

Where Have All The Matchboxes Gone?

By Larry Mogelonsky, MBA, P. Eng.

Picture this: I'm dining out at an upscale restaurant and when the bill arrives, it comes with a branded matchbox for each person at our table. Twenty years ago, this would've been nothing out of ordinary, maybe even a slightly nicer touch over leaving a bowl of matchbooks at the entrance or on the bar. But with the declining number of smokers as well as prohibitive laws against lighting up in public establishments, complimentary matchboxes are now somewhat of a rarity. While I'm not condoning a resurgence of cigarette consumption, from a branding and marketing perspective, perhaps we gave up on the matchbox a little too soon.



Or, to be more abstract, we gave up on the *idea* of the matchbox. Back in the day when smokers were plentiful, matches had far more utility than they do now. They allowed people to consume cigarettes and, therefore, they were lifted from bars, restaurants and hotels by customers with the intent of striking them at a later time. Although lighters better served this purpose, it would be uncharacteristic to refuse handy freebies like these tiny fire sticks. And so, matchboxes and matchbooks were willingly taken, cropping up in cars, houses, offices and jacket pockets the world over.

What's significant here is that wherever the matches went, they would carry the branded logo of the establishment that produced them. This means that wherever the matches went, they were also cleverly advertising said establishment to the prying eyes of new consumers. Hence, the idea behind the matchbox, as it applies to hotels, is to give a guest something free that has enough utility for them to actually keep it, and then let these customers help with the marketing push.

The matchbox is but one application of this concept, and I could have started with pens, t-shirts, hats, fridge magnets, posters, Frisbees or teddy bears. Whichever the vector, the principle remains the same: get consumers to carry the giveaway home so that new people might gain familiarity with the logo on it and perhaps make a quick inquiry about the brand in question.

Social Proofing

In Jonah Berger's 2013 marketing book "Contagious: Why Things Catch On" he describes at length the theory of 'social proofing'. That is, most people only like things that other people already like. Or, in other words, consumers need proof of a product's efficacy by witnessing others buying and using it before they will in turn make a purchase. It's a bit of a Catch-22 and it helps explain why many good products fail to find an audience.

A foremost example that Jonah Berger cites is Apple. When they launched the iPod, they bundled each player with a pair of white earbuds at a time when most headphones were colored black. By visually standing apart, Apple ensured that passersby would note the iPod owner's atypical white earbuds dangling on the exterior of his or her clothes, thereby 'proofing' the iPod itself. Additionally, the radiant Apple logo on the back of every laptop sold is not designed solely for the purchaser's satisfaction. It is upside-down so that when the computer's screen is flipped open, other people will see the logo in its proper orientation and know that buying Apple products is socially sanctioned.

In this day and age, with its furor of media bombardment and endless distractions for consumers, you must find innovative ways of spreading awareness and making your brand viral. Freebies are one such tactic. Perhaps instead of pondering about mere matchboxes, I should have asked: where have all the freebies gone which can potentially social proof a given product?

The Key Is Good Design

For the frugal hotelier who keeps a stranglehold on the annual marketing budget, the idea of complimentary trinkets for departing guests may be met with scorn. If the above paragraphs have not been enough to persuade you, there's an adage I like to apply: *Spend a little to make none; spend a lot to make a ton.*

To expand on this rhyming couplet, many companies have tried giveaways as a marketing vector only to see lackluster results. The two biggest problems with most giveaways are that, first, they have negligible utility which means they won't be repeatedly used in front of others and, second, they are designed for private use only. Often the most 'viral' freebies are the ones that have a sizeable production cost.

Consider a hotel room's soaps, shampoos, conditioners and all other bathroom consumables. It is a common practice for guests to use these products during their stay, and then put the miniature hygiene bottles in their bags upon checkout. Such products are relatively inexpensive and their 'theft' is likely already factored into the ADR. As each bottle has the brand's name and logo on it, a shrewd hotelier might assume that they will help spread awareness amongst each guest's friends. But this is not the case as hygiene products will be typically consumed privately and won't be visible in high traffic areas.

Ultimately, any 'stolen' soaps and hair care products will serve as mementos to reinforce customer loyalty, but they will not directly help the hotel breach new social circles. The same can be said for fridge magnets. Even if a brand is lucky enough to have a customer slap one of these on the refrigerator door, its exposure is limited to friends, family and, occasionally, workmen who visit the kitchen. Magnets are better on the social proofing front than bathroom products, but still far worse than popping open your Apple laptop in a crowded café.

Next, consider the branded pen (or pencil or highlighter for that matter). They have utility everywhere, both public and private, and they can be produced en masse at a bargain price. There are two significant design problems, however. First, pens are ordinarily quite thin which means that a logo must be

imperceptibly small to wholly fit on one face. Or, if kept at a reasonable size, the logo will wrap around the cylindrical shaft and won't be seen in its entirety by other people. Branded pens are also likely to have some text scrawled down one side; in the event that the pen is turned the other way, the words won't be visible to the outside world. The other major issue stems from the fact that these cheaply made pens are oftentimes just that – cheap. They don't last long and the flow of ink isn't constant. They are disposable goods and they are treated as such.

Branded pens can nevertheless act as a viable advertising vector when they are done right. The key is to not skip out on craftsmanship. They shouldn't fit the same standard design as 99% of the pens out there. Make them longer; make them shorter; give them a funky color; give them an oddly shaped top; or make them as thick as a fountain pen so they appear to be of higher quality and so one side can adequately accommodate a large enough logo. As well, design them as durable products that guests will actually cherish. That way, they will be used in public spaces – and thus exposed to other consumers – over as lengthy a time as possible.

The Bottom Line

I could drone on and on, scrutinizing a myriad of potential freebies, but the efficacy of each depends on the hotel in question. Some managers might understand the intrinsic benefits of placing funky pens in every guestroom, but the budget simply cannot, well, budge. Other hoteliers might want to give out a swag bag brimming with high thread count polo shirts or complimentary scarves but are hampered by a timid executive committee. And yet others who want to hand out matchboxes with every meal at the lobby restaurant are vetoed by his or her colleagues who believe such giveaways' singular purpose is to augment cigarette consumption.

The broad takeaway is: as long as you are aware of the potential for this marketing vehicle, then a great opportunity will come your way. As an exercise, reflect on other products doled out as freebies and their social proofing capabilities. Then, think outside the box – er, the matchbox – and you might discover a 'gift' that your own brand might apply for a very lucrative outcome.

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