What to Think Through Before Ordering Branded Merchandise

Getting It Right the First Time

Ordering custom promotional products for the first time can feel like stepping into unfamiliar territory. There are choices about the item itself, how it looks, where it comes from, and how it will be used. A little planning upfront saves time, money, and the disappointment of opening a box of something that does not quite work. The checklist below covers the main points to consider, so your first order is a solid foundation rather than a lesson learned the hard way.

Know Why You Are Ordering

Before you pick a product or a colour, be clear about the purpose. Are these items for a one-off event, a new product launch, or ongoing staff and client gifts? The answer changes everything from the quantity to the quality level. A cheap pen for a trade show stand might be fine, but the same pen given to a long-term client sends the wrong message. Think about who will receive the item and what you want them to feel or do afterwards. If the aim is brand recall, the item needs to be useful enough that people keep it. If it is purely a giveaway, cost per unit matters more than durability. Write down the primary goal before you look at catalogues.

Pick an Item People Actually Want

The most effective custom promotional products are the ones people use regularly. Drinkware, tote bags, notebooks, and quality pens all fit that category because they solve a small everyday problem. Clothing works well too, but sizing adds complexity. Think about your audience: a tech conference crowd might appreciate a branded power bank, while a charity run crowd would prefer a reusable water bottle. Avoid novelty items that will be thrown away after a week. The goal is to keep your logo in circulation, not in a landfill. If you are unsure, ask a few colleagues or friends what they would actually use. Their answers will surprise you.

Check the Decoration Method

How your logo or text gets onto the product matters as much as the product itself. Screen printing works well for simple, bold designs on fabric and is cost-effective for larger quantities. Embroidery gives a premium feel on polo shirts and caps but struggles with fine detail. Pad printing is common on pens and drinkware but may not hold up to dishwasher cycles. For full-colour artwork, digital transfer or dye sublimation might be needed. Each method has a minimum quantity, a setup cost, and a limit on colours. Ask the supplier for a proof or a sample of the decoration on the actual material before you commit. A logo that looks sharp on screen can look muddy when printed on a dark surface.



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Set a Budget That Includes Everything

It is easy to focus on the unit price and forget the extras. Setup fees, artwork charges, shipping, and VAT can add 20-30 percent to the total. Some suppliers include these in the quoted price; others add them later. Ask for a full breakdown before you order. If the budget is tight, consider reducing the number of colours in your design or choosing a simpler product. A two-colour print on a good-quality mug often looks better than a four-colour print on a cheaper one. Also consider the packaging. If you are giving the items as gifts, individual boxes or bags add cost but improve the unboxing experience. For loose giveaways, a bulk pack is fine.

Order a Sample First

Never skip this step. A sample lets you see the actual product, feel the material, and check the print alignment. Colours on a monitor are never exactly the same as colours on fabric or plastic. Lighting in a warehouse is different from lighting in an office. Order a single sample of the exact product with your artwork on it. Most suppliers offer this for a small fee, often refunded if you place a full order. If the supplier does not offer samples, that is a red flag. A sample also helps you catch mistakes in the artwork file, such as missing bleeds, low resolution, or wrong font choices. It is much cheaper to fix a file than to reprint a thousand items.

Check Lead Times and Deadlines

Production and shipping take longer than most people expect. A typical order of custom promotional products can take two to four weeks from artwork approval to delivery. If the items are coming from overseas, add another week or two for customs and freight. Always ask for the latest possible date to approve the artwork and still hit your event date. Build in a buffer of at least a week for delays. If you are ordering for a specific date, tell the supplier upfront. They may be able to prioritise your order for a small fee. Avoid the temptation to request overnight delivery; rush charges are high and mistakes are more likely when the production team is under pressure.

Understand Minimum Order Quantities

Every decoration method has a minimum quantity, often driven by the setup cost. Screen printing might require 50 or 100 pieces per colour per side. Embroidery might have a minimum of 12 or 24 units. If you only need 20 items, look for products that can be decorated with a method that has a low minimum, such as digital transfer or laser engraving. Some suppliers offer a mixed-bag option where you can order a smaller quantity of several different items

within the same product family. Ask about this if you want variety without hitting high minimums. Another approach is to order a larger quantity of one item that everyone will like, rather than several small runs of different items.



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Review the Artwork Requirements

Suppliers need artwork in a specific format, usually vector files like AI, EPS, or PDF. Raster images like JPEG or PNG often cause problems because they lose detail when scaled. If you do not have a vector version of your logo, many suppliers can convert it for a fee, but it is better to have it ready. Make sure the file includes all fonts converted to outlines, and that the colours are defined as Pantone or CMYK values. A common mistake is to send a file with the logo too small, so it becomes illegible when printed. Follow the supplier's template for placement and size. If in doubt, ask for a digital proof before production begins.

Think About Sustainability

More recipients now consider the environmental impact of the items they receive. A plastic pen with a short lifespan feels different from a bamboo notebook or a recycled polyester bag. If sustainability matters to your brand, choose products made from recycled or renewable materials, and check that the decoration method does not create waste. Some suppliers, like Bulk Branded, offer a range of eco-friendly options that still look professional. You can also reduce waste by ordering exactly the quantity you need, rather than over-ordering and storing boxes of items nobody wants. If you are unsure about the environmental credentials of a product, ask the supplier for details on materials and production processes. A transparent answer is a good sign.

Plan for Distribution

Getting the products is only half the job. Think about how you will get them to the people who need them. For an event, you might need someone to unpack and display the items. For a mail-out, you will need packaging, address labels, and postage. Some suppliers offer a fulfilment service where they pack and ship individual orders directly to your recipients. This saves time and reduces the risk of damage during transit. If you are distributing the items yourself, make sure you have enough space to store them and a plan to hand them out. Items that sit in a cupboard for months are wasted money. A simple distribution plan turns a box of products into a marketing campaign.

Build a Relationship with a Supplier

Once you find a supplier who communicates clearly, delivers on time, and produces good quality work, stick with them. A long-term relationship means they will understand your preferences, your artwork files, and your deadlines. They can also suggest products and methods that suit your needs better than a generic catalogue. For your first order, choose a supplier who is willing to explain the process and answer questions. A good supplier does not rush you into a decision. They want the order to succeed because it leads to repeat business. Bulk Branded, for example, focuses on helping customers through the process and offers a wide range of categories from drinkware to clothing to bags. A supplier that takes the time to get it right is worth more than the cheapest quote.



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Final Checks Before You Hit Order

Before you confirm the order, run through this short list one more time. Is the product right for the audience and the purpose? Is the artwork file correct and in the right format? Have you seen a sample or a digital proof? Does the total cost match your budget including all extras? Is the delivery date realistic with a buffer for delays? If the answer to every question is yes, you are ready. If any answer is no, pause and resolve it. A few extra days of planning can save weeks of regret. Ordering custom promotional products for the first time is a learning process, but with a structured approach, the results can be exactly what you hoped for.

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