



# Sustainable Swag and Branded Merchandise

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How to Choose Eco-Friendly Products for Your Brand



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## Introduction

Eco-friendly practices are essential to brand reputation, with customers and employees drawn to businesses that prioritize sustainability. This commitment goes beyond core products and services to include promotional items like reusable water bottles and custom hoodies, each reflecting your brand's values and environmental impact.

But aligning branded merchandise with sustainability goals goes deeper than picking products labeled as “green” or “eco-friendly.” True sustainability requires thoughtful planning – considering everything from material sourcing to end-of-life disposal.

A proactive approach helps ensure that your promotional items reinforce your brand and contribute meaningfully to your company's sustainability efforts.





# Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

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## Skipping Material Sustainability Checks

The materials used in a product play a big role in its sustainability. Labels like “eco-friendly” can be appealing, but it’s essential to verify what they truly mean. A product labeled as sustainable may still fall short if its materials aren’t responsibly sourced or renewable.

### Solution:

### Choosing the Right Material Type and Source

Choosing materials with verified sustainability credentials – such as FSC for responsibly sourced wood or Fairtrade Certified clothing and textiles – ensures your merchandise aligns with your brand’s goals. By prioritizing materials with trusted certifications, you can confidently select products that reinforce your sustainability commitment.





## Prioritizing Cost Over Quality

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Choosing low-cost branded merchandise can seem like a smart budget decision, but it often leads to products that are less durable and more likely to end up as waste. While cheaper items may save money upfront, they can undermine sustainability goals by creating disposable products that don't last and aren't recyclable.



### **Solution:** **Balancing Cost and Value**

Higher-quality, sustainably made items may have a higher initial cost, but they're likely to be used longer, reducing waste and enhancing your brand's reputation for quality. Balancing cost with value ensures your choices support both your budget and sustainability efforts.

## Overlooking Vendor Sustainability Practices

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Overlooking vendor sustainability practices can lead to unintended environmental impacts, even if the materials themselves are eco-friendly. Before committing to a supplier, it's important to understand how their production processes, sourcing standards, and waste reduction efforts align with your goals.



### **Solution: Vetting Vendors for Sustainability**

Look for vendors who are transparent about their sustainability commitments and practices. Holding recognized certifications, such as ISO 14001 (environmental management), Fairtrade, or B Corp, can give you confidence that the products you choose reflect your brand values and also responsible, ethical production.

## Neglecting Packaging

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Even when the product itself is sustainable, excessive or non-recyclable packaging can undermine your efforts. Packaging materials often add unnecessary waste, increasing your environmental footprint.

### **Solution: Opting for Minimal, Recyclable Packaging**

Choose packaging designed with sustainability in mind. Opt for minimal, recyclable, or compostable materials that reduce waste and lower costs. Thoughtful packaging choices can reinforce your brand's commitment to sustainability while minimizing environmental impact.





# Ignoring End-of-Life Options

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A product's sustainability is more than how it's made. It also depends on what happens when it's no longer useful. Neglecting to plan for end-of-life options can lead to items ending up in landfills, even if they were made from sustainable materials.

## Solution: Planning for End-of-Life

Consider how your merchandise can be recycled, composted, or repurposed once it's no longer needed. Understanding what recycling facilities are available in your region is key, as certain types of plastics, compostable materials, or other products might be processed locally in one area but not in another. Transporting items long distances could even cancel out the environmental benefit.

By carefully considering these factors, you'll ensure that your branded merchandise meets your sustainability goals while also enhancing your brand's reputation for responsible practices.



# Recycling Symbols and What They Mean

## Overview of Common Recycling Symbols

Recycling symbols can be confusing, but understanding them is key to making informed, sustainable choices. These symbols show how a product can be processed at the end of its life, whether it's recyclable, compostable, or requires special handling.

One of the most common symbols is the Mobius loop (three chasing arrows). It signifies that a product is recyclable. When the symbol includes a number inside, it identifies different types of plastics and levels of recyclability, known as resin identification codes (1-7):



**PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate):** Commonly used for water bottles, custom drinkware, and some food containers. PET is widely recyclable through curbside programs.



**HDPE (High-Density Polyethylene):** Used in items like reusable water bottles and some promotional containers, it is typically accepted in curbside recycling and can be reused to make new products.



**PVC (Polyvinyl Chloride):** Commonly used in flexible promotional items like lanyards, badges, stickers, and inflatables, PVC is rarely recyclable and has additives that pose environmental risks. Consider opting for items made from recycled PET or other recyclable materials.



**LDPE (Low-Density Polyethylene):** Used in items like clear polybags and flexible packaging, it's not typically accepted in curbside recycling. Consider alternatives like compostable bags, or reusable packaging.



# Recycling Symbols and What They Mean



**PP (Polypropylene):** Used in branded food containers, reusable coffee cups, and cosmetic containers like lip balms. Its recyclability varies, so it's best to verify with your local recycling program.



