



Pen Academy

As the second-most-popular promotional product category, writing instruments have a variety of applications and uses. But do you know everything there is to know about pens and how to sell them? We're here to help. Here are 11 tips for writing more business from pens.



By Shane Dale

Shane Dale always makes sure his distributor partners are knowledgeable about the writing instruments he provides before sending them off to their clients. "Beware of people who don't sell you a quality pen," says Dale, senior vice president of Logomark (*asi/67866*), "because there's a good chance they're not educated about pens." • To appear knowledgeable to their end-users, distributors must be familiar with the inner and outer workings of pens, the differences between low-end and high-end pens, and the presentation and packaging available.

Here are 11 steps to get your distributorship to maximize its writing instrument sales potential. Get ready to go back to pen school – and reap the financial benefits.

1 Be prepared to make suggestions

Yes, each client will enter into a pen program with an anticipated budget. That doesn't mean that distributors shouldn't be open to changing minds. "What happens is a client says, 'I want a pen.' The distributor says, 'Give me your budget,' and suddenly they're off and running," says Marsha Londe, a former distributor and current CEO of Tango Partners, a consulting firm to the ad specialty industry. "There are more questions than that. Tell me about your recipient. How will it be used? How involved is your brand in this? Are your customers just filling out cards for a drawing and they're walking away with a pen? That's different than when you're calling on your good customer."

If you're looking for repeat business, Londe, who sold pens in the promotional market for 24 years, advises having nothing less than significant in-depth knowledge of the pen universe. "Don't assume that your customer knows what they want. Ask questions and offer as much information on the products as you can. Be an expert," she says. "Be open with suggestions and ideas, having products in your line in mind that will be a perfect match for what they are looking for.

"Be prepared to show samples, and know the benefits and traits of each item. Know the piece inside and out, and try to

\$6.1 billion

The value of total writing instrument sales in 2006, according to the Writing Instrument Manufacturers Association.



show and explain all of the features and benefits of it. The more knowledgeable you are, the more professional you look in the eyes of a client."

Demonstrations are always an effective means of closing the deal, says Jeff Lederer, executive vice president of Prime Line (*asi/79530*). "Provide examples of a pen's use. This provides you the power to transform a product from a nebulous idea into a real vision for the customer," he says.

Ryan Kaback, ASI manager for distributor Custom Logos (*asi/173183*), believes that good salespeople should offer the idea of completely custom pens to their clients. His theory: If a client ultimately buys something completely unique to them, then they're more likely to remain loyal to

the distributor that sold it to them.

"We're seeing more customizable features on pens," Kaback says. "For example, a clip, maybe a metal mold on the clip, or there are pens that have the logo all around the barrel. There's been an increase of proprietary product that they can't go and get elsewhere from a distributor, so it creates loyalty. It's also high perceived value when you get something that's completely customized. On top of that, clients and their recipients tend to retain it. You have something that's unique, you get more face time, and they'll keep it longer than they would with a pen with just an imprint on it."

2 Know the target audience

"Know who you are selling to and the audience they are targeting," Lederer says. "Are they looking for more of a giveaway, such as a standard, plastic, everyday ballpoint pen, or are they looking for something more high-end to use as corporate gifts or employee rewards? You want to be able to offer helpful suggestions when possible on what product will best suit their needs."

After determining the target audience, distributors need to determine the impression the client is trying to make with that audience, Lederer says. "Are they looking to be remembered for the practicality and usefulness of the product, or are they looking to make an impact with more of a fancy, ornamental piece?" he says. "Would a two-



Writing instruments make up the **second-biggest-selling product category in the ad specialty industry**, behind only wearables, according to the 2008 *Counselor State of the Industry* report.

in-one pen provide extra impact, or are they looking for a high-end pen? This also ties in to knowing your audience and their needs.”

Londe says pens can be gender-specific, as well. “Are you selling predominantly to women? Are you selling to men? Women like color; men like this marble or material

look,” she says.

