



# *Ink* The Deal

Sometimes a twist to the simplest products can complement the most unique and successful promotions. Here's how pens have helped power several signature campaigns.



*By Dave Vagnoni*

The former owner of a restaurant and a bookstore, Shannon McGaw only began selling promotional products last year. Yet, when a *Fortune* 500 oil and gas company needed help planning a diversity conference for leading managers, McGaw was ready with an idea in mind. “I liked the thought of a deluxe journal with a die-cut window with the word ‘diversity’ spelled out in different colors,” McGaw says. “Later, it hit me that I could add pens with assorted color tips and caps to really get across the diversity message.”

The journal, produced by Chameleon Like (*asi/44558*), includes an iridescent blue custom cover which opens to reveal a message about unified values and diverse talents. There’s also an elastic loop for the pens, supplied by Senator USA (*asi/86390*), which are imprinted with a multicolored company logo. “The client is thrilled,” says McGaw, a Texas-based account executive with Bluegrass Promotional Marketing (*asi/141964*). “The journal is going to be a desktop item and reinforce the message of diversity the company wants. I’m so excited about it.”

Equally excited about another ongoing promotion is Sue Grzybowski, a sales consultant with Halo/LeeWayne (*asi/356000*). Grzybowski has sold multiple orders of custom banner pens, manufactured by Market Street Press (*asi/68815*), to a Phoenix-based hospice client. On one side of the banner, there’s a list of illnesses

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**SHANNON MCGAW, BLUEGRASS PROMOTIONAL MARKETING (*asi/141964*)**

that would qualify someone for hospice care; the other side features medical codes for insurance. “The pens are given to doctors, case workers or anyone else who might decide if someone should receive hospice

care,” Grzybowski says. “It keeps the hospice on their minds. Doctors can keep a pen in their lab coat and the name of the hospice is right there.”

Finally, not to be forgotten is the straightforward, yet goofy pen promotion conceived by Jeff Brooke, owner of Proforma Business Builders (*asi/300094*). Looking to publicize its youth leagues, schedule of classes and Olympic-size swimming pool, the Palos Heights, IL, park district turned to Brooke for an out-of-the-box suggestion. “I had seen these neat bobblehead pens at an ASI show and got some samples,” Brooke says. “The district gave the custom pens out to department heads and at sign-ups. They went over incredibly well.” Produced by Points of Light (*asi/78825*), the pens have feather hair, funny faces and an uncommon appeal. “The district was astounded by the response from kids and adults,” Brooke says.

With a little thought, you'll be astounded, too, at the amount of selling opportunities you can create with pens. As you're about to read, from the hands of a fortunate attorney in Washington to a dog's collar in Chicago to legislators' desks in Colorado, pens have been authoring promotional success stories for decades. Here are five case studies of how clients have implemented pens into large-scale promotional programs – with much success.

### The \$43,000 Pen

Patrick Leahy knows the story sounds unbelievable. "It's really true," he promises.

A personal injury attorney from Tacoma, WA, Leahy first ordered pens from Dnette Colbo of Elliott Sales several years ago. Leahy gave the imprinted pens, which

*Evoigna (asi/155460) designed this wellness kit for a nationwide hospital network.*



## MARKET SPOTLIGHT

# Health Care: Prescription For Pen Sales

While it may seem that promotional pens are under attack in the health-care market, distributors should still focus on this industry when looking to sell writing instruments. Yes, the Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers Association (PhRMA) released new marketing guidelines that restrict pharmaceutical and medical device companies from giving logoed products to doctors. And the hotly-contested Physician Payments Sunshine Act, the pending legislation that if passed would limit the amount of gifts to doctors, could put another crimp in distributors' arsenals.

But, pens and other promotional products can still be sold to this market. The key is education. The items that pharmaceutical companies give to doctors and hospitals must now have education components.

So industry distributors need to come up with alternate strategies for selling pens to the pharmaceutical market. "The days of handing out various products to offset the cost of physician's office supplies have left us, and as a result, it's required that promotional product distributors and their suppliers are creative and can design, pitch, sell and manufacture an original concept that's beneficial to both the physician and the patient," says Jason Emery, vice president of sales for Logomark (asi/67866).

Since filling a new prescription typically requires a piece of paper,

a signature and a trip to the pharmacy, Emery says this provides distributors with the opening they need. "Providing a detailed piece of literature to send home with the patient has always proven to be helpful for those who are prescribed medications," he says. "The writing instrument is now inserted into a custom folio made exclusively for the drug being prescribed."

As long as a pen is part of any kind of education kit or educational material, it doesn't fall under the marketing gift guidelines laid down by PhRMA. Emery recommends a metal pen, rather than a plastic one, to ensure that patients will keep and use it. "In these cases, the folio will be die cut to suit an anatomical model or chart," he says. "One should include a writing instrument as well as an informative CD or flash drive describing the reasons as to why the drug was recommended, a detailed explanation of the symptoms incurred and possible side effects involved."

