



Photo courtesy of T Bar M Camps

MERCHANDISE AND MARKETING

How to succeed with branded clothing and promo products

Think about your favorite T-shirt. It's the one you wear once a week if you can manage to keep it clean. It's the shirt you keep in the top drawer because it's easy to get to. You love this shirt, and there could be multiple reasons why. It could be the way it fits, the softness of the fabric, the color combinations, the cool design or the story it tells. My guess is, if you're still wearing it, it's a combination of all these things. ►

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After being in the merchandise industry for 15 years and designing and selling hundreds of thousands of shirts, the one question I still find myself asking is: *Which drawer would I put this T-shirt in? Would I put it in the bottom drawer? The drawer I have to dig into when it's time to mow the grass, wash the car or paint the house?* Or, would it earn what I like to refer to as “top-drawer status.” (Some of you may read this as “closet status.”) You get the idea.

The same thought exercise applies to every merchandise product your brand has ever (or never) attempted. Did your hats get conveniently misplaced? Did your coffee mugs become pencil jars? Did anybody actually like those expensive hoodies? Is merchandise even right for your brand?

I'm not trying to scare anyone away from ordering merchandise, but I would like to help you evaluate your strategy. In merchandise marketing, the choices you make will either build a new brand or build another billboard.

How Not to Merchandise

In 2009, I joked that I lived “in a van down by the river,” which was not entirely far from the truth. I spent that year traveling from music festival to student conference to church camps selling T-shirts. At one event, I was set up as an exhibitor next to a national brand with twice the booth space and four times the designs. In a word, I felt inadequate. I instantly wanted to emulate everything they were doing and “borrow” all of their tricks. One of those tricks was a large sign that was displayed front and center next to a tip jar that read, “T-shirts are billboards. Donations keep the lights on.” Their shirts were so much cheaper than mine, and there were dozens of them.

I liked it. I liked it a lot. For my next festival the next month, I tripled my design options, printed them on cheaper shirts, lowered my retail price and put a sign up with the exact same verbiage. The result? Well, to keep the story short, I nearly went out of business by the time 2010 arrived. (And by the way, the other company didn't thrive much longer, either.)

See, the problem with the “T-shirts are billboards” philosophy is that no one likes billboards. You notice even the best billboards by accident, and then they're gone. Good T-shirts are quite the opposite. When someone receives a soft, quality T-shirt, they don't just see it, they wear it. And when a stranger sees them wearing such a cool design, they don't just notice it, they want to be a part of it.

There's a popular adage in marketing that says, “The best marketing doesn't feel like marketing,” and the same thing applies to branded merchandise. The best T-shirts, hats, mugs and promo products don't have logos plastered on them. They tell a story. For the wearer, they extend the experience of being at your destination. For the observer, they inspire interest in your brand and invite them to be a part of it.

So, let's replace one word and learn from a marketing philosophy that has proven successful: “The best merchandise doesn't feel like merchandise.”

So, what happened after my 2009 merchandise failure? I was able to go back to the very same festival one year later and made three times the revenue. Let me explain how. ►



Photo courtesy of T Bar M Camps

Building a Successful Merchandise Strategy

I spent time developing six creative designs that truly meant something to me, then I printed them on the highest quality shirts, tank tops and hoodies I could afford. I held social media contests to see what designs and garments my audience liked the most, and then I rewarded everyone that voted with a coupon code. I offered my products both at events and online, and I made sure to communicate the stories behind the designs to everyone that bought one.

I finally learned to value my merchandise as much as I valued my brand. I went back to that same event three more years after that, and each year I had people coming up to my table saying that the shirt they bought in 2010 was *still* their favorite shirt, and they had to get some more. My brand was finally in the top drawer.

When it comes to camps and conference centers, I have a simple observation that I wonder if you'd say is true: Your wins are unique, but your pain points regarding merchandise are the same. Overstocked inventory, unprofitable margins, poor quality and basic designs, just to name a few.

To help alleviate these pain points, I've put together five quick tips you can learn from to build a successful merchandise strategy.

1. An industry expert will help you stay within budget.

You can breathe a sigh of relief because I'm here to tell you the most expensive T-shirt does *not* always win. Many of our customers bring in their favorite shirt or hat to see if we can find something comparable. More often than not, I'll look at the tag and realize it's a budget-friendly option. There is a quality product for every budget. All you need is an expert guide to help you find it.