Dan Madden, vice president of sales for *Counselor* Top 40 distributor Jack Nadel International (*asi/279600*), says that it’s vital for pen sellers to know the specific needs of their customers.

“Definitely understand who your client is,” he says. “We’re in a new era and the

tech market is definitely different. Writing, I think, is a lost skill, so they’re not going to take the time to use high-end instruments to do anything with. People just e-mail or text or use cell phones. So, I would find out the market, make sure they understand who the pens are going to, and try to appeal to the masses.”

Will New Pharmaceutical Guidelines Hurt Pen Sales?

Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) is set to throw quite the wrench into the pen promotion plans of suppliers and distributors. This year’s PhRMA Code on Interactions for Healthcare Professionals, released July 10 and scheduled to take effect in January, discourages pharmaceutical companies from promoting their products and marketing themselves by giving pens and other inexpensive items to doctors.

Section 10 of the code, titled “Prohibition of Non-Educational and Practice-Related Items,” reads:

Providing items for healthcare professionals’ use that do not advance disease or treatment education – even if they are practice-related items of minimal value (such as pens, note pads, mugs and similar “reminder” items with company or product logos) – may foster misperceptions that company interactions with healthcare professionals are not based on



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While Hayes notes that these guidelines are strictly voluntary, it appears as though the largest pharmaceutical companies are planning to follow them. “This whole argument over lowering drug costs was brought up by some politician in Massachusetts,” he says.

Earlier this year, the Massachusetts state government initially passed a law that included a ban on any gifts from the pharmaceutical industry to all doctors in the state. However, Governor

Deval Patrick ended up signing a different version of the bill, which excluded the gift-ban language and rather focused on companies claiming any gifts over \$50.

The PhRMA code, though, definitely goes further than any state or federal law regarding pharmaceutical industry gift bans. And while the reason for the code’s implementation is

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– MICKEY HAYES, SUNSCOPE USA (ASI/90075)

informing them about medical and scientific issues. Such non-educational items should not be offered to healthcare professionals or members of their staff, even if they are accompanied by patient or physician educational materials.

“This was by far our biggest market,” says a dismayed Mickey Hayes, national sales manager for Sunscope USA (*asi/90075*).

to reduce overall health care costs, most in the ad specialty industry, and even in the health care markets, are skeptical about how the gift ban can help accomplish this. “The PhRMA people are putting all promotional products into this gift-ban item, which is the crazy part,” Hayes says. “Come on, a pen and pad is not driving costs up!” – SD

10.9%

Distributors reported that just about **11% of their total sales volume was made up of writing instruments in 2007**, according to the 2008 *Counselor State of the Industry* report.



3 Score with inexpensive pens ...

Pens are one of the least expensive marketing tools in the world. It's important for your clients to understand the importance of capitalizing on that, says Jennifer Grigorian, vice president of marketing and merchandising for Clegg Ind. (*asi/45450*). She always makes a point to share a piece of advice with her clients: When meeting with customers, always leave behind a pen with your contact information on it.

"Pens are such a great marketing tool," she says. "I cannot count how many times I've picked up a pen at someone's desk and used the info on there for the goods and services offered, or how many times I've lost pens with an imprint and I always wonder if the next person who picks that up will use the info on there for goods and services."

And just because a pen is inexpensive doesn't mean it can't be interesting. "Go with a unique color, unusual design or just use a funky and fun font to print your information," Grigorian says. "Any of those will be eye-catching and spark the interest of anyone who picks it up. This can be done very inexpensively. The most eye-catching pens are sometimes the least expensive."

And distributors would be wise to invest in some low-cost promotional pens of their own as the ultimate low-cost gift. "You can get all your contact info on an inexpensive pen and leave them behind with your clients," Grigorian says.

4 ... But cheaper isn't always better

While many clients believe that cheaper is always better, it's a mistake for distributors to enable that kind of thinking, Londe says. "If you want a piece-of-garbage pen, it's going into the trash. You've lost goodwill, marketing, and your budget," she says.

