoping to use the functional products in their lives without feeling like a billboard. "It's this simplicity movement of wanting less stuff, less text, less everything in favor of simple, clean design."

Whatever the aesthetic, the products that stay out of junk drawers and landfills connect the dots: They can show the consumer that the company values them enough not to offload cheap, repetitious junk on them, but these products can also tell the story of the brand's ethics or campaign strategy. As appealing as a cost-saving, trendy knick-knack may be, Taschereau cautions: Do you want to be the logo on the selfie stick, or you want to be the experience that warrants the selfie stick? **m**

LESS STUFF, LESS TEXT, LESS EVERY-THING IN FAVOR OF SIMPLE, CLEAN DESIGN



SWAG DIFFERENTLY

Some companies are rethinking swag entirely. These eco-friendly options have myriad ancillary benefits: they're trackable, Instagrammable and even edible.

BRANDED FOOD

Danielle Baskin was invited to a barbecue in honor of a friend selling their start-up company, Scroll Kit, to WordPress. Wanting to celebrate her friend's success and contribute to the meal, she applied Scroll Kit's logo to the avocados she brought to the party. "I noticed that people were taking pictures and putting it on Instagram," Baskin says. "I thought, 'Oh, actually this is really good swag.' People really like avocados, but they're taking pictures of it because it's very novel. It's pretty effective for marketing because you don't have to bring this artifact home with you, it doesn't sit in a closet or get left in a drawer—it doesn't become a problem. But it also gets more views than a water bottle or something you're used to seeing."

Baskin is a serial entrepreneur, and one of her first companies—Inkwell Helmets—gave her experience in printing on unconventional surfaces. After seeing the response to her avocados at the party, she launched Custom Avocados in 2016, expanding to other fruits and vegetables in 2018 and renaming the company Branded Fruit. She attributes the appeal of her products to two main factors: companies trying to be eco-friendly but still providing physical swag, and the universal appeal of food. "People like oranges, people like avocados, people like clementines," she says. "It's different than a pair of sunglasses. Not everyone needs or likes this type of sunglasses. They might not be stylish."

The fruits and vegetables are sourced as locally as possible (not a terribly difficult feat, as Baskin is located in San Francisco). She also packs the fruit in a way that doesn't create unnecessary waste, unlike many promotional items that are individually wrapped in plastic. She's highly aware of the waste that can be created in the manufacturing process, having visited factories and manufactured products for her other businesses in China. For cheap items in particular, Baskin says, the waste occurs not just when the final consumer receives and tosses the swag, but also in the manufacturing process during quality assurance testing, or if there's a flaw when the item comes off the assembly line, such as an off-center logo.

The branded fruits may be a bit more expensive than bulk plastic items, but they're not out of line with the cost of, say, a notebook. Her lowest-cost items, clementines, are $3 each and avocados cost $5 each. But unlike those notebooks, Baskin's branded fruits and vegetables are likely to have a bigger impact because of how unique they are.

"I go to a lot of conferences and you get this particular notebook and a tote bag and a pen," Baskin says. "It's stuff I already have. I talked to someone who's been in the

promotional items world for 25 years and they said, 'We don't see new things as frequently. This is what really excites us—nobody has printed on fruit.'"

In addition to being highly Instagrammable, some brands have used Branded Fruits to create an entire experience for event participants. For example, a liquor company requested a cocktail recipe be printed on grapefruits. The company made the grapefruits available at a bar so people could take one home and have a cocktail recipe that involved grapefruit juice and the company's product.

Branded Fruit was profiled by Fast Company in December 2018, after which Baskin says she received about 300 inquiries for her products. "I thought, 'Oh, it'll die out, this is trending online,'" she says. "But it hasn't at all."

DIGITAL SWAG

Digital companies such as Event Farm, an event and experiential marketing platform, are coming up with ways to maintain a dotted line between attendees and sponsors long after the physical trinkets are forgotten. Ryan Costello, CEO and co-founder of Event Farm, likens the shift toward digital swag to invitations. Save for major events such as weddings or other milestones, invites have largely gone digital—and they track the experience even after it ends, with platforms such as Evite asking attendees to upload photos from the event.

"It's not just because of sustainability, but it's more efficient, it's quicker, it's trackable, it's all these things," Costello says of digital swag. "Not only does that check a box of [being] better for your global footprint, it also provides more value."

Event Farm has created products such as a digital gifting wall, where event attendees can tap their event ID or a wearable to receive exclusive digital content: coupons, videos or white papers. It can all be highly personalized to the attendee. The benefit to the company is that they've captured the person's data and can send customized follow-ups.

"I get the brand awareness value," Costello says. "Having a connection with the brand—that's what events are about, it's not just about handing out swag but, how do I really engage? This is my chance to authentically engage with a human for an extended period of time. If it were just about giving T-shirts to people, why don't you just mail them? Why are you having the event in the first place?"

The trend may be more relevant as the demographics of conferences and events change. It's easy to see the benefit of digital swag when you consider the younger attendees of Coachella or the Ice Cream Museum: Would they rather have the water bottle or the selfie?

Costello's company is in the early stages of another event platform, a sort of digital memory bank that would store event swag—those personalized, exclusive pieces of content—along with photos and content from sessions you may have missed because you opted to visit a different track. It acts as loss prevention. Rather than lose the important business cards in the bottom of a free tote bag filled with tossables, a digital memory bank allows users to retrace their steps and relive the experience.

"It's another way to remind the person that the thing that you wanted the most, here it is—and here are the other things that you can still take advantage of," Costello says. "I think we'll see conversion go up. We will get those coupons converted more because they can access it again in a place where they want to go to, because they have other things of value there—as opposed to that gift bag."