

The Science of Effective Recognition



I.

Our Challenge

Within the supplier/distributor/end-user dynamic, there are conditions and circumstances that frequently inhibit the creation of effective recognition. We'll address what defines "effective recognition" later, but we must first examine and acknowledge the human conditions that affect the downstream sales channel before we even begin any selling proposition.

Here are some hard truths about how awards programs are implemented, managed and sourced:

1. In all but very rare cases, **the buyers of recognition awards are acting as de facto volunteers** for the task. In fact, the term volunteer is inaccurate. They've been "voluntold." Since very few organizations are staffed with a job-specific person or team, recognition programs are appointed to someone under the auspices of "additional duties and responsibilities as assigned."

As a result, managing a recognition program is oftentimes a secondary role for the tasked individual. It's an inconvenience and perhaps even a burden—not exactly a top-of-list responsibility. This nuance is further reinforced by the hand-me-down nature of the assignment in the first place.

The fact is, if recognition isn't initiated and advocated by a high-level champion as a vital mission within an organization, then it

will be relegated to customary purchase decisions that are driven by basic human conditions *and* prevailing industry resources. In other words, cheap & easy.

2. Given these circumstances, awards program voluntolds will likely follow one of three decision paths, none of which favor a creative outcome:

a. Procrastinate until the “Oh shit!” moment.

An 11th hour approach narrows the possibilities to blank goods that are in stock and awaiting “your logo here.”

b. Seek out solutions on the web.

In an open search environment, Google (or any other engine) will give you the most popular (or paid for) results. These are invariably the same commoditized blank goods that are in stock and awaiting “your logo here.”

c. Default to doing what they’ve always done as a fallback.

Because past purchase decisions were likely dictated by one or both of the conditions above, those same shortcomings are destined to be repeated.

This hike along the path of least resistance yields a chicken/egg dynamic: The available products are a result of the prevailing demand, which is fed by what products are offered. This is why the ubiquitous “globs of glass” awaiting a logo imprint are so abundant.

To curtail this vicious cycle, the possibilities within the hearts and minds of the buyers must be activated. Their eyes need to be pried open to a whole world they never knew existed.

3. Recognition is not approached in most cases as a **practice conducted by subject matter experts**. Even though nearly 95% of all organizations with 100 or more employees have recognition programs in place, there is no recognition “industry” that functions as a known resource. By default, it is commonly relegated to the much broader world of promotional products. A vast majority of these salespeople operate in a highly transactional, “get the order” environment. Most promotional products they sell—which comprise 95%+ of their book of business—are stock blank goods awaiting a logo imprint. Because this is what and how they are most accustomed to selling, this is how they position awards as well.
4. In a majority of cases, buyers aren’t thinking of a promotional products distributor as the solution provider for the awards category. To be blunt, they think of a promotional products distributor as *The Hat Guy* or *The Mug Lady* or *The T-Shirt*
5. *Dude*. These labels are frequently applied to distributors on the basis of the first thing they ever bought from them. Proper recognition is not something that can be thrown into the “We do that too!” narrative as part of a general sales presentation.

6. On the supplier side, the award marketplace is jammed with Big Box sources with many overlapping—if not identical—offerings. In fact, many products are obtained from the same offshore factories. This highly commoditized environment places

The resulting mission for us is to break through these barriers, with great care taken to steer clear of the message that they are presently “doing it wrong.” That’s not a takeaway that resonates well with anyone. We are trying to drive to the “why.”

II.

“Effective Recognition” Defined

There are lots of awards out there, and most will get the most basic part of the job done: Provide something to be presented. Nearly anything can accomplish that. But the value of an award—its overall *effectiveness*—is characterized by 10 traits, which can be posed as goals for the buyer to contemplate. Think of these as essential vitamins and minerals for a healthy and long-lasting recognition impact:

1. It depicts exclusivity

Your Idea Here, not Your Logo Here. An award should only be deployed when an exceptional performance is at hand. The award benchmarks should only honor the elite, and the presented award should reflect that distinction. Off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all solutions fall short of being impactful. Serving critical core business objectives and performing at a high level is

not an **“Everybody’s a Winner!”** participation award proposition. Save that for the kid’s soccer team.

