

# MAKE THE COLLEGE CONNECTION

School's out for summer – but you're not on vacation just yet. June is the perfect month to gear up for college promotions.

BY JENNIFER VISHNEVSKY

If you've got online bookstores, alumni gifts and football games on the brain, you're not alone. Education consistently ranks in the top five markets for promotional products, according to *Counselor's* State of the Industry report. And while colleges are on summer break, you should be hitting the books.

Jeff Hoffman thinks that June is a great time to focus on the education market. "Buyers are already planning for next year's events, such as athletic games, new student orientations and welcome receptions. Being proactive with useful promotions for these events will help you land new sales and become a valued partner in the purchasing process," says Hoffman, account executive at BC Graphics (*asi/128880*). So if you're looking for a piece of this market, get smart and check out these college-related success stories.

## Online Solutions

Jeff Hoffman had been calling on local universities and schools in Arizona for a long time. "It really started with marketing and purchasing," he says. "They have a lot of RFPs and RFQs they send out. It's a good way to get in so that you can expand and show them creativity and service."

Three years ago, Hoffman broke into the market by offering an online solution when he noticed that a local university had only an internal bookstore. "A lot of schools just buy online now, so they need ideas," he says. A local college had a need for its law school, nursing school and business school, among others. He needed to take things slow, so he offered individual online stores for various departments. After the initial success, he was able to offer online stores for the whole school.

Hoffman believes that offering online stores helped him excel, as his company can do more apparel on demand as the clients need it. It's a seven-figure market for BC Graphics, as he nets upwards of \$1 to \$2 million. "This has been a very successful market for us when the economy has been down and corporations are not spending what they used to," he says.

He has parlayed this success into more sales with big universities and smaller niche schools in Arizona. All of the schools Hoffman deals with have turned to him for an online, streamlined solution to offer merchandise to students, parents and alumni. "With the college market, they need items quickly," he says. "Becoming the go-to guy makes a difference. Working with partners overseas has helped us get items in quickly and competitively."

Apparel is the primary sales item, but Hoffman has also found success with direct-marketing recruiting pieces that target potential students. In a recent promotion for a business school, he crafted a fortune cookie mailing that was sent in a takeout-style box with a printed menu listing the school's programs. He also used an "old-school" viewfinder filled with images of the college in a campaign revolving around "seeing the world through rose-colored lenses."

BC Graphics has gone above and beyond with its education clients, working onsite at school events and helping them sell. Being involved has helped build the relationships, says Hoffman. The company's strong graphics department helps cement relationships, too, by "dressing up" products and putting spec samples together for clients. The distributor also hosts open houses that feature products catered to the college market. "There are so many departments and schools; it's hard to keep track of it all," Hoffman says. "This way, our clients can talk amongst themselves to see what's new out there. Instead of just having a big open house for all of our customers, we focus it on the university aspect."

A caveat: One of the challenges Hoffman has faced is dealing with licensing. "It can slow orders down," he says. "We're bidding against people. It can make it difficult to be competitive when it's not regulated."

### CHEAT SHEET:

"Be creative and be persistent," Hoffman says. "Keep an organized list of contacts. People move around a lot, so encourage your contacts to be part of the team" and you won't lose the account when they move to another location.



## Big Ideas

John Hurley looks like the people he sells to. You see, his entire clientele consists of college students just like him. The founder of Campus Cups, FLINGables (*asi/156422*) is about to complete his education at the prestigious Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Upon graduation he'll have earned a bachelor's degree in economic history and entrepreneurial marketing. "I've been immersed in learning about the promotional products business for two years now," he says. "My focus has been on defining the material and semantic values my generation assigns to goods."

In his freshman year of college, he had an idea to start importing plastic cups with branded logos and selling them to the college market. But he first started selling T-shirts. He got a wholesalers license to work with fraternities and sororities around campus. "I was catering to exactly what they wanted: helping with designs and price matching," he says. That's when Hurley realized that college students are very specific about what they want. They are tech-savvy, but they don't know where to look, nor do they want to go through hundreds of products to find what they want – which is good news for distributors.

Hurley was able to create the demand for products they didn't know existed. "Just from being in the market, I understood what they were looking for, so I could cater to a specific need and curate the product offerings," he says.

