

# Following Trends Online

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The promotional merchandising market is largely driven by the consumer retail space. Monitoring and tracking trends in the consumer world help us better predict what our customers will ask for in the near future. In addition, a better understanding of these trends lets us better market to our customers based on a generalized marketplace need. But how do we do this?

Trends are typically driven from the designer and high-end retail spaces, and then they find their way down to the general consumer market and even to us in promotional merchandising. The ability to monitor these trends and better predict what is headed our way makes us more effective in our approach to customers. The connection between markets makes the online space the best place to follow and predict trends. But, doing so can become confusing and often very convoluted.

#### Tracking Trends

I have always been an advocate for using social media in our industry due to its connectivity, marketing potential, and customer interfacing opportunities. This is no different when following trends. Social media is a free-thinking platform. Although retail

markets and even developers try to force the market, they are increasingly unable to do this through social media because social media is maintained as a forum for real conversations and opinions. Trends in all markets are driven by these opinions. The best part about social media is that you can better understand the trends in each unique market with certain compartmentalization. So, I always encourage those in our industry to follow the supply chain on social media—this is your vendors, your competitors, your customers, and even your prospects. The first step in knowing what someone wants is to see them for who they really are.



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This is increasingly difficult to do physically but easy and cost-effective to do digitally.

It is also important to track trends based on your existing customer appeal. This means you need to take an interest in your customers' interests. Depending on the size of your customer base, this may be difficult to achieve but start with your top 10 percent. Look through past orders and understand who they are purchasing for. Do larger purchases contain more expensive apparel items, or are purchases cost effective, showing customers are mindful of the spend? What does this tell you to look for? Our customers create indications for us. As an industry, we typically react to trends in retail products. It is up to you individually to be proactive in following trends and acting accordingly. What other indicators can you find throughout your customers' purchase histories? As you do this activity, you will naturally become more aware of the trends you are tracking. Then, if you follow trends through social media or online retail trade outlets, you can begin connecting purchase histories to potential client desires. After that, it is up to you to connect the trend to the customer or prospect.

#### Discussing Trends

Picking out trends online and creating relations to your customers' activities is the difficult part. The next step is communicating what you find. During this communication, don't forget the digital connectivity that led you to understand that a particular customer may want a particular product. Telling customers that a certain item is or may start trending based on your understanding of the subject is one thing; actually showing them the connection you made creates interest and ultimately leads to the sale. You are the expert in your industry. Deliver customers the same value in your connections to trends. If your customers see you as an expert in your field, they will not question the relevance you are demonstrating in your delivery of trend suggestions. In addition, knowing you can digitally connect their buying habits to marketplace trends gives you the tools necessary to further demonstrate your claim. As you build out your online trend following, you will begin seeing where you can find the most valuable information. After that, you will become better equipped to be seen as an expert in connecting these trends to an industry need. There are many examples of suppliers and distributors who think they have the tools

necessary to connect your customers with trending products. The reality is that you are the only one who knows your customers. You can only take advice from others for so long until you need to develop yourself as the expert for your customers and prospects.

#### What It All Means

Trends drive buying habits and buying habits drive our industry. The better understanding you have of where the line between retail consumption and customer demand is, the more ability you will have to connect with and be successful in this market. The digital world is filled with advice and trend theories. The access is there. The challenge is in finding a way to make all the information make sense. Don't overwhelm yourself with research. Instead, train yourself to create natural connections between the things you see trending and your customers' histories. Only then can you respond proactively while the remainder of the industry only reacts, often too late. Trends move quickly. Your ability to stay up-to-date on a wide variety of trends will help set you apart. You know the industry. Now find ways to connect what you know to the trends moving around us.