2. It is timely

The time to recognize someone is as immediately following the performance or behavior being honored as possible. This is when the impact on continued performance is greatest.

Conversely, taking too much time disconnects the recipient and serves as a possible impediment to future performance.

Timeliness is a component of thoughtfulness—think about the impact of a belated birthday gift.

3. It is accurate

The award must be the correct item, with the correct recipient name, sent to the right destination. Sounds pretty straightforward, but the data associated with awards programs can be daunting. An organization with an effective recognition culture will be accountable to the details. They will take the time to recognize Jeff not Jeffrey, or Jim not James—it demonstrates a personal connection to the recipient.

4. It conveys meaning

An award that properly connects its meaning transmits clear, uniform, and well-communicated performance criteria. The answer to the question “What was done to earn that?” needs to be implicit. This is not necessarily a literal part of the award, but

rather a part of the narrative that comes with it. The award in some way symbolizes that narrative.

5. It becomes an incentive

Recognition done right will induce non-qualifiers to perform to the recipients' level of success. In high school, it's called peer pressure. In business, it's shifting the bell curve of performance, which is an important aspect of recognition ROI. This is initiated from the start of the program and communicated throughout the "marketing" phase until the end of the qualifying period. In this regard, a proper recognition program is a campaign, not just a carrot.

6. It requires expertise

As a metaphor, let's say you want to build a custom home. You come to the table with your own vision (style, materials) and criteria (space, budget, time)—and those elements are essential. But the actual building of a home is not, for most people, a DIY project. It's advisable to enlist experts such as architects and contractors—unless you happen to possess those skills yourself.

Building a custom award is no different. Sure, there are pre-fab solutions—they're cheap & easy. But be prepared to sacrifice much of what you dreamed about in the first place. A partnered expert can translate the cocktail napkin doodle to an executable award that checks all the boxes.

7. It possesses an aesthetic quality

Be realistic about how another stock award or glob of glass is going to live its post-presentation life. Is it destined to be immediately stashed or trashed?

Instead of speculating on an award's long-term fate, make the effort to create a visually interesting showpiece. Something that will endure long after the rubber chicken banquet is over. If the award isn't shown off, any inherent message it may have conveyed is lost. The objective is to create an award that perpetually lets recipients brag without having to say a word.

8. It symbolizes who you and your recipients are

Recognition awards should clearly incorporate your brand and culture, as well as portray the specific performance or behavioral traits that are being recognized. It should convey the distinguishing features of the presenting organization—what sets them apart from their competition.

9. It gives personally because it is taken personally

The message to the recipient is on-point, reflective, and addressed to the individual. Recognition is a form of gift-giving, which should be conducted with thoughtfulness and care. Recipients who perceive little care was taken to properly recognize their efforts may be less likely to continue to put forth the effort—"If they don't care why should I?"

10. It delivers value on different levels

An award should project an *intrinsic* quality of materials and craftsmanship. The “feel” and the “fit & finish” should appeal to objective senses.

But it should also bear an *extrinsic* significance—an emotional and perceived value beyond the material “stuff.” This is the intangible and subjective yard stick that can only be deployed if the recipient audience is properly appraised from the start.

III.

The First Date

To this point, the aim has been to assume the role of subject-matter experts, and to get the buyer to reflect on the current state of their awards programs. The checklist that follows can function as talking points with buyers to promote this dialog. This is a crib sheet for the first date with the client. It breaks the ice and places the discussion on a professional and expert level and helps determine if there is a match of what they need and what you have to offer.

Ask the client if...

