

The Merch Matrix™

Project Planning Workbook

A practical framework for choosing branded merchandise and apparel.

Edition 01

"There is no perfect promotional product."

CUSTOM BRANDED

The Merch Matrix

Stop Choosing Products. Start Building Better Projects.

Most businesses begin by asking - "What's the best promotional product?"

The better question is - "What are we trying to achieve?"

The truth is there isn't a "best" promotional product. A stainless steel drink bottle may be perfect for an employee onboarding program, yet completely unsuitable for a giveaway.

Likewise, a simple stress ball may have low perceived value, but be the ideal choice for a high-volume awareness campaign giveaways.

The most successful branded merchandise projects begin by identifying the ***Decision Drivers*** that matter most.

The Merch Matrix provides a practical framework to help you make those decisions with confidence.

The Eight Decision Drivers

There is no perfect promotional product.

There is only the product that best aligns with your project's objectives.

Selecting branded merchandise should never be a guess or a race to the cheapest pen. Before placing an order, evaluate your candidate products against the **8 Decision Drivers**.

1. Value

The simplest way to filter your product search is of course the price you pay for it. There is a product to suit any budget, making promotional products accessible to businesses of any size, literally within any budget.

Tread carefully when judging products just by their cost at time of purchase. True “value” in judging products by cost lies in its value over the entire lifetime of the product, considering cost hand in hand with product durability paint the real picture of the cost of the product.

A simple example is a pen that costs \$0.60 but breaks after 3 uses – which has provided you \$0.20 per use or impression. Contrast this with a purchase of a \$20 drink bottle that last 2 years, is used over 300 times and effectively gives you \$0.06 per impression.

Why it Matters ?

Balance the initial investment against the product's expected lifespan and frequency of use. The true value of promotional merchandise is measured over its lifetime—not simply by its purchase price.

Merch Matrix Insight:

Don't judge a product by what it costs today. Judge it by the value it delivers over its lifetime.

2. Durability

Put simply how long the item remains in use, is one of the most important decision drivers.

Short Lifecycle - Low Durability

A short lifecycle product is attractive to even the largest brands and companies, if it suits the goals of your merchandising campaign. For example large scale awareness campaigns can use a disposable giveaway item as a highly effective way to reach large audiences at a sporting event.

For small business with limited budgets, the concept of durability of the products you chose become a major consideration as your limited dollar goes further - “more bang for your bucks”.

Long lifecycle - High Durability

Products with longer lifecycles in general are highly desirable, as they reduce the overall cost over time and essentially giving your brand more “eyeballs” for longer to your clients and target market.

Service based businesses like plumbers, pest controllers, electricians, real estate agents who are only used a few times a year will benefit greatly from using highly durable products as it enhances their chances of being front of mind when the need for your services is front of mind.

Durability & Apparel

A common example is evaluating a quote from company A - \$7 t-shirt vs Company / Product B - a \$12 t-shirt or even a \$20 polo vs \$35 polo. In this case the \$7 T-shirt is available for a reason, as sometimes you only need a t-shirt for a one day event, while the \$35 polo and \$12 t-shirt is designed as a uniform option, made to last up to 20 washes.

As a guide a number of apparel lines can be split into:

Good: A good promo t-shirt that will last between 5 - 10 washes.

Better: Closer to retail quality and will last up to 20 washes.

Best: Premium fabrics, built to last often with performance features and premium retail brand quality detail.

Road testing items like t-shirts, polo shirts, caps or drink bottles, by requesting a sample in advance before ordering a bulk order is a great way to judge the quality and how long it will last.

Why it Matters ?

The longer a product remains in use, the more opportunities it has to keep your brand visible. Durable products often deliver a lower cost per impression over time.

Merch Matrix Insight:

Every extra week your product remains in use is another week your brand stays front and centre.