A branded notepad or stationery that allows the patient to take notes during the physician's explanation of the medication is another great addition to the folio. "A well-thought-out and exclusive package will ensure the commitment of a pharmaceutical company to the recipient, as well as provide confidence to the doctor when discussing the medication with their patient," Emery says.

## A \$43,000 return on investment and a wedding invitation? Yeah, the promotional pen order was definitely worth it.

included his specialty practice's contact information, to current and prospective clients. Somehow, one of those chrome-tipped royal blue pens ended up on the counter of a local bank branch. "A woman who had recently been in an accident saw the pen," Leahy remembers. "She was a religious woman and she felt the pen was a sign that she should call me."

Leahy took the case, which eventually was brought to court. The verdict was favorable, yielding \$27,500, a third of which went to Leahy. But there's more to the story. "A little bit after that, the same woman's cousin was in an accident, too," Leahy says. "She referred him to me. We had to sue, but we got the maximum policy limit from the insurance company. The settlement was \$25,000."

In just two cases, one pen brought Leahy \$17,000 worth of business. But there's more. "Turns out that same guy moved to Yakima and was in another accident," Leahy recalls. "We got an \$80,000 settlement out of that one. So the one pen brought in about \$43,000 in fees."

Needless to say, Leahy has continued to order pens from Colbo, whose company is now a division of Geiger (*asi/202900*). "I don't do any other advertising," says Leahy, who doesn't even maintain a Web site. "I've also ordered stress balls from Denette that I give out. They're bright yellow with a big smiley face."

Of course, Colbo has good reason to smile, too. "It just shows you the value of a promotional product," says the 11-year industry veteran, about how her pens have reaped huge benefits for one of her clients. "This kind of thing is exactly what you want to stimulate business. It creates loyalty with customers."



*For over 20 years, Shumsky Enterprises (*asi/326300*) has distributed these patented therapeutic pillows to medical centers.*

Leahy certainly has a loyal partner in Colbo, and he has loyal clients, too. The woman who first saw Leahy's branded pen in a bank remains grateful to this day. "She even invited me to her wedding," Leahy says.

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### Journey To Wellness

Thirteen months ago, Evigna (*asi/155460*) posed a challenging question to a top faith-based medical client. "We asked them how they differentiated themselves from other hospital networks," remembers Marc Belanski, Evigna's CEO. "It gave us an opportunity to come back and offer a thought about wellness and how that's really a journey."

Born from forthright conversations, 15 members of Evigna's staff have developed a multiple-piece wellness kit that includes a custom journal, ballpoint pen and a journey stone. "The kit is designed for admitted hospital patients," says Belanski. "It's meant for patients to track their milestones to recovery and take an active role in the process."

On one side of the dark brown journey stone is a Native American symbol for well-being, while the other side is marked by a symbol that's representative of the hospital network's faith. The journal contains several customized pages, allowing patients to fill in specific information about their visit and recovery program.

"It's a roadmap," Belanski says. "When patients are admitted, they're given the kits and made aware that it's their record



*A top iPROMOTEu (asi/232119) salesdog, Marley has a pen attached to his collar.*

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DAVID HENRY, SHUMSKY ENTERPRISES (asi/326300)

to keep. It can be a record about RNs, attending physicians, orderlies, physical therapists, exercise routines or anything else.”

Clearly energized by the promotion, the hospital network purchased 25,000 kits in its first order. “Besides the wellness benefit, it’s also given as a gesture of appreciation from the hospital,” Belanski says. “People do have decisions to make and they could go somewhere else. These kits are a ‘thank you’ as well.”

The entire process, from discussion to delivery, has been a bit of a journey of sorts for Michigan-based Evigna, too. After years spent concentrating on the automotive industry, the distributor is continuing to broaden its outreach. “We’ve gotten more deeply engaged in understanding the transformations going on within health-care organizations,” Belanski says. “It’s been great for us.”

### Autographed Pillows

Selling to nearly 1,000 hospitals around the country, Shumsky Enterprises (asi/326300) has distributed its patented line of therapeutic pillows for two decades. “The pillows are firm enough for support, but soft enough for comfort,” says David Henry, director of sales for the pillow line. “It’s a nice mix.”

Manufactured by a partner company in Indiana, the pillows are marketed as both a recovery and an educational tool. “On one side of every pillow there’s an anatomical

diagram,” Henry says. “A physician or nurse can explain a surgery, post- or pre-op, with the help of the diagram. Patients can later use the pillows for exercise, as well.”

The pillows, which can be customized with hospital logos, come in a variety of sizes, shaped to match a procedure. For example, there are heart, liver, kidney and lung pillows. Shumsky also sells specific pillows for children, mothers and those stricken with breast cancer.

The key, though, with these pillows is that a pen can be attached to each one to make the personalization that much more concrete. Sewn into the fabric of each pillow is a loop zone, allowing a marker pen to be attached by the hook on its cap.

“Doctors write on the pillows with the pens,” Henry says. “Plus, lots of times patients see the pillows as mementos, so they’ll ask their doctor or nurses to autograph it.”