- 1. Recognition projects are treated as programs or campaigns, with communication prior to and throughout the qualifying period.**

Measure how important recognition is within the current culture.

- 2. Potential recipients are excited in advance about the “reward” they can earn.**

Gauge the fresh/stale status of current programs.

- 3. Recipients are impacted at the “moment of recognition” when presented an award.**

Gain insight into how awards are presented.

4. Recipients are proud to “live with” and publicly display their awards.

Determine how far recognition messages are carried throughout the organization.

5. Other people are impressed with and influenced by award recipients.

Assess if the wider population is engaged in how they are potentially recognized.

6. Peers aspire to achieve to the level of award winners.

Evaluate if current programs are moving the needle.

7. The awards are perceived as thoughtful gifts.

Size up the authenticity of the program.

8. Recipients view their awards as commensurate with the effort they’ve put forth.

Uncover inequities that undermine recognition programs.

9. Awards speak to the brand, culture, values and purpose of the presenting party.

Consider the strength and accuracy of the messages being transmitted.

10. Awards clearly communicate and foster behaviors that represent key performance indicators.

Make sure programs are inducing favorable results.

11. Award buyers are proud of what they have selected to present to winners, and they can position themselves as creative thinkers and heroes within their organization.

Weigh the effect on the people involved with giving awards.

IV.

The Second Date and Beyond

With a successful first date, the focus can now turn to establishing what we hope will be a long-term relationship. Doing so requires a deeper familiarity with the client's particular circumstances and challenges.

There are award-specific questions that we can ask that identify and cultivate the ingredients that can be used to create a custom solution. Most buyers have never heard these questions before, so this assessment will be viewed as a crucial step in the ongoing process of self-identifying as a subject-matter expert.

1. What is the name of your "honor club"? (President's Circle, Founder's Award, etc.)

Give the project a name and identify it by that name from the beginning.

2. What objectives does your recognition program serve within your organization?

Identify what's important within your business.

3. What behaviors and accomplishments is your recognition program directed to support?

Discover how recipients are contributing on a daily basis.

4. How are you measuring these achievements?

Determine if there is a process, and what accountability is involved.

5. What are the demographics of the recipients?

Get a feel for the type of people involved so you can focus solutions on what would appeal to them.

6. Are the awards presented in person at a single site/outing/event, or will they be presented individually in the field?

Understand the degree of visibility and begin to identify the shipment logistics.

7. Is there a theme related to the honor club? Are there logos/graphics specific to this theme?

A theme is an important design element.

8. Can you describe where/how the typical recipient works?

Provides insight into the lives and livelihoods of the recipients. Also helps determine the right kind of product given the physical display space they might have available.

9. What kinds of things have you done in the past to recognize your achievers?

Zero us in to condition the response to the level of your experience.

10. What worked/didn't work with past solutions?

Uncover pain points and opportunities for improvement.

11. How would you describe your company's culture?

Aim the solutions at your unique qualities and market differentiators.

12. What are your company's primary mission statements/core value statements?

Demonstrate that your objectives are the priority.

13. What is the history of your company?

Product and design cues might be taken from your timeline. We want to know about your business and how it has evolved and adapted over time.

14. What do you hope to accomplish personally/professionally with this honor club?

We aim to make it personal and objectify your needs.

15. Who is involved in the decision-making process?

Identify the players involved.

16. What is the timing involved throughout the proposal and approval process?

Identify the process involved.

17. What is the single-most important objective to you?

Make sure our response is geared to what is near & dear to you as an individual.

18. What do you anticipate to be the greatest challenges in getting this project done?

See where the pinch-points might be and work to steer clear of them or plan for them accordingly.

19. Are you engaged with other potential providers?

Assess and measure the competition to ensure we are offering a unique proposition.

20. Where does this project fit into the projects you have on your plate?

Assess the urgency involved.

V.