3. Perceived Value

We all place a value on products or brands based on previous use, social media and marketing influences and also by the retail equivalent prices of each product. T-shirts, polo shirts, tech and lifestyle products and many more are items people have clear values as the marketplace has purchased them many times before.

For example a “Frank Green” inspired water bottle carries a value of \$70-\$100, while in effect this style of drink bottle product may cost less than \$25 to produce. This presents a clear example of a “winning outcome” as far as the gap between what a products value is perceived vs the actual cost to you.

Should I always select products with High perceived value ?

Not at all, the main thing to avoid however when selecting a product to use - is to make sure that you avoid a clear mismatch between:

- a) the objectives of the campaign and / or
- b) your brand or companies positioning
- c) the perceived value of the product chosen.

For example, a shirt for your staff to wear on a fun run or promotional event does not require you to purchase a retail quality or branded polo or t-shirt.

Similarly a giveaway “use once” or products with short life cycle do not require high perceived value.

Co-Branding:

An easy way to leverage high perceived value and align it directly to your brand is to brand your logo onto existing brand name products. Co-branding is available in many product categories, including drink bottles, notebooks, pens, corporate gifts and also with retail quality apparel suppliers.

Why it Matters ?

The perceived value of your merchandise should reflect your campaign objectives and the image you want your brand to project.

Merch Matrix Insight:

The best promotional products aren't always the most expensive—they're the ones that feel more valuable than they cost.

4. Brand Alignment

Brand alignment evaluates whether the product directly reflects your company's core values, positioning, and mission.

A mismatch here damages brand credibility:

- **Aligned:** An eco-conscious tech brand gifting a solar power bank or a certified organic cotton hoodie.
- **Misaligned:** A healthcare company giving out single-use plastics or an premium luxury firm distributing cheap acrylic keychains.

Why it Matters ?

Every branded product becomes an extension of your business. Choosing merchandise that reflects your values helps strengthen trust and reinforces your brand positioning.

Merch Matrix Insight:

Every product carrying your logo sends a message about your business. Make sure it's the right one.

5. Usefulness

A product only builds brand equity if it stays out of the bin. Usefulness measures how seamlessly an item integrates into your recipient's daily work or personal routines.

Simply ask yourself "Will people actually use it?"

Is this important? Well the research says absolutely, in fact 77% of people selected "Usefulness" as the number 1 reason to keep a promotional item in a poll on industry site www.ppai.org.

Lifestyle Integration - Brand Ambassador Cheat Code

A key metric in usefulness is the ability of the product to integrate into a person's daily life. By seamlessly integrating into people's lifestyle, your branded promotional product has effectively unlocked the Cheat Code for promotional products - you have created the *pseudo brand ambassador* for your brand!

These products are used every day of the week, be it at work, during exercise or at the gym or kids sports on weekend. Effectively they become mobile branding tools, as the user interacts with people or in outdoor settings, this increases your brand exposure to not just the owner but to a much larger audience.

Products that are high in lifestyle integration include: all apparel items (polo, t-shirts etc), drink bottles, sports shakers, reusable travel mugs, umbrellas, bags of all types, including tote bags and backpacks.

Why it Matters ?

Products that become part of everyday routines are more likely to be kept, used and appreciated, giving your brand ongoing exposure long after they are received.

Merch Matrix Insight:

The best promotional product is the one people reach for without thinking. That's when your brand becomes part of their everyday routine.

6. Visibility

How often will your brand be seen by others?

The number 1 place people use and keep their promotional products is the Kitchen, and people spend an average of 3 - 5 hours a day in their kitchen - thus providing products that can be used in the kitchen has potential to give your brand high visibility.

Visibility measures where and how often your brand mark is exposed to both the user and surrounding onlookers.

Evaluate visibility across two distinct areas:

- **High Desk / Kitchen Exposure** - Desk mats, ceramic mugs, and kitchenware offer high repetition to a single user in private spaces.
- **High Public Exposure:** Outerwear, caps, tote bags, and umbrellas act as mobile billboards, generating thousands of passive impressions in public spaces.