His epiphany came after going to a Penn State football game. Hurley noticed the large amounts of disposable plastic cups – leftovers from tailgating. After brainstorming with

his friends, he came up with the idea for Campus Cups – customized, disposable plastic cups. Hurley says Campus Cups' business has produced \$120,000 in revenue this year.

Hurley has also had a spinoff concept – *FLINGables.com*, a website that caters to a big party week at UPenn. During that time, fraternities and sororities order customized products. He captured that market by offering items he knew they'd like, like neon shirts, crazy sunglasses and tank tops. Last year, the website had \$35,000 in revenue over a one-week period. Now, the concept is expanding with campus managers at other schools. "I am giving them the tools from my experience to basically start their own FLINGables," he says. "We'll provide capital for them to get product photos specific to their campus."

One of the best advantages Hurley had was being on campus. He would see people getting ready for a big event, and he'd reach out to them with an offer to save \$200 on an order. He offered promotions as an add-on. "If they ordered their T-shirts with me, I'd match the price and give them 53 sunglasses," he says. Now, he's able to offer promotions that save him money and also provide a greater perceived value to his accounts.

Hurley found that news spreads fast on the college level. "The great thing about the college campus is that it's contained and news spreads quickly with influencers," he says. "There are people who have social currency. If you use word-of-mouth to get those people advocating your brand, it's really easy to spread and enact a contagion."

### CHEAT SHEET:

"Build a fun association between your brand and college students," Hurley says. "Make it more relaxed. Also, help students make decisions. It will increase the likability of your product. You can create a demand that wasn't there already."



### CHEAT SHEET:

Brady says to start with the university or college that you attended. She also suggests going to alumni networking events and presenting items that you don't find in the bookstore or gift store.

## Find Your Focus

Maria Bernardo Brady, president at Marakae Marketing (*asi/260725*), realized that breaking into the college market was challenging, since many colleges have partnered with bigger companies, such as OfficeMax, to produce promotional products. As such, she decided the school bookstore wasn't the avenue she wanted to pursue.

So she switched gears to the gift side of the equation, namely speaker gifts and alumni gifts. Brady received a flier from Wolfmark (*asi/98085*) about custom ties. "They provided virtual samples, so we forwarded logos over," says Brady. "We sent them to a local college, and they immediately loved it and wanted to meet."

Brady, along with account executive Kris Horvath, was able to secure the order. They decided on scarves for ladies and ties for men, with the option of silk or woven. In addition to gifts, the male athletes were outfitted with the ties to wear when they travel.

They started with 150 pieces of each and are now onto their second reorder, with a sister college also pursuing the ties and scarves. Brady showed a spec sample to another local university for its alumni night, and it was looking at 3,000 pieces. "We work directly with alumni relations," she says. "It's not just a product – it's the creative idea and the whole package that helps us to sell."

Marakae Marketing brings in just under \$200,000 annually within the college market, but its employees are poised to pursue more universities and colleges with the ties and scarves idea. "We're finding success with this specific product. It's unique and well-received, and there's a need for it," she says.

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Tbezek Photography

## Divide and Conquer

Eric Manin and Tony Hernandez, co-owners of Proforma Premier Branding (*asi/491614*), are selling more than \$500,000 a year in the college market – and they're on track to increase that to \$2 million over the next few years. They do this by working on several projects, including out-of-town events for sororities and fraternities, providing products for "Greek Week" and residence welcome kits. They've also expanded their business to community colleges and work a lot with sports departments, philanthropies and charities.

When Manin and Hernandez were students at the University of Florida, they dealt with many school organizations. Their first clients were their friends who were decision-makers in various organizations, and their main products were T-shirts.

That led to other promotional items and other organizations within the university. The co-owners knew what college students liked, so they started focusing on trendy items. They have continued to do the same thing over the last 17 years, keeping their pulse on fashionable brands like Bella and American Apparel. "Young people know what's hip," says Hernandez. "We use industry magazines to see what's coming down the line. We tell our sales reps that things change and we need to stay ahead of the curve at all times."

And they need to stay organized. During Greek Week alone, Manin and Hernandez deal with 10 organizations that are leading 40 other organizations. This event demands attention to detail. "There are 5,000 people that you have to keep happy and engaged. It's really a matter of teamwork," says Manin.