**PS (Polystyrene):** Found in items like disposable cutlery, foam packaging, and some promotional cups. It's rarely accepted curbside and is often non-recyclable due to potential toxins, so it's best to avoid it for branded merchandise.



**Other (Miscellaneous Plastics):** This category includes mixed plastics and polycarbonate, often found in items like sunglasses, frisbees, or phone cases. Not widely recyclable, products with this code typically require specialized facilities.

Understanding these codes and knowing what your local facilities can handle helps you choose materials that are recyclable in your area.





# Biodegradable vs. Compostable: Why the Difference Matters

The terms “biodegradable” and “compostable” are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings that are important to understand. Biodegradable means that a product can break down naturally over time with the help of microorganisms, though this process can take years, and there’s no guarantee it will happen without leaving behind harmful residues.

Compostable products, on the other hand, are designed to break down more quickly under specific conditions, leaving no toxic residue. To be labeled as compostable, products must meet strict standards, such as those set by the Biodegradable Products Institute (BPI).

Understanding the difference helps ensure you’re choosing materials that will decompose in a way that aligns with your sustainability goals. For example, if your goal is organic composting, choose certified compostable utensils, plates, and other tableware that will break down alongside organic waste in a commercial composting facility – and confirm the availability of local facilities process them.





# Getting Employee Buy-In and Engagement

Implementing sustainable practices, including choosing eco-friendly branded merchandise, takes more than good intentions – you need team support. When employees can see the full sustainability picture and feel empowered to contribute, they're more likely to embrace your initiatives and drive them forward.

Try these tips to turn sustainability into a team effort:

## Educate and Inspire:

Share how sustainability initiatives align with broader company goals. Regular updates, workshops, and training sessions help everyone see their impact.

## Lead the Way:

Encourage leaders to actively participate, from using eco-friendly products to making conscious choices in daily operations. When employees see leadership's commitment, they're more likely to get involved.



## Encourage Participation and Feedback:

Create ways for employees to share sustainability ideas and recognize their contributions, whether through a suggestion box, team meetings, or green teams.

## Make Sustainability Part of the Culture

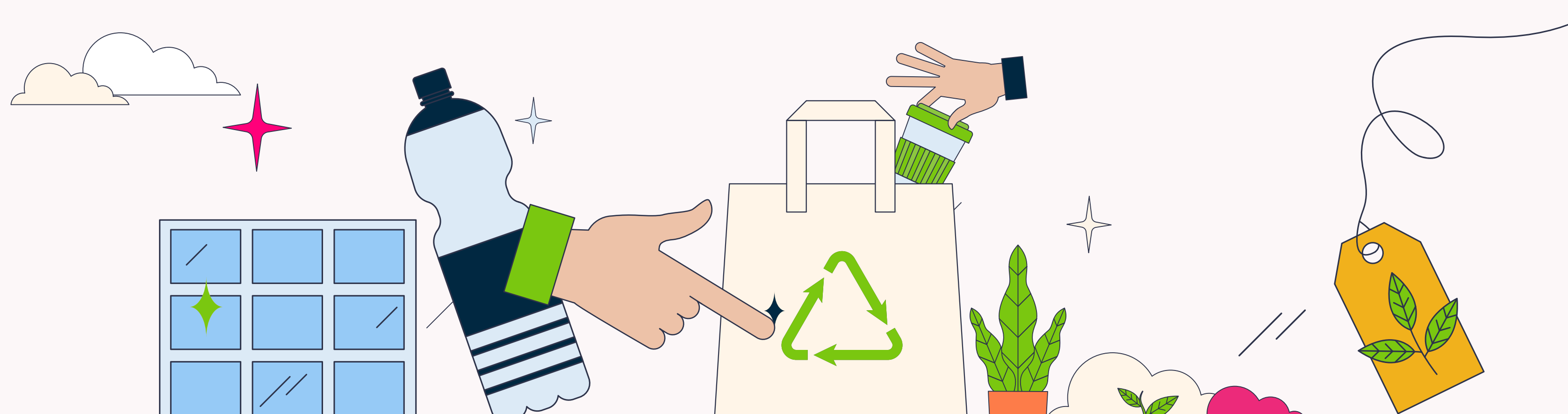
Weave sustainability into your core values and everyday practices, like using reusable items in break rooms or setting company-wide waste reduction goals. Visible, ongoing actions foster a culture of support.



## Practical Steps Toward a Greener Brand

Building a sustainable approach to branded merchandise requires thoughtful choices, from selecting eco-friendly materials to ensuring responsible end-of-life options. By avoiding the common pitfalls, you can make smarter decisions that align your promotional items with your sustainability goals.

Whether it's branded apparel, a reusable tote, a recycled notebook, or compostable utensils, each piece of branded merchandise is an opportunity to show your company's commitment to sustainability.







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