That's not to say that there aren't good 59-cent pens, Londe says. You just have to know where to find them. "There are times when an inexpensive pen is appropriate, if they're more for convenience for forms and notes needing to be taken en masse," she says. "In recent years, lots of real nice, quality pens have come out in the mid-price range. You don't always have to go to a name brand to go to a customer's need to satisfy perceived value."

Before suggesting the right price for the client, distributors must have an understanding of two things: what the customer wants, and what the customer will keep and use. And cheap for cheap's sake just doesn't fly. "When I would go sell pens, I would try to avoid the cheapest, because this is somebody's brand," Londe says. "I once had a customer that wanted a 15-cent pen. It was so cheap, it'd melt on the dashboard in the car."

"Is this the image you want to present for yourself? You're throwing away your brand, you're throwing away your money and you're throwing away your opportunity."

\$1.4 billion

The total amount of ad specialty revenue attributed to the writing instrument category in 2007, according to the 2008 *Counselor State of the Industry*



5 Familiarize yourself with the craftsmanship

The average person doesn't think much about the craftsmanship that goes into pens. That's why it's important for distributors to be familiar with the process.

"As with most products, you get what you pay for," says Stuart Babb, director of marketing for Gemline (*asi/56070*). "Pens made with superior materials and craftsmanship will perform at a higher level of precision, and are less likely to have the problems that lower-cost pens have."

Understanding a pen's components is crucial, according to Babb. "For example, a pen using a Swiss-made point versus a China-made point is often less likely to experience quality issues such as leaking or blotting," he says.

Joe Thanin, vice president of purchasing for Logomark, says the inside of the pen is more important than the outside. "Ultimately, a pen is only a holder for a refill," he says. "We use USA-made ballpoint refills and German-made roller-point refills. Not that an Asian-made refill is a bad refill, but the American and German refills are superior."

A lot of pen makers will cut corners when it comes to quality. For example, instead of making a pen out of 100% brass, some manufacturers will create a pen with a brass look-alike, such as chrome-plated plastic. "The tip might be brass, but they'll use an aluminum ring," Thanin says. "You can actually pull the tip off because the brass is so much stronger than the aluminum that it'll just pop off the pen."

An easy way to detect a shoddy pen is to weigh it, as 100% brass pens will always weigh more. "You'll have equal strength throughout the pen with brass, so it'll last for generations, rather than a year," Thanin says.

6 Get to know the inks

Like pens, all ink is not created equal, Want says. He goes so far as to compare the

refining of ink to that of motor oil. "There are all kinds of grades of motor oil, and for each level, it's refined to a degree, and it'll be refined time and time again to get rid of particulate matter," he says.

Whether for a ballpoint pen, roller-ball pen or fountain pen, well-refined ink does make a difference, as low-grade ink could cause any pen to jam or skip. "Which is why on a fine instrument, they write smoothly," Want says. "There's nothing to impede the flow of ink. That has a lot to do with quality."

That's why high-end pens always come with high-end ink. "It might be microscopic, but at the end of the day, a pen is made to

write, so when people say it writes better, it does," Want says.

Distributor Ryan Kaback also makes sure to know about the origin of the inks in the pens he sells to clients. "The quality of the ink – generally, where it's made – has an impact on the life of the pen," he says. "I know Swiss and German are generally the best, and when you find out about the inks afterwards, occasionally you can get burned."

7 Learn about decoration

Part of being a pen expert includes an understanding of the ins and outs of pen imprinting, and educating clients on imprint-



January 23

National Handwriting Day, sponsored by the Writing Instrument Manufacturers Association.

ing is an important part of completing the sale, Lederer says. “Show where the product can be imprinted,” he says, “whether it be on the barrel or on the cap, or on both for maximum branding impact.”

Thanin says Logomark uses four to five unique decoration processes for its custom writing instruments. Logomark’s finest pens are engraved with a chrome finish or are laser-engraved on the brass itself.