Product Categories (Opportunities)

Because the world of recognition awards entails so many potential opportunities—and the fact we can provide solutions on a broader scale than just awards, here’s a glossary of where fertile ground might be found:

1. Recognition Awards

- Sales – Quotas, benchmarks
- Training – Certification achievement
- Quality – Internal achievement; external (supplier) achievement
- Years of Service – Recognition in years 1, 3, 5 and every interval of 5 years after that; also “onboarding” as a welcome commemorative
- Safety – Intervals of accident-free accomplishments
- Dealer Certification – Top tier of dealer performance
- Retirement – A relevant symbol of legacy and personally meaningful
- Patent/Innovation – Share the wealth through recognition
- Membership – A professional merit badge
- Victory – If ya ain’t first, you’re last
- Improvement – Shift the bell curve upward

2. Architectural & Decorative Elements

- Hall of Fame/Wall of Fame Displays
- Installations
- Display Panels
- Reception/Lobby Signs

3. Commemorative & Event Gifts

- Groundbreaking Ceremonies
- Company Anniversaries
- Mergers & Acquisitions
- Product Launch Events
- Customer Loyalty programs
- VIP Gifts
- Benchmark Sales Commemoratives – “One Millionth Unit Sold,” etc.
- Trip & Room Gifts – Themed or tied to location
- Gameday Giveaways – Sporting event VIP souvenirs

4. Corporate & Lobby Art

- Framed Prints
- Portraits
- Scenery
- Reception/Lobby Décor
- Hallway Décor

5. Emblematic Seals

- Logos
- Crests
- Emblems
- Indoor Signs
- Outdoor Signs
- Podium Signs

6. Permanent Honor Walls & Lobby Installations

- Sales
- Training
- Quality
- Years of Service
- Safety
- Dealer Certification
- Retirement
- Patent/Innovation
- Membership
- Donor/Benefactor
- Company Timeline

7. Identification & Signage

- Logos
- Lettering
- Wayfinding

- Nameplates
- Reception Area & Lobby Signs
- Company Timeline Graphics

8. Marketing & Promotional Opportunities

- Product Launch Event
- Ad Campaigns – Tied into other media
- Premiums – Take action and receive a gift
- Customer Loyalty Programs

9. Mission Statement Displays

- Value Statements
- Core Values
- Vision Statements
- Statements of Purpose
- Founding Principles
- Company History

10. Point-Of-Purchase Displays

- Product Enhancers
- Counter & Tabletop Talkers
- Signs
- Temporary Installations
- Semi-Permanent Installations
- Permanent Installations

