



# Sustainable Swag Self-Evaluation for Vendors

Have you thought about the environmental impact of the swag items that you provide at conferences and other events? From the raw materials used to create the items, to the way that they are used, to their ultimate disposal, promotional items have an effect on people and the planet.

Vendors that purchase **sustainable swag** consider the social, environmental, and economic impacts of the materials that they buy. The rubric below can help you evaluate the sustainability of the promotional materials your organization purchases.

This rubric is not exhaustive. It was developed based on the life cycle analysis — learn more here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/life-cycle-analysis>.

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Poor
<b>Extraction / transformation of raw materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Made of materials that are ethically-sourced (e.g. fair trade)</li> <li>Locally produced / local materials used</li> <li>Made of recycled material</li> <li>Meets standards for organic, vegan, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Materials are <i>somewhat</i> ethically-sourced or locally produced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workers are exploited and/or mistreated</li> <li>Materials produced far away</li> <li>Extraction of materials is harmful to the surrounding ecosystem (e.g. palm oil in chocolate candy)</li> </ul>
<b>Manufacturing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low emissions in production process</li> <li>Producer of swag uses renewable energy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Some</i> emissions in production process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emissions of production process not considered</li> </ul>
<b>Packaging and Distribution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimal / no plastic packaging</li> <li>Locally-distributed</li> <li>Shipping emissions are offset</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Some</i> landfill-bound materials are used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All or mostly plastic, polystyrene, or other landfill-bound materials</li> <li>Distributed from a long distance / with high travel emissions</li> </ul>
<b>Use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly likely to be useful and have a long use period</li> <li>Only enough swag was purchased to be useful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Somewhat</i> useful product</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single-use products</li> <li>Excess swag was produced and is likely to be discarded</li> </ul>
<b>End of life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be easily composted, recycled,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Some</i> of the components of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All of the swag is landfill-bound</li> </ul>

	or otherwise ethically disposed of	the item can be disposed of ethically	
<b>Producer Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Producer of swag meets existing standards (e.g. B-Corp. certified)</li> <li>• Producer of swag is a woman-, BIPOC-, indigenous-, or refugee- owned business</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doesn't meet any existing environmental standards</li> </ul>

## Examples of Potentially Strong Vendor Swag Options

Note: What is most sustainable in terms of swag will depend on many factors, including where your business is located, what can be obtained locally, what season it is, etc. Whether the material will be useful to your intended audience should also be a consideration. If you already have a stock of unused swag, use it down before distributing anything new.

- Virtual gifts (e.g. virtual gift cards)
- Food (preferably plant-based and locally-sourced)
- Glass or metal water bottles
- Reusable cutlery sets
- Glass or metal straws
- Bamboo lunch boxes
- Bamboo cutting boards
- Pocket notebooks
- Solar-powered chargers
- Clothing, hats, backpacks, pencil cases, etc. made from recycled material
- Seeds
- Small desk plants
- Plantable bookmarks
- Bar soap (made with no palm oil)
- Candles
- 100% cotton hand towels
- Refillable hand sanitizer containers

## Additional Resources

- ALA Sustainability Round Table: <https://www.ala.org/rt/sustainrt>
- Living Future Organization: <https://living-future.org/declare-overview/>
- Guide to Sustainable Promotional Products: [https://www.equiterre.org/sites/fichiers/divers/guide\\_to\\_sustainable\\_promotional\\_products.pdf](https://www.equiterre.org/sites/fichiers/divers/guide_to_sustainable_promotional_products.pdf)
- Making Conference Swag Sustainable: <https://www.pcma.org/making-conference-swag-sustainable/>
- Ethical Swag (distributor): <https://ethicalswag.com/>

## Questions?

Reach out to the ALA SustainRT at [sustainrt.ala@gmail.com](mailto:sustainrt.ala@gmail.com).