“The last thing you’ll have is where you’ll have a lighter-colored pen or a chrome pen, and it’ll be oxidized or done by hand,” he says. “We’ll go back in after it’s been engraved and oxidize it. That’s what you do with a high-end pen. When you’re dealing with a higher-end writing instrument, you want to make sure that the logo is going to last a lifetime.”

Mickey Hayes, national sales manager for Sunscope USA (*asi/90075*), says many distributors don’t realize the major imprinting advancements that have recently been made.

“Most pen suppliers these days have the capability to do full heat-transfer wraps around the whole barrel,” Hayes says. “This is a great selling feature, because many end-users now have four-color-process logos and want their imprint seen on the barrel in full color. In years past, pen suppliers could only do one or maybe two colors. Now, most suppliers can do a four-color process. It’s a great selling feature.”

8 Make presentation a priority

“Great packaging will automatically raise the value of a pen,” Grigorian says. “If you’re working with a tight budget but still want to give a great gift, you can instantly raise the gift value of a pen by having jazzy packaging.”

And it doesn’t have to be expensive. “There are a variety of packaging options that are very cost efficient, and they make the value of the pen and the gift much higher,” Grigorian says.

Londe says there are three reasons to make proper pen packaging a priority: It increases sales, increases perceived value and helps the distributor look knowledgeable in front of the client. “A pen can come in a single-piece box, it can come in a two-piece cardboard box where you can lift up the top, and it can come in a good-looking plastic container now, like a tube,” she says. “There’s wooden packaging, also, so it can sit on your desk.”

Grigorian says that packaging pens as a set can also help distributors to increase their pen sales. “The key to showing an array of pen options is to have them organized neatly in a kit,” she says. “This makes it much easier for the client to see options and feel the differences in materials and weights. It’s a lot less overwhelming for them to see 20 pens, nice and organized, uniformly in a presentation case.”

9 Package with another promotional product

Some of the best pen promotions are those in which pens are not the only item being used. Grigorian encourages distributors to come up with programs for their clients that provide pens in concert with additional products. The value of a pen, she says, is that it can be grouped with so many other items to expand the revenue base of each pen-related promotion.

“Package pens in another promotional product for double logo exposure,” she says. “This is a great way to sell multiple promotional products. You can package a pen and pencil or a pen and jotter in another promotional product. This will not only get another item in their hands with your client’s logo, but it will also give a unique presentation that will be exciting to the recipient.”

10 Think about customization

Customers tend to keep items to which they develop a personal attachment.

Nothing helps to foster that attachment better than a personalized product, such as a pen that comes with a person’s name permanently engraved.

“I like it when a pen can be personalized,” Londe says. “If I receive a pen with my name on it, I’m more likely to hold on to it. Anything you can do that’s personalized is more likely to be kept.”

And personalized pens are even better when they’re brand names. “You can sell that personalization, which becomes an upsell, and it really increases the value of the pen, as does the packaging,” she says.

11 Never forget about fun

There are times when distributors must put together a high-end, classy, distinguished pen program to impress their corporate clients. Then again, there are times when it pays to be a little wild and crazy.

“Sometimes, it’s just plain old fun,” says Londe, who once sold a series of pens with purple ink to a hospital with purple and red corporate colors. “There are some wonderful pens that write different colors. That tends to be in the less expensive pen more than the upscale pen.”

Londe once sold a series of red-ink pens to financial firm Arthur Andersen prior to the company’s auditing scandal and eventual collapse. Ironically, the slogan was “You never want to be in the red,” Londe says.

But off-the-wall colors aren’t the only way to make pens fun. Combination pens, such as a pen that comes with a laser pointer or a highlighter, can also be big hits. More importantly, these are the pens that customers tend to keep and use, according to Londe. “We did a mailing that included a pen with our name and phone number,” she says. “You take the cap off and when you twist it, it’s a highlighter. A lot of people liked that combination because it was novel and different.” ◊

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