When they first started, most of these organizations would order 150 unisex T-shirts in an extra-large. "The problem is, everyone fits into it, but they're not getting the point across," Manin says. "That's not a T-shirt that people want to wear all the time. When we came in and introduced fashion-forward concepts, people started ordering the right fit. The more they liked it, the more they wore it. That's the biggest difference we made in the market."

At the same time, the market was strictly a wearables arena. Hernandez noticed that promotional products weren't that popular. So, he started introducing a souvenir item to go along with a T-shirt. "If it was a beach-themed

event, we could sell sunglasses. It doesn't need a design – it can just be the name of the organization so it's a bit more functional," he says.

One big pro that Hernandez sees about student organizations is that despite being seasonal, it's a very predictable market. They have a set calendar and there's always something revolving around certain events. "I tell our reps that it's no different from a corporate account that has eight trade shows that are set in stone every year," he says.

One of the biggest challenges is educating their clients, since many have never ordered before, and "young people can get defensive if they feel intimidated." So, they spend a lot of time teaching students and molding them into the perfect clients.

"The tough part is that they graduate," says Manin. "That's one downside about the collegiate market – there's a lot of turnover." And transitioning between students is important to the integrity of the account. "If turnover isn't handled properly, we have to resell the organization all over again," he says.

However, Hernandez has found two ways to overcome that challenge. "We hold onto the last 10 years of artwork we've done for certain events," he says. "So when the new guy starts from scratch, we can offer that artwork. That's a competitive advantage."

Educating his clients has paid off in other ways, as well. Student leaders often become corporate leaders, which translates into new business. "Those leaders come back to us for corporate apparel," says Manin.

The pair has also hired an active student as a part-time employee. "Collegiate student leaders keep us up-to-date on what's happening on campus," says Hernandez. "They help us hire new people and keep us aware of who's coming and going. A lot of times, events won't be in the student paper – they will be on Twitter or Facebook. So we need an insider for that information."

Manin and Hernandez plan to partner with other companies to expand their network. They have a division called Premier Collegiate, in which they consult with other companies regarded as experts in the field. "There's great potential in student housing," says Manin. "A lot of students work on a fundraiser and spend six figures on it. By opening up as consultants and partners, we see a lot of future potential to grow."

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## CHEAT SHEET:

Hernandez says there can be a disconnect due to the age difference of the distributor rep and college student, so it's important to get to know your client. Many organizations have websites and events that are unique to them. "Get to know their language and what's hot," says Hernandez.



## TAKE NOTES

- David Letterman went to Ball State University – as did ASI President and CEO Tim Andrews.
- Columbia University is the most expensive private college (\$45,290 per year).
- Famous college dropouts include Steve Jobs, Ben Affleck, Woody Allen, James Cameron and Mark Zuckerberg.
- The national student debt has surpassed \$1 trillion.
- 11 members of Beta Theta Pi have become *Forbes* 500 CEOs.
- Omega Psi Phi and Alpha Kappa Alpha are the largest fraternity and sorority, respectively.
- For the last three decades, a little over 20% of all American college students have majored in business, making it the most popular undergraduate field.
- *The Princeton Review* recently named Wheaton College in Illinois as the college with the best campus food.
- The Duke Blue Devils basketball team topped all schools with \$13.8 million spent on the basketball program in 2011.
- In a recent survey of admissions officers at 359 colleges and universities, Kaplan Test Prep revealed that 24% of respondents reported using Facebook or other social networking pages to research an applicant. This is a significant increase from 2008, when only 10% reported using social media as a source during the admissions process.

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## Create a Relationship

Justin Washburn came to Pro-forma Eclectic Technical Systems ([asi/490897](http://asi/490897)) fresh out of college, so he had some connections in the market. In addition, owner Steven Flaughers had connections with universities and was successful, so Washburn followed his lead. "We earn roughly \$350,000 from the college market, and 60% of my business is to higher education. There's not a department we don't work with at a university," says Flaughers. The company works with 25 schools, all on the East Coast.

Washburn works hard to qualify clients and figure out what department is worth working with. "Each department at a university has its own business and entity. So when we go after a new school, we find certain titles and we contact those people," he says. The company qualifies schools by their ranking, like Big Ten or Big East.

Once Washburn has figured out who he wants to talk to, he creates a campaign to get in the door. He treats the first meeting like a discovery session, where he will listen to what the customer wants and needs. While some of his clients know exactly what they want, others look to him for ideas.

