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The Procurement Leader's Guide to Sustainability in Custom Merchandise

Introduction

As you review another quarterly report, the familiar tension returns. Your institution, like roughly 85% of higher education organizations in the U.S., has made bold commitments to sustainability. The board's expectations are clear. Student demands are louder. And your procurement team? They're at the center of it all, managing millions in annual spend that could either help or hinder these goals.

You're not alone in this challenge. Across the higher education landscape, procurement leaders find themselves in an unprecedented position. While institutions trumpet their sustainability commitments, the reality of implementation often falls to procurement teams already stretched thin by limited bandwidth, competing priorities, and increasing stakeholder demands.

Reality Check on Sustainability

- Sustainability initiatives require cross-functional buy-in, yet stakeholder alignment remains one of procurement's top challenges.
- Technology adoption, crucial for tracking and reporting impact, often faces resistance or budget constraints.
- Supplier relationships need careful recalibration to align with new sustainability requirements.
- Limited staff and resources must somehow stretch to accommodate these new priorities.

The Growing Need for Purpose-Driven Procurement

As higher education procurement professionals seek new ways to impact environmental goals, custom-branded promotional items – traditionally a source of campus waste – offers a strategic opportunity to demonstrate your team's leadership.

Custom merchandise sits at an uncomfortable intersection – where institutional marketing meets environmental impact. The average college spends between $750,000 and $5 million annually on branded items, creating a sustainability challenge hidden in plain sight. Yet within this challenge lies an opportunity for procurement teams to demonstrate meaningful leadership to advance sustainability initiatives.

By rethinking promotional products through mindful supplier selection, material consideration, and purpose-driven distribution, procurement professionals can turn a problematic category into a showcase for institutional values. Adopting this transformative approach not only reduces environmental impact but also creates authentic engagement with students who are increasingly passionate about sustainability and eco-friendly choices.

The Unfortunate Truth

The unfortunate truth about campus promotional items is that most are designed for momentary impact rather than lasting value. The standard approach – ordering the most cost-effective items that meet basic brand requirements – creates a stream of products with limited utility and considerable environmental cost. Conventional wisdom says that students want free stuff, regardless of quality. Our more recent experience suggests otherwise. Today's students are increasingly conscientious consumers, judging institutions by their environmental commitments. When universities and schools make not-so-green decisions on promotional items, they're not just creating waste – they're contradicting the values they claim to uphold.

In recipient preference surveys, some organizations discover that their assumptions about promotional items (particularly "quantity over quality") are outdated. Students often express preference for fewer, higher-quality items that authentically reflect the sustainability values being promoted on campus. This alignment between institutional messaging and tangible giveaways creates more meaningful connections while reducing waste.

From Transactional to Transformational

The shift from transactional to transformational begins with a fundamental question: What if promotional merchandise served as a physical manifestation of institutional values rather than mere swag and giveaways?

Shift your perspective on promotional items from mere giveaways to physical embodiments of your institutional values. The key questions should evolve from simply "How much does this cost?" to the more meaningful "What does this product say about who we are as an organization?"

Consider reimagining your school's approach to orientation materials. Rather than distributing traditional welcome bags filled with numerous disposable items, adopt a more sustainable solution by providing one high-quality backpack (manufactured from recycled materials or designed by a women-owned business) containing only essential items like a reusable water bottle and a plant-based notebook. The savings from eliminating multiple low-cost items can offset most of the cost of these higher-quality alternatives while significantly reducing waste and better reflecting your institutional commitment to sustainability.

The Procurement Advantage

As a procurement leader, you have the perfect vantage point for advancing sustainability and other initiatives within your organization. You see spend across departments and recognize patterns invisible to others. While sustainability offices create ambitious goals, you can control the practical levers that turn those aspirations into reality.

The humble promotional product – so often overlooked in sustainability conversations – provides an easy, accessible starting point. By transforming how your institution approaches these items, you demonstrate that sustainability isn't merely about grand initiatives; it's about rethinking everyday decisions.

The swag unpacked for upcoming events on campus could tell a very different story – not just about your school, but about your values. The choice is yours to make, and the impact is greater than you might imagine.

Procurement's Sustainability Strategy

Lean on Your Supplier Partners

- Limit your supplier pool to vetted partners to ensure consistent sustainability standards and who prioritize sustainability and can provide detailed reporting on eco-friendly purchases.
- Source out manufacturers that hold legitimate third-party certifications across the full product lifecycle—materials, manufacturing, labor standards, and transportation.

Focus on Purpose over Volume

- Swap out less useful items in favor of more meaningful, quality products to reduce waste while increasing recipient satisfaction.
- Consider "takeaways" (items that recipients will actually keep and use) rather than disposable "giveaways."
- Challenge campus departments to justify promotional items based on genuine utility rather than traditions.

Consider Product Lifecycle

- Create a straightforward evaluation framework examining four key factors: manufacturing impact, expected usage duration, marketing value, and end-of-life options.
- Encourage for informed product decisions that include in sustainability and value rather than cost alone.

Next Steps to Advance Your Eco-Leadership

1. Define KPIs to benchmark progress, including data to measure and report on environmental impact reductions.
2. Educate stakeholders and teams on how sustainable product options can align budget efficiency with institutional values.
3. Develop sustainable procurement policies that can withstand leadership changes, including specifics on selection criteria.
4. Regularly review your organization's sustainability performance in custom merchandise on a quarterly or annual basis.
5. Join sustainability networks and professional organizations to stay current on trends and best practices.

Talk with Consolidus

If you'd like to learn even more about enhancing sustainable practices in your organization's custom merchandise procurement, Consolidus can help.

Consolidus is redefining the way leading universities, schools, non-profits and government offices purchase promotional products and custom-branded merchandise. If you can put a logo on it, they can help you get it on time, in bulk, and at a significant savings. From the basics like pens and tee shirts, to unique promo giveaways, gifts and gear, each customer is supported by a dedicated US-based account management team to help simplify the order process and efficiently manage high-volume demands.

For procurement and brand licensing professionals, Consolidus technology is an absolute game-changer. The integrated platform makes buying eco-friendly items simple and smart. For sustainability initiatives, those ordering can see which products are better for the planet, while procurement can track overall spend across initiatives.

Get in touch to learn more.

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