Why it Matters ?

The more frequently your branded merchandise is seen—whether at home, in the workplace or out in public—the greater the opportunity to build familiarity with your brand.

Merch Matrix Insight:

Every time your product is seen, your brand earns another opportunity to be remembered.

7. Distinctiveness

By providing unique or distinctive products in some way, allows your brand to be associated with the Wow factor that comes with this.

Uniqueness evaluates how unexpected, creative, or memorable the merchandise is within your industry landscape.

If 10 exhibitors at a conference hand out standard notebooks, yours will be forgotten. A unique item cuts through digital and physical noise:

- **Standard:** A standard blue ballpoint pen.
- **Unique:** A plantable seed paper notebook, a custom-shaped wireless charger, or a locally sourced artisan coffee gift set.

Strategies to provide unique twists to products can include:

- Innovative and unique branding methods, for example instead of embroidery on a cap, why not try a unique patch option
- Select a different material to a traditional product, for example a bamboo pen or Jute bag instead of traditional materials.
- If you're disrupting a market – look for products that offer something distinctive.

Why it Matters ?

Distinctive products are more likely to spark conversations, create memorable experiences and help your brand stand out in a crowded marketplace.

Merch Matrix Insight:

If your merchandise looks like everyone else's, your brand will be remembered like everyone else's.

8. Fit

Successful companies generally get their marketing spot on correct? , thats why they are consistently successful in competitive markets. The marketing fundamentals of customer segmentation, target marketing, knowledge of your customers buying behaviour and preference and matching these needs with your products which you develop strategies related to pricing and promoting them accordingly, is the fundamental of marketing principles and long term product success.

The same principles you use to market your products or services will also apply to your products of choice to promote your brand!

Who is your intended target audience ? What are there behaviours and preferences, once you answer these questions, you can easily match products they will find useful and are more likely to use, thus keeping your brand front and centre in their daily or weekly life.

Is it genuinely suited to your target audience? Avoid picking products that you think are cool and funky and what you would like to use, this makes you feel great but not necessarily of any interest to your intended audience.

Why it Matters ?

The most successful promotional products are chosen with the recipient in mind. When the product matches your audience's needs and interests, it's far more likely to be used and valued.

Merch Matrix Insight:

Choose products your audience will value—not simply the ones you like the most.

Build Your Merch Matrix

Step 1 — Define Your Project

Project Name

What are you trying to achieve?

- ☐ Brand Awareness
- ☐ Customer Loyalty
- ☐ Staff Recognition
- ☐ Employee Onboarding
- ☐ Conference / Trade Show
- ☐ Product Launch
- ☐ Fundraising
- ☐ Uniform Program
- ☐ Client Gifts
- ☐ Other _____

Target Audience: _____

Estimated Quantity: _____

Budget: _____

Required Delivery Date: _____

Step 2 — Rank Your Decision Drivers

Rate each Decision Driver from 1–5 based on how important it is for this project.

Your Priority Meter

Decision Driver	Priority
Value	○○○○○
Durability	○○○○○
Perceived Value	○○○○○
Usefulness	○○○○○
Visibility	○○○○○
Brand Alignment	○○○○○
Distinctiveness	○○○○○
Audience Fit	○○○○○

My top 4 Decision Drivers for this campaign are:

Step 3 — Compare Your Shortlisted Products

Product Option 1

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Product Option 2

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Product Option 3

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Product Option 4

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Final Recommendation

After completing The Merch Matrix, ask yourself:

- ✓ Does this product align with our project objectives?
- ✓ Will people actually use it?
- ✓ Does it represent our brand well?
- ✓ Will it provide value beyond the initial cost?
- ✓ Would we choose it again?

Need Expert Advice?

The Merch Matrix helps you define the right questions.

We can help you find the right answers.

Visit: custombranded.com.au