Some of the departments Washburn works with are focused on entertaining the students; these are the most creative. He just worked with one university that put together a package for a contest in which the school brought in musical artists Pitbull and Wiz Khalifa. The promotion involved posters, window clings and glow sticks to be handed out at the event. Of course, with this demographic, "We incorporated social media throughout the campus, mixing the print with QR codes and Facebook," he says. "Those artists are well-known by the younger generation, and those groups are fun to work with."

Washburn also worked with a school in southwest Florida that never gets snow, but wanted to do a winter event, and the budget was huge. He suggested that the school bring in a snow machine. There was also a giant blow-up snow globe that visitors could get into and take pictures. The evenings in Florida were getting cooler, so he suggested handing out Snuggles to the first 2,800 people. That order was so successful that he had to do a reorder.

While universities go cold in a different way at certain times of the year, Washburn throws out ideas all year round. "If I see something cool, I'll send it to customers who are at least 100 miles away from each other so that they don't cross paths," he says.

Turnover is a challenge, but it can also be a positive. "I've had some contacts that I've really enjoyed working with. They are young, just out of college, work there for three years and go someplace else," Washburn says. "Now I have to reestablish that new client base in the same place, but I also get to work with someone new. And there's always the old client at the new place to reconnect with."

Washburn says that athletics isn't always the best way to get in the college market. He hasn't found a lot of money in that area. He advises distributors to find out what departments are lucrative within a university. "You might have to talk to a dozen people to get to the right person," he says. "And remember that even if one person at one school does purchasing, another school might be structured differently."

## CHEAT SHEET:

"Be persistent," Washburn says. "The college market is really a niche; it's not like a corporate account or even a high school. Always be available. A lot of times, you're working with young people who want to text you or call you at 10 p.m."

## Make an Impression



Until 10 years ago, Metrographics Printing (*asi/268937*) was primarily a printing broker. Business was starting to downtrend, so the company got involved in promotional items. Guy Albanese, vice president of sales, had been in business with the New Jersey Institute of Technology from a printing standpoint, but met with a residence hall person who had a need for T-shirts. He filled that order and started thumbing through the phone books to make contacts with other residence hall people. "NJIT has mechanical, architectural and honors clubs," he says. "Once I knew one person, it was pretty easy to get appointments."

Since then, he has gotten involved with eight different clubs on campus that buy T-shirts, pens, water bottles and tote bags. "Once you successfully service one group, word-of-mouth within the college community spreads fairly easily, and the phone calls come on their own," says Albanese.

He has found the college market to be full of tremendous potential. "There's a lot of money funded for the individual clubs waiting to be spent," he says. "You've just got to tap into it. They don't really care about the dollar figures. They just want to spend the money."

Also, you never know when someone from a different market will help you get your foot in the door with colleges. Working with Pepsi Bottling Direct opened the door for Albanese to get into Rutgers University dining. "They were thrilled with the work, so my name got passed around to residence halls and student organizations," he says, resulting in an additional order of 30,000 shakers for a football game.

One challenge is timing, as students have crazy schedules with their classes and extra-curricular activities. Luckily, he has found that they are dying to hear a pitch. "Once you get them on the phone, it's an easy sell," he says. Albanese earns between \$50,000 and \$100,000 with NJIT and Rutgers. Going forward, he plans to branch out while staying regional with the colleges in his area.

### CHEAT SHEET:

After finding out what organizations exist within the college, Albanese started soliciting directly. He sent catalogs with his business card and a pitch letter. "Take a youthful approach," he says. "Carry the most hip items out there. Students aren't looking for the basic T-shirt. They want American Apparel."

*Jennifer Visbnevsky is a staff writer for Advantages.*

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(A)



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(C)



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(D)



D. BMB  
Stock 3/4" Ball Marker  
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E. ADT-002

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F. ADT-005

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ITEM	100	250	500	1,000
A. CC-B004	\$4.20	\$3.40	\$3.10	\$2.90
B. CC-B002	\$4.40	\$3.80	\$3.50	\$3.30
C. CC-B003	\$4.20	\$3.40	\$3.10	\$2.90
D. BMB	\$2.00	\$1.50	\$1.30	\$1.20
E. ADT-002	\$5.10	\$4.30	\$4.10	\$3.90
F. ADT-005	\$5.90	\$5.10	\$4.80	\$4.60

(4C)

DIE/SET-UP (G)	
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