University of Calgary Sustainable Swag Guide

Swag, giveaways, freebies – no matter what you call your gift items, they can be a fun way to build your brand and make your event memorable. However, many of the most common swag items, such as pens, stress balls and Frisbees, are more likely to end up in a landfill than they are to make a lasting impression on your guests. Use this guide to help you find more meaningful and sustainable giveaway items for your next event.

Key Principles of Sustainable Swag

1) Carbon Footprint, Social Responsibility and Environmental Impact

Before placing an order for swag or speaker gifts, consider the impact these items are likely to have on our environment throughout their life cycle. If the manufacture, shipment, use or disposal of a product has a large carbon footprint or will damage the environment, it is a good idea to seek out more carbon-neutral options. Similarly, if the product was made under unsafe or low-wage labour conditions, you may wish to replace it with a locally-made or Fairtrade-certified item.

Questions to ask:
- How far away was this item made and how far did it have to travel to get to me?
- Which resources have been consumed in its creation and which resources will be required to destroy or dispose of it? Does it incorporate any recycled materials?
- Who made this item, and were they paid a fair wage for their work?

2) Materials

The best sustainable swag can be reused for a long time. Items made from more durable materials have a better chance of being reused and included in the recipient’s daily life.

Questions to ask:
- What is this item made from?
- Is this item made of materials that feel cheap, disposable, wasteful, or unsafe?
- Can this item be used many times, or will it wear out or break after a few uses?

3) Utility, Uniqueness, and Value

The more useful a swag item is, the less likely that your guests will discard or forget about it after your event is over. By choosing unique, desirable and memorable items, you can provide a giveaway that will continue to add value to the event long after it has ended.
Questions to ask:

- Will people want to keep and use this item after the event is over?
- Does the item serve a clear purpose?
- Does it work better than similar items that most people are likely to own already?
- Will this item add to the recipient’s experience of the event?

4) Experiences, Not Products

No matter how useful or durable the giveaway item, swag often ends up in a landfill without being used for its original purpose. Activities and experiences are often more meaningful to guests and rarely create the same volume of landfill waste as gift items.

Questions to ask:

- Can you replace giveaway items with experiences?
- Which experiences would match the goals and values of this event?

Sustainable Swag Ideas

- Local honey or preserves
- Fairtrade Certified coffee, tea, or chocolate
- Reusable sporks
- Notebooks made from recycled paper
- Gift cards to local or sustainable businesses
- Promotional bags or apparel made from organic Fairtrade Certified cotton or bamboo
- Local crafts or art
- Activity memberships or day passes
- Stainless steel straws
- Charitable donations
- Movie, theatre, or sports tickets

If you have an idea that we should add to this list, send an email to sustain@ucalgary.ca to let us know. We’d love to share your ideas with the rest of the campus community!