



Create A Distinct Selling Advantage

DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF AND UPSELL YOUR CLIENT WITH THESE APPAREL DECORATING IDEAS

By Andrew Shuman

TODAY'S PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS DISTRIBUTORS ARE certainly faced with their fair share of challenges. While it's truly great to hear that nearly every industry indicator points to a continued rebound from a few off years, distributors also know that this business, in many instances, comes at a price. Margins are more frequently squeezed by increased competition, and average order sizes are smaller than they were during the good old days. Challenging? Yes. A bleak future? Absolutely not, for distributors willing to embrace change and opportunity—especially when it comes to selling promotional apparel.

APPAREL SALES

Apparel has been and will continue to be, in my opinion, the industry's No. 1 product segment. A corporate casual atmosphere has become more popular than ever, in large part due to the literally thousands of brand-name, generic and private-label garment options. As such, this robust market share is sought after by many. Competition abounds, making it critical for a distributor to set themselves apart from the masses.

Combining unique decoration methods with the right garment options can be the ideal recipe needed to accomplish this task. By offering a creative decorating alternative, even if it's just a slight twist to traditional screen printing or embroidery, a distributor can create a distinct selling advantage and in many cases upsell their clientele into a truly unique product.

Differentiate Your Product

Promotional products Distributor A was

recently approached by a client in the technology development market. For an upcoming tradeshow, the purchasing agent was looking for what she called a “nice, comfortable, moderately priced” polo with the corporate logo embroidered on the left chest. She was quick to point out that since this was an order that would exceed a certain dollar amount, the company was going to honor quotes from three different promotional products agencies. While timid, and a bit dejected at first, Distributor A decided to take a different approach to the challenge. Rather than allowing her client to commoditize the product, she opted to provide samples of three high-end, brand-name polos.

Additionally, she asked for some creative assistance from her decorator, ultimately developing a multimedia appliqué version of the standard corporate logo. The cost of the garment, with decoration, made the selling price of the three unique, brand-name options nearly 40 percent greater than that of the other two quotes. The result? Distributor A upsold the customer, won the job and, more importantly, procured all future apparel business by developing, in the client’s mind, a completely unique and proprietary way of executing the company logo. While this was certainly a risky endeavor, the distributor felt it was a better alternative than throwing her hat in the ring with the same product as her competition simply to see if she could come away with the order at the lowest price.

Developing this type of approach does not have to be reserved for instances as risky or unique as the example above. While it may not be feasible in every case or with every client, upselling through the use of unique decorating methods can be a standard practice rather than just a trick you occasionally pull from the hat.

Create Retail Appeal At A Low Cost

Promotional products Distributor B took the technique a step further and mastered Distributor A’s approach on even the smallest of orders. While servicing several clients’ online company store programs, Distributor B developed a way to increase shopper traffic by creating apparel items with retail appeal. In each case, the online stores were zero-inventory models, which can make decoration options of all types quite expensive.

The distributor, however, created multimedia combinations using screen-print heat transfers with an embroidered appliqué overlay that allowed customers to create an incredible retail look while also being able to order very small quantities—and still keep the product affordable. In other e-store programs, the distributor took a less complex but equally unique approach by adding textured inks to several screen-printed logos, as well as alternating or textured stitch patterns to embroidery files. In certain cases, the distributor even managed to incorporate an inexpensive and simple rhinestone complement to a basic screen-print logo, which increased sales of the young women’s apparel on which it was used within the company store.


While the approaches to these two examples are very different, the results shared by Distributor A and Distributor B were quite similar. They achieved higher profit margins, a unique sales advantage and, most important, thrilled clientele.



The decoration on this t-shirt was created by putting a zigzag stitch over a multi-color distressed print.

For distributors accustomed to selling the basics in apparel, this approach need not be a daunting task. Following these few, simple steps will have you well on your way to the same upselling success:

- 1. Solicit help from your decorator.** He or she is the expert and can help develop and execute decorating methods that suit your clients’ logos.
- 2. Be creative.** While you certainly don’t want to completely forego approaches that have worked well in the past, use your next few apparel projects to experiment with unique decorating techniques. Gauge your clients’ responses and don’t be afraid to think outside of the box. Even if your clients aren’t crazy about the idea, chances are they’ll be very impressed with your proactive approach to their projects.
- 3. Set yourself apart.** Use your newfound creativity to build a reputation for being unique. In the long run, this will prevent your clients from being able to commoditize what you do.
- 4. Make money.** Utilize decorating techniques to move more profitable products. Not every account is going to be on a Nike budget. However, unique decorating methods inevitably lend themselves to higher-end apparel.

Being a sales professional of promotional apparel has an incredibly bright future. You can sell anything to anyone at any time. Embrace the changing times with creative thinking. Build on the great reputation you’ve formed with your clients by not only distributing apparel, but showing them that you design it as well. 

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