Case Study:

CIRCULARITY

Post-Rebrand, gomi Converts Pens Into New Product

PPAI

Introduction

You've likely heard about circularity, a broad concept suggesting materials can continue to be used in some fashion rather than end up as waste after initial use.

How is this even possible?

Is it cost effective?

If any waste enters the equation, does it still qualify?

As PPAI considers a working definition of circularity, we understand that showing is always more helpful than telling.

So, we will provide case studies of branded merch firms that have demonstrated circularity in some capacity. These cases can serve as resources for anyone looking to do more within sustainability. Circularity is not a zero-sum game. Context, strategy, results, challenges; they all make concepts like circularity far more approachable.

Key Takeaways

Challenge:

Rebrand left thousands of pens at risk of becoming waste.

Solution:

Materials recovered and remanufactured into custom power banks.

Result:

Waste diverted, new branded merchandise created, and a unique customer story generated.

1. Circularity Can Solve a Real Business Problem

This wasn't sustainability for sustainability's sake. A distributor had obsolete branded inventory after a rebrand, and instead of disposing of it, the materials were transformed into a completely new, higher-value product. The case study demonstrates that circularity can be a practical solution to excess inventory and product obsolescence.

2. Waste Materials Became a Premium, Story-Driven Product

Old branded pens were converted into custom-designed power banks, creating a unique product with a compelling origin story. The resulting item helped the distributor differentiate itself with clients by showcasing creativity, innovation, and environmental responsibility rather than another standard self-promo item.

3. Circularity Is Possible, But Requires Planning and Scale

The project succeeded because of a detailed discovery process to understand materials, safety requirements, and recycling considerations. The case highlights that circular solutions are achievable, but work best for larger-volume projects where the additional labor, testing, and material handling can be spread across more units.

The Possibility: Solving The Rebrand Problem

In this case study, we'll take a look at a common problem leading to waste in the branded merch industry: Rebrands. A rebrand can be a savvy strategy, but it leads to suddenly obsolete products, and it becomes the burden of the company to prevent them from ending up in the landfill.

- Often companies will donate this outdated stock – a perfectly viable option – but that only extends the lifecycle by one use, delaying its time before reaching landfill
- However, there are circular options within the branded merch world. There are companies that can not only take the materials from these products and find use for them, but they can turn them back into completely different branded merch. There will often be parameters that need to be met, but it's an exciting option in the circularity toolbox.

The Campaign: gomi X Fluid Branding

U.K.-based supplier gomi was approached by distributor Fluid Branding, which had just gone through a rebrand. As a result, they had a glut of potentially obsolete pens. gomi presented a new opportunity: transforming the materials into something new, in this case power banks with intricate designs.

“They were doing a rebrand, which is the most common request,” says Rishi Gupta, CEO of gomi, which often works on circular projects.

Process: A Discovery Stage

An average of

100

emails are sent back and forth before an order is placed

How this might look, and even if it's possible, isn't quite clear from the start, however.

- There's what Gupta calls a "discovery process" where materials are melted to discover how they behave and confirm what they are made of.

- For a pen, the ink, the springs, the metal and the plastic components must be taken apart before melting.

- Gupta says that an average of 100 emails are sent back and forth before an order is even placed, as understanding and clarifying these details is crucial. (gomi doesn't typically charge for the discovery phase).

"Usually, the companies who come to us, they're coming to us with materials that they only know very little about, so they don't have a spec sheet to say, 'it's using this plastic or these properties,'" Gupta says. "If we make something and then it's not safe, then it defeats the point."

So, gomi usually relies on partners that will put some upfront trust in them to wait out that discovery phase, but that naturally creates a sort of unveiling of one-of-one branding, recreation of their own materials coming to life.

"There is a lot of anticipation because it all is very exciting because, in the promo industry, everything can be quite the same across the board, and there's very little new usually in the industry," Gupta says.

The discovery process showed that the pen casings could be transformed into the gomi powerbank casings.

Results: "A Very Good Story"

The final product was something a distributor could never have drawn up in a pitch meeting. It was the result of an ambitious plan, circularity in action.