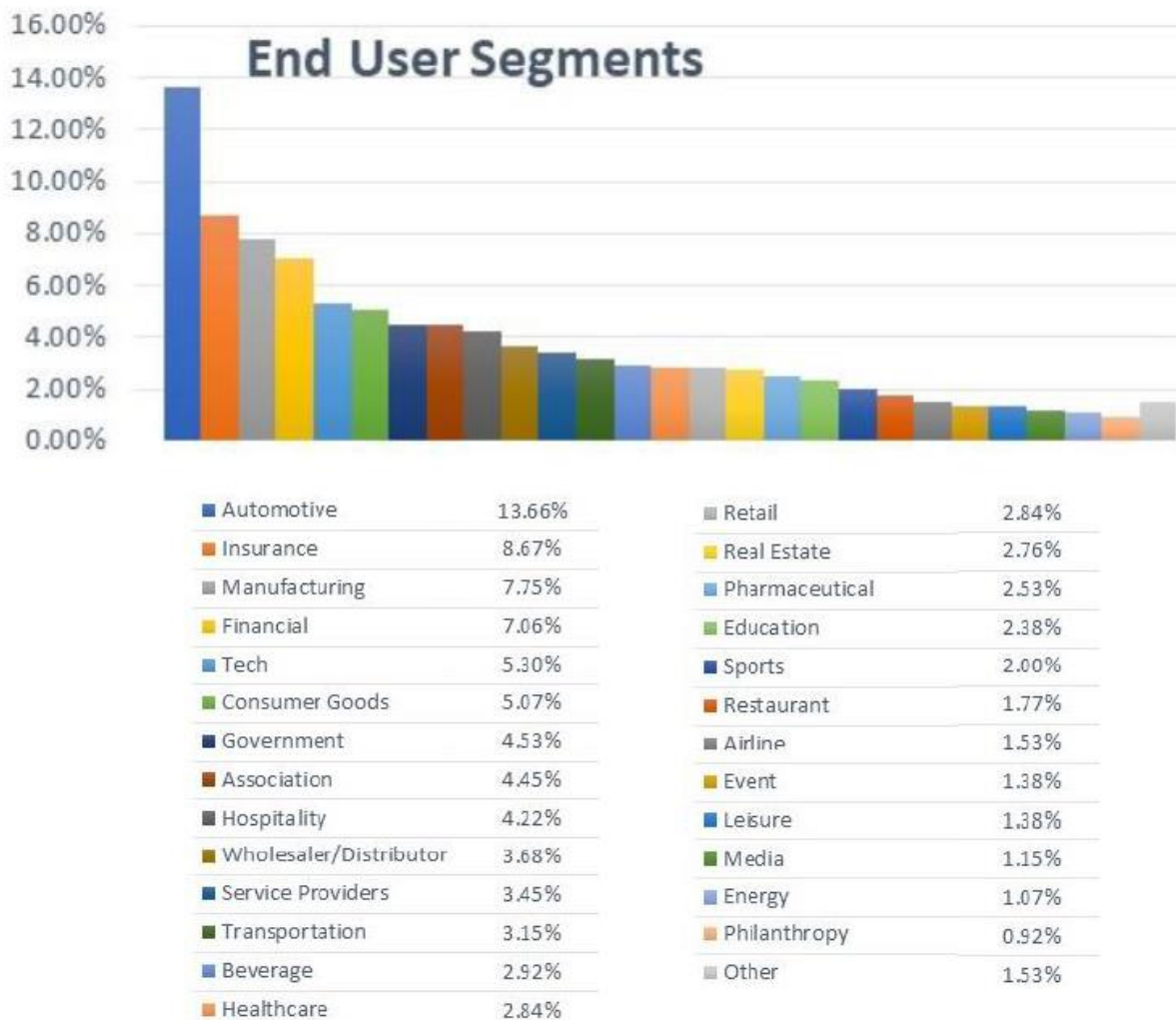
11. Product Replicas & Miniatures

- Mascots
- Character Renderings
- Product Replicas
- Founder & Leadership Portraits
- Buildings & Icons

VI.

Market Segments (Audience)

The end users we serve cover a wide array of business types, as illustrated by this graph:



VII.

Making an Impression (Reach)

The whole idea of promotional products is to create what the industry calls “impressions.” What is an impression? It’s the confluence of people, places and things. Let’s contemplate each of these in inverse order as it pertains to our business.

1. Things

At a basic level, this is the stuff we make; the deliverable hard goods. It’s comprised of the 11 product categories we serve, as outlined in section V. above.

But it’s also the core messages that are being communicated—brand identifiers, essential practices, and market differentiators. It’s the client DNA, and it should be present in everything they do.

2. Places

These are the 26 market segments we’ve identified, listed and graphed in section VI. But let’s also think of places as physical spaces, which in our case include:

- Walls
- Hallways
- Desks
- Stores

- Dealerships
- Workstations
- Counters
- Lobbies
- Reception areas

3. People

The message our product conveys is directed at a much broader audience than it might initially appear. We're in the field of advertising, and our "billboards" have a wide variety of people driving by them.

We aim at the entire spectrum of an end client's **brand ambassadors**, including:

- Recipients
- Customers
- Visitors
- Co-workers and colleagues
- Friends & family
- Suppliers
- Distributors