

McGill Sustainable Events Certification Program

Promotional Items and Material Waste

Why?

From branded bottles to glossy brochures, the education sector is a prominent offender in the promotional item industry [Source]. When thinking about what “swag” you want to distribute to your guests, it’s critical to first reflect on how to reduce the quantity of items produced and what alternatives may suit your event.

How?

Instead of offering material items, consider offering experiences to your guests. Alternatively, you may consider having an option to “opt out of swag, opt into [example] donation” for a vetted **offset project** or your chosen charitable cause. Not only is it more sustainable to offer donation certificates, public transportation passes, or tickets to shows, museums, or other local venues, but it may also be more meaningful than a pen, pin, or bag.

If you are committed to ordering material items, some guiding points to consider are:

1. Order thoughtfully

- Partner with local suppliers. See the Quick Guide to Locally Based Suppliers and Services.
- Partner with social economy initiatives. See the Quick Guide to Social Economy Initiatives.
- Search for **Fairtrade, FSC, B Corp, Ecocert, GOTS, 1% For The Planet**, and other third-party certifications that ensure ethical, sustainable, quality, and durable materials and practices are present.

2. Order less: Not every guest will want leave with a promotional item. There is therefore no need to order one item per person attending your event. This will help keep extra padding in your budget.

3. Order smaller items: Smaller items are typically lighter, use fewer materials, and create less waste.

4. Offer a small variety of items: Offering a small variety of items allows people to choose something most useful to them.

5. Have a flexible budget

- Low price points come with hidden costs, so be wary of choosing the cheapest option for your promotional items. A “sustainable” item (i.e., a reusable drink bottle) made of poor-quality materials or made in poor working conditions is a form of greenwashing.
- Tip: Choose materials like stainless steel, glass, or bamboo over plastic, and opt for certified organic cotton over polyester.

Other ideas may include:

- STM passes or 1-month BIXI subscriptions
- Small house/office plants or seed cards
- Discount vouchers for local cafés
- Fairtrade or Rainforest Alliance-certified coffee, tea, chocolate