

## Promotional Merchandise & Light Bulbs

On the surface the relationship between the two nouns in the title may seem distant. And like electrons that orbit an atom, in the natural world the space between them should most often stay the same. They have different roles. Different uses. Different goals. If you are most readers you see little or no relationship between a light bulb and a logoed pen or a shirt with a company logo embroidered on it. But also like an atom, if you look a little deeper things get more interesting and complex.

Let's dive in. Most companies spend hundreds of thousands of dollars (if not millions) developing, propagating, and carefully building their brand. By brand, it can be as simple as spelling the name in a clear and legible font on the landscapers' shirt, or it can be as complex as an entire 3 ring binder filled with hundreds of pages on corporate brand standards containing detailed descriptions of colors, logo sizes, font preferences, acceptable uses, unacceptable uses, and more. Further, this project almost without exception, involves C-suite level guidance. (Along with a consultant or ad agency or two.) Approval of the final brand the entity wants to project to the world is-- as it should be—not left to chance. It is a plan. A design. The final product becomes a critical element of the feel and message a company will reflect back to their target audience. Creating a brand and maintaining its integrity is a revered topic across every Fortune 500 Company.

As brand standards 'go live', the information is disseminated to the operating units, and the company articulates its commitment to maintaining the brand and what it stands for. From there, the marketing process begins. Print ads are created. Social Media plans implemented. Budgets are created for various operational units to order pens, mugs, folios, and company awards from a competent provider of promotional merchandise that is fluent in the brand standards, knows the look, feel, and style the company is trying to create.

So what about light bulbs? Lighting is critical to a company as well—and while companies will on occasion examine the nuances of lighting relative to energy use and productivity of workers, over time, little (but perhaps some) thought is given to light bulbs. Except one. How much do they cost? Soon, the light receptacles are counted, along with how many light bulbs need replacement, and the company learns they need 10,433 light bulbs per year. From here, procurement creates a RFP for bids to find the low cost provider of the type of light bulb that meets the standards the company requires. In most cases, this works out well. The specifications for a light bulb are clear and precise. Very little room for error once the right measurements are in place.

Every promotional merchandise order is customized. Pens change shape and size almost every year. Product decoration methods change, and some products get discontinued. User needs change. And, the uses change. Each buyer has his or her own concept and interpretation of what the 'light' of a promotional product should look like There is not 'one' light bulb. There are hundreds of variations that need constant attention and nurturing to ensure these products reflect the brand, are safe to use, and can adapt to changing conditions. The relationship to the light bulb cannot be more different. Yet they are often treated the same.

For all the investment and all the hundreds of thousands (or millions) of dollars to create a sustainable brand, companies will often treat the acquisition of promotional products exactly like the light bulb.

Would procurement get involved in the RFP to retain an ad agency? Would procurement get involved in deciding which accounting firm to retain? Almost certainly not. And the reasoning is exactly the same. The subtleties of accounting practices and the nuances of corporate culture and history for an advertising firm are more nuanced. To be effective in these more nuanced roles (accounting, advertising, branding) requires detailed understanding of the goals of the organization, the brand standards, the history of a company, and a fluency of knowledge that the organization ultimately leans on to protect the financial value and integrity of the brand. These decisions are not relegated to procurement for good reason, as those more qualitative characteristics simply cannot be distilled down to “we need 10,433 120V light bulbs”.

Companies spend considerable resources on promotional merchandise and apparel—all proudly emblazoned with the company logo. However, when the engagement is treated the same as purchasing a light bulb, what is washed away and impossible to articulate is the value added to the engagement of a promotional merchandise professional that first balances the need to protect and nurture the brand doing so within a cost structure that reflects the value of the relationship and the services provided. In our business—anyone can for a singular moment choose to be the “low cost” provider. Much like the accounting firm down the street can be much more competitive than a national accounting firm.

What an RFP cannot do is confirm that the promotional merchandise provider truly understands the significant investment the company has made in the brand. An RFP cannot ensure that you are constraining risk by buying a low cost item that contains a hazardous substance or is not CPSIA (Customer Product Safety Improvement Act) compliant.

An RFP cannot parse a provider’s ability to understand your corporate appetite for risk and be sure you avoid exposure to reputational risk from a poor or unsafe product recommendation. An RFP cannot confirm how to know when the embroidery is not quite right. Or when the colors or the logo use are at odds with the brand standards that the company has so heavily invested in and worked so hard to get into place. For all of the effort to the contrary, what is lost in the pricing war of a RFP are the very things that should not be stripped away. Yet they are.

Yes, you are buying a thing. The similarity between promotional merchandise and lightbulbs stops there. The decision to print your name on that ‘thing’ changes the entire dynamic. Promotional products are not ‘light bulbs’. Why treat them that way?