

Chapter 7: Specialty Product Segments

So far, I've given you a lot of information about how to sell and how to stand out. One thing I've already recommended is to specialize in high-quality products. Here are a few examples of niche products and how you can appeal to quality-seeking customers.

Green Products

Several years ago, green products rose to popularity in the promotional products industry, and they remain in demand today. To sell more of these products, there are a few things you need to know.

Three Categories of Eco-Friendly Products

Knowing these terms helps you better determine your customer's needs and desires when he or she requests eco-friendly alternatives to traditional items.

Recycled – Made from:

- *Pre-consumer waste* – Material from the manufacturing process that is recycled back through the same manufacturing process.
- *Post-consumer or industrial waste* – Materials that are discarded by households or businesses and are then collected and processed for other uses.

Biodegradable – Products that have the ability to break down safely and relatively quickly by biological means. They pose no toxic threat when disposed of through conventional waste systems.

Recyclable Plastic – These products are indicated with a triangular symbol (indicating that they are 100% recyclable) and a number:

- 2 – Products made of high-density polyethylene or HDPE
- 4 – Indicates low-density polyethylene or LDPE
- 5 – Represents polypropylene plastic or PP

Popular Cost-Effective Green Products

You can sell these to almost anyone.

Magnets

Many magnet companies are producing their 20-, 30- and 50-mil magnets from 50% post-industrial recycled magnet material. In addition to being fully compliant with all federal and state product safety regulations, the words "50% RECYCLED" and "MADE IN USA" are printed on the back of each magnet, which means you can receive full credit with your customers.

Pens and Pencils

Suppliers are now producing pens in which everything but the spring and refill is made from 100% compostable and biodegradable starch. There are also pencils made from a PLA material, which is enviro-friendly and renewable, and is produced entirely from plants. Other pencils are being made from 75% recycled newspaper and 25% new paper and recycled denim, catalogs and currency.

Labels

Almost everyone uses roll and shipping labels or label stickers on a daily basis. These cost-effective paper products are now being imprinted on 100% post-consumer waste on uncoated white paper and feature recycling-compatible adhesive. Roll labels are offered in common and special shapes.

Plastic Bags

A small percentage of plastic bags are recycled in the U.S. and the rest will remain in the environment for centuries. Entire communities have attempted to ban non-eco-friendly plastic bags. To address this problem, industry suppliers produce several different types of biodegradable bags and even one made, from plastic removed from the oceans. Other plastic bags being produced, will degrade in landfills 80 times faster than ones that were made several years ago.

There are thousands of green products now available in the promotional products industry. Take the time to research a handful of them so you can educate current customers, attract new ones and increase your sales.

Made in the USA

For years, many of us didn't think about where products were made. With the recent issues revealed by problems associated with the enforcement of California's Proposition 65 and other associated legislation, I decided to start selling more products manufactured in this country. I would rather be safe than sorry.

For instance, just last year there were problems with promotional products made abroad containing dangerous levels of lead. Thanks to U.S. regulations, I feel more comfortable selling American-made products for safety, quality and ethical reasons.

To protect yourself and your customers, start asking these questions:

How was it made?

It's difficult to know if safety standards were met during the manufacturing of imported products. American companies must adhere to strict manufacturing guidelines imposed by government agencies before products can leave their plants. The result is a higher quality product, although often at a higher price.

What I do: When I pitch American products, I point out that the quality justifies the higher sales price, and that going with a higher quality product will reflect better on their image. To illustrate this point, I always tell people my cheap coffee

mug story: I had lost a sale to a competitor because their mug was cheaper than mine. This was great for the customer – until the cheaper mugs' handles started coming off.

Is it in stock?

Over the years, it has become more commonplace for customers to place orders at the last minute, making rush service a popular demand. For USA-made products, suppliers tend to have more stock on hand, making it easier for them to fulfill rush orders.

To make sure orders are delivered promptly, one supplier buys his entire blank product stock from American injection molders. He can estimate delivery lead times accurately and has stock on hand so deliveries are made on time.

What I do: When people call for rush orders, I show them products from certain suppliers who I have long-term relationships with. By doing this, I'm able to control the situation and make sure my customers are getting products on time and from a reputable source.

Can I make more money on custom-made products?

Yes, because you'll have less competition. By selling custom orders and one-of-a-kind products, you can create your own product line and increase margins. You'll become the go-to person for certain products.

What I do: I combine two different USA-made products to create one completely new one. One way I do this is by using imprinted lunch pails and then filling them with imprinted butter mints. This makes me the only source for this particular item, and these items are all American-made!

Does it come in several colors?

Many imports are produced in fewer colors, limiting their appeal. Even though I'm not a big proponent of providing too many choices, if a client needs and asks for options, it's nice that I can sell products that come in different styles and colors.

What I do: Over the years I've sold promo items to many youth camps that use them as giveaways for their participants. One particular cheerleading camp bought American-made lanyards from me in multiple colors, and they use the different colored lanyards to differentiate different age groups.

Who can solve my problem?

Sometimes orders go bad no matter what you do. When they do, limit the pain your customer feels by providing them with quick, straightforward answers. American-made goods are usually made and decorated at the same place, so suppliers who offer them are able to provide solutions faster than with products made overseas.

For example, one supplier I use has made pencils in America for many years. He's told me he can solve problems quickly. He knows what's taken place with his products from the time they go to order entry until they are shipped out the door, and it gives him a leg up in handling problems.

What I do: As soon as I hear anything negative about one of my orders, I contact the customer at once. I've found that by handling the situation immediately, my customer is easier to work with when it comes to providing the solution. And when I can offer a solution faster because the manufacturer is in the USA, it's even better.

How do I find suppliers carrying American-made products?

Several industry publications include American-made product sections and suppliers who produce American products, proudly display signs in their booths to let you know. If you're not sure where something is produced, all you have to do is ask. I find that suppliers featuring American products are very enthusiastic to tell you about what they offer!

You can also look online for answers. Numerous industry product sourcing websites allow you to search for American-made products. For instance, ESP allows you to filter your search specifically for items made in the USA. You'll be surprised at how many you'll have to choose from in every product category.

When you have the choice between showing your customer a product that was made in the USA or one made elsewhere, proudly offer the American-made version. You will feel more self-assured in recommending its quality and safety, and you'll also have the chance to make a higher profit margin.



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