

It's Personal

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Artist and Etsy.com shop owner Kim Piotrowski gives postcards printed with her work to customers as thank-you gifts.

The promotional products industry and Etsy.com members have one major thing in common: A fervent belief in the power of thank-you gifts.

For the uninitiated, Etsy is an online marketplace where artisans and crafters set up shops and build followings through the site's highly engineered search engine. It has more than 800,000 active shops, 17 million-plus members and \$525.6 million in merchandise sales last year alone. Etsy sellers come from all walks of life and skill levels, but most are small-businesses people who process one transaction at a time, often crafting a product after an order is placed.

Despite typically small margins and little capital, many sellers make it a priority to include thank-you gifts with purchases. The practice is so rampant that it has become part of the culture of shopping on Etsy, and buyers have come to expect it.

"In the beginning, I didn't always send a freebie—only if someone spent a certain amount, then I felt pressured to put in a little something extra," recalls Kim Piotrowski, an artist and owner of Etsy shop Kipi since 2007. "I started by including an extra small piece of artwork, then the postcards that I'm doing currently. For the future, I'm thinking about the idea of including glass magnets that I've assembled using my art designs."

Jackie Kaufman, of shop Rock My World, Inc., started selling handmade sterling-silver jewelry on Etsy four years ago. Soon after, she had inexpensive wooden peace-sign pins made to use as packaging decorations. "I never say this is a 'free gift,'" she says. "I leave it up to the imagination of the customers." Still, many customers thank Kaufman for the "special gifts."

"I want my customers to feel a personal interaction with me," says Etsy seller Carmen Taylor of The Flair Exchange, who often includes personal notes and packages of hand-cut confetti in her orders. "This is what sets me apart from a big-box store."

Piotrowski isn't sure who started the practice of giving gifts or how it came to be known. "In almost all cases, you're dealing with an individual (or a couple working together) who want to leave you with a good impression of their shop and their work," she says. "You get that homespun responsiveness."

Given Etsy's appeal to artisans, few sellers have traditional business backgrounds; but, thoughtful gifts seem to be just good business to these entrepreneurs.

Piotrowski says gifts included in Etsy purchases most often pull double duty: They say "thank you" and add a cute factor to help buyers remember the shop. "I suspect it also makes the buyer feel good to get an extra surprise in the mail," she says. "It's almost like digging for the prize at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box, or the traditional mom-and-pop store or pizza joint that offers calendars or magnets printed with their business information."