"They love the product," Gupta says of Fluid Branding feedback. The sleek design leads into what becomes part of the narrative Fluid Branding can put forward.

Clients that want to work with a partner who can do more than just put a logo on something are looking for creative additional add-on on services. These set them apart from other distributors.

"It's a very good story," Gupta says. "With their clients, it's like very it performs really well because it's a bit is novel. It's new. It's different. So, it helps their clients see that they're more than just a distributor. They're beyond that. They have creativity.

Challenges: “We Always Suggest It Be A Big Order”

While Fluid Branding feedback on the actual product was overwhelmingly positive, the distributor also noted that, relative to more typical orders, scale is an even bigger part of the economics of the transaction.

Largely due to labor and time, margins are thinner when it comes to reusing materials from an introduced product, so a small order will not yield major results.

Think back to that 100-email-average in the discovery stage. That is a serious commitment for a small order, but it is simply not something that can be compromised.

There are a number of tests or non-starters that have to be determined in this stage:

- Two different plastics cannot be mixed together because it will then become harder to recycle later.

- Jumbling together different materials haphazardly would create a product less reusable than its current state.

“We’re very careful to ensure that even though we’re using the material in a circular way, we maintain that circularity beyond our production,” Gupta says. “Otherwise, it just kind of defeats the point.”

Rough Numbers

gomi makes all of its products from diverted waste of some form. It sources its own waste, which it can acquire fairly cheaply at a scale of about a ton (think food packaging or plastic bags).

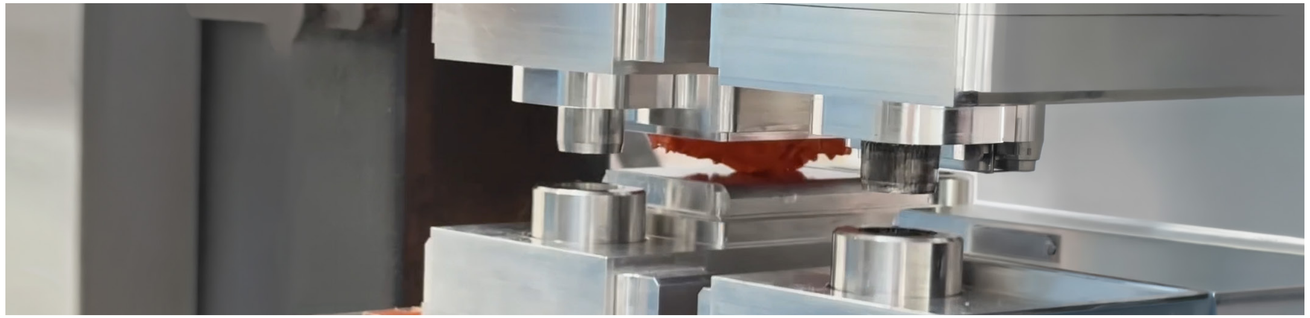
The cost of making power banks based out of Fluid Branding pens is about 50% more in material cost than it would be from using the waste acquired at scale.

This has almost nothing to do with process and everything to do with scale. The cleaning, sorting and shredding are the most expensive part of the process and at a ton, this process is much more efficient.

At a higher quantity, the cost of using Fluid Branding pen materials would be essentially the same.

For reference, the cost of recycled material, like what gomi uses, is roughly about 20% more expensive than using virgin material. Once again, this comes down to scale. There is more than enough waste. But virgin material is available at a scale of millions of tons compared to just tons of waste, so the two do not come out to equal scales.

But for gomi, the price is not impacted because its quantity per unit is low enough to be absorbable for the supplier.



What Is Circularity To gomi?

gomi is able to operate in a way that works within the parameters of its own success, which should be celebrated by just about any measure for those who applauded sustainability. But business is not a one-size-fits-all venture. So, what does circularity mean to gomi's CEO and co-founder?

"I think it's where the product has been designed to be repaired, replenished, reused and easily be donated at end of use," Gupta says. "I guess it's a combination of all three."

"I think it's where the product has been designed to be repaired, replenished, reused and easily be donated at end of use,"

- Rishi Gupta, CEO *gomi*