2. Your design is an extension of the experience.

While it may seem obvious, I can't emphasize enough the important role custom, creative artwork plays in the overall success of your merchandise. To make sure your design is worth wearing, you need to think about your finished design as two parts: quality and creative.

Make sure the artwork itself is quality. If you're working on T-shirts, for example, it's best to hire a graphic artist or illustrator that has experience designing T-shirts. You're much more likely to have a finished product that can compete with the big brands.

Communicate your idea creatively. The best T-shirt design doesn't just look good — it means something. Whether you're an idea machine or don't have a creative bone in your body, what you *do* have is a story and a destination. Find a statement that resonates with the heart of your brand and ask the artist to incorporate it into the design. If you're working with the right artist, they will know how to bring your story or experience to life creatively.

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3. Know where you can save money.

One of the best ways to know if you're working with the right merchandise vendor is if they give you advice on where to save money. There are industry trade secrets that some companies like to keep to themselves. A good partner won't.

For example, in the T-shirt industry, the easiest way to trim up a T-shirt budget without having to sacrifice quality is to adjust the amount of print locations and print colors. I often ask our customers whether they buy shirts from a major fashion retailer because of all the ink colors. Most likely not. There are exceptions to the rule, but for the most part your customers won't care how many colors of ink are on the shirts. Similarly, unless you know your customers are avid about having a front and back print, you can eliminate the back print and save a ton of money.

4. Create an online or pre-order store.

If you weren't thinking about it before 2020, you certainly are now. In this new age of virtual school and events, your audience is online all day long. To stay relevant, you need more than just a website and social media presence. You need creative ways to connect with your audience, and one of those ways is by offering them a piece of your destination experience via your merchandise.

Not ready to own inventory just yet? No problem.

Many companies (including mine) can help you set up a pre-order store that collects orders and payments on the front end, then simply write you a check for the profits collected. However you do it, the first step is to build it. The second step is to tell people about it.

An easy way to build up the hype is to get people involved on social media. Let people be a part of your T-shirt designing process by posting different design options on Facebook or Instagram. Ask your audience to vote, like or comment on their favorite design. Offer a giveaway in exchange for feedback on which design they like most. ►



Photo courtesy of Ink



Photo courtesy of Lake Ann Camp



Photo courtesy of Ink

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5. Follow the trends, then make your own.

This tip should actually be a separate article in itself, but I'll go ahead and summarize things as briefly as I can and share a few of my favorites for 2021.

In our industry, we don't just work with camps and conference centers, but also global retail brands that distribute millions of catalogs and sell in big box stores. As thankful as we are for that business, it's an even greater joy to share what we learn with camps and conference centers who desire to have a more effective merchandise campaign.

You can expect graphic design styles in 2021 to feature abstract color partnered with custom illustrations. The typography will range from classic serif fonts to chaotic block lettering done by hand. With graphic design being more common than ever, the designs that are truly unique and creative will be the ones that rise to the top (which is really good news for you if you took Tip #2 seriously and hired a great artist).

For product trends, we're seeing throwback pullover sweatshirts, chenille lettering (think varsity letter jackets), dad caps, beanies, tie-dye and, of course, comfortable T-shirts. As for the non-apparel items, stick with popular name brands like Nalgene bottles, Columbia backpacks and PopSocket phone grips. Then, look for useful items for the current times such as masks, personal hand sanitizers and plenty of pens.

To stay competitive and offer products people actually want, it takes trust and hard work. You need a vendor who doesn't just take your order, but actually inspires you to stay relevant and looks forward to what the next trends might be.

Retail Items Call for Retail Quality

Whether we're talking about apparel or promo products, you will always have a hard time retailing something if it's not retail quality. So, how can you know? There is a simple formula:

$$\text{RETAIL QUALITY} = (\text{TRENDY PRODUCT} + \text{QUALITY PRINT}) \times \text{CREATIVE DESIGN}$$

If you can commit to offering only retail-quality products, you won't just have a "camp store" or a "gift shop." You'll start seeing people wearing your shirts and hats more frequently, and soon enough you'll realize that you haven't built a billboard. You've built a brand, told a story and extended the experience of your destination for years to come. ■



Caleb Harris is a brand consultant with 15 years of experience in the custom merchandise industry. He and his team at Ink help brands, groups and events create retail-quality apparel by providing them with expert guidance, custom artwork and quality printing. He and his wife live in Little Rock, Arkansas, with their 1-year-old son and a daughter on the way. Contact Caleb with any merchandising questions at caleb@inkcustomtees.com and learn more about Ink at www.inkcustomtees.com.