Henry says the pillows, which are washable, shrink-resistant and packaged in poly bags, help connect patients to the treatment staff. “Nurses love giving the pillows to patients, especially on that first visit to a room after a surgery,” Henry says. “They get great reactions.”

Developed with the help of a prominent surgeon, the pillows are mostly targeted for sales to hospitals and surgery centers. Still, because the pillows are unique, Ohio-based Shumsky often receives individual requests. “People will go on our Web site, call us and want to order them,” Henry

says. “They’re a comfort and they’re highly professional, too.”

### A Ray Of Sunshine

Chris Morrissey is squarely in the middle of a political fight. As legislative chair for the Rocky Mountain Region Promotional Products Association (RMRPPA), Morrissey is leading a charge against The Physician Payments Sunshine Act. “I really feel like we need to use the same products we sell to send a message,” Morrissey says.

The hotly-debated pending legislation, aimed at preventing extravagant gift-giving, would require drug companies to record the value of all products given to doctors. There is no blanket exemption for promotional products, meaning most items, even those of modest value, would have to be recorded. If the legislation passes, pharmaceutical companies might avoid buying promotional products altogether, rather than devoting time and

### LEARN IT LIVE!

Want more case studies of promotional success? Head to The ASI Show Orlando, January 3-5, where a full slate of education sessions is sure to provide a roadmap for 2010 distributor success. Plus, General Colin Powell will be delivering a highly motivational and inspirational keynote speech during the show on Tuesday, January 5, from 8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.

## “I’ve used those pens for years at trade shows. They’re like stress relievers!”

LEE ANN PETER, FiF MARKETING

energy into recording countless items.

“What they’re really saying through this legislation is that a 40-cent pen has the same value as some lavish vacation,” says Morrissey, owner of Proforma Big Dog Branding (*asi/300094*).

To rally support against the bill, RMRPPA has kicked off a promotional campaign that includes signed banners, detailed letters and gift baskets filled with branded items like hats, squeeze toys and pizza cutters. Representatives from RMRPPA, which boasts 600 members, have hand-delivered the items to both of Colorado’s U.S. senators and to several area congressmen.

While banners and toys are clever additions, it’s the 1,500 imprinted pens, donated by BIC Graphic USA (*asi/40480*), that are the heart of the association’s grassroots effort. They read: “This pen has the same persuasive value as an all-expenses-paid vacation.”

According to Morrissey, the reaction from legislative staffers has been very positive. “They tell us to keep doing what we’re doing,” Morrissey says. “A politician’s office can get thousands of e-mails, faxes and letters. They tell us that we’re doing something different.”

Morrissey hopes other associations voice their displeasure about The Physician Payments Sunshine Act, as well. To encourage action, he’s created a blog, linked to the RMRPPA Web site, with step-by-step instructions on starting up a campaign. “It’s important we get the message out there,” Morrissey says.

And to spread his message, a pen is at the forefront.

### Go Fetch

With the right attitude and approach, in-person cold-calling can be a highly effective selling strategy. Going door-to-door, Lee Ann Peter, president of iPROMOTEu (*asi/232119*) affiliate FiF Marketing, has put a fresh spin on the time-tested technique. “It helps to have a friendly face,” Peter admits.

Looking to grow her business, Peter recently started making unexpected visits to Chicago-area businesses, typically those with offices in industrial parks. Her goal is to introduce herself, pass along a business card, a product catalog and an imprinted promotional springy pen manufactured by Sweda (*asi/90305*). “I’ve used those pens for years at trade shows,” Peter says. “They’re like stress relievers.”

Showing up at companies unannounced, you might think Peter would occasionally be politely or even impolitely turned away. Yet, Peter always seems to get past the gatekeeper and gain an audience with whoever’s in charge of a company’s marketing budget. What’s her secret? “I take along Mr. Marley,” Peter says.

Marley, a muscular, 70-pound Weimaraner, is a rescue dog that Peter and her husband have owned for about 15 months. Likely abused by a prior owner when he was younger, Marley suffers from separation anxiety and follows Peter just about everywhere she goes.

“He even comes with me to the Xerox machine,” Peter says, laughing. Instead of leaving Marley in his cage at home all day, Peter decided a while ago that she’d take him to work. “At the office, he has his little bed,” she says.

When she makes a cold call, Peter takes full advantage of Marley’s pleasant demeanor, attaching a business card and a springy pen to his collar. “It’s a great ice-breaker,” Peter says. “He’s such a big dog, but nobody is ever afraid of him. His face is so gentle and his tail is always wagging when we go into an office. Everyone wants to pet him.”

Marley, named after the popular reggae singer, may soon be appearing on Peter’s blog. “We’re thinking about using him for marketing,” Peter says. “People are really starting to get to know him around here.” Clearly, Marley wouldn’t mind. “He definitely knows how to draw a crowd,” Peter says. ○

*Dave Vagnoni is a staff writer for Counselor.*

## Pens Aplenty

Writing instruments are the second-most-popular product category in the ad specialty industry, behind only apparel. In 2008, writing instruments alone accounted for

**5.3%**

of industry revenues – a total of

**\$1.05 billion**

worth of imprinted pens.