

The State of Responsibility 2023

PPAI research reveals how distributors and suppliers of all sizes are approaching CSR and assigns high marks to some of the companies doing it best.

By John Corrigan

orporate social responsibility has become a priority for most companies, especially those in the promotional products industry.

To be a good corporate citizen in 2023, a firm must commit to making a difference in the world, which includes supporting diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as sustainability and philanthropy.

As part of the PPAI 100 research program, the Association gathered benchmarking data provided by companies that appeared in the inaugural ranking of promo's leading distributors and suppliers, as well as those who didn't make this year's list or were too small to be eligible.

This report focuses on the very questions that allowed PPAI Media to score the PPAI 100's responsibility category. In it, we look at some key performance indicators of their businesses in terms of CSR, sharing the state of responsibility among the very largest companies in the industry, all the way down to the industry's more typical small businesses - suppliers earning less than \$5 million per year, and distributorships making less than \$1 million.

This article shares a breakdown of each benchmarking statistic, with insight and reaction from CSR decision-makers among companies who participated in the surveys.



Supplier Benchmarking

TABLE 1. Does your company have an established internal sustainability committee, "green team" or individual head of sustainability to lead advocacy for sustainability efforts?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Suppliers	78%	23%
Suppliers \$250M+	100%	0%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	78%	22%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	61%	39%
Suppliers Under \$5M	75%	25%

As the industry tries to scrub off its "brandfill" reputation, it's reassuring that more than half of suppliers of all sizes have designated a position or committee to leading advocacy for sustainability efforts.

"It should be no surprise that the larger suppliers have programs in place for sustainability, reusable energy and charitable cause marketing," says Brad Bartlett, president and owner of Dallas-based Opti Print & Fulfillment. "There's been a big push the last few years, and these results are duly noted."

TABLE 2. Has your company defined in writing its core commitments to sustainability?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Suppliers	67%	33%
Suppliers \$250M+	90%	10%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	65%	35%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	65%	35%
Suppliers Under \$5M	75%	25%

Dan Taylor, president and CEO of Virginiabased BamBams - ranked the No. 35 supplier in this year's PPAI 100 - didn't find the survey results to be terribly surprising.

"The CSR subject is challenging, and defining it is very subjective," Taylor says. "The pressure to meet and measure a predetermined list of criteria or values imposed on our company by others (that may or may not share the same perspective) was difficult, but certainly made me consider some new objectives for the future."







TABLE 3. Has your company completed a sustainability audit from EcoVadis or a similar organization?

	Completed	Underway	Waiting	Haven't solicited yet
PPAI 100 Suppliers	48%	3%	10%	40%
Suppliers \$250M+	70%	10%	10%	10%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	50%	0%	11%	39%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	26%	0%	4%	70%
Suppliers Under \$5M	50%	0%	25%	25%

Minnesota-based Ball Pro - ranked the No. 37 supplier in this year's PPAI 100 - hasn't undergone a sustainability audit yet, but Adam Hanson, president of the golf product specialist, says he's looking into it.

"We feel at this time it doesn't make sense to do as a company because it opens you up to other areas," Hanson says. "But it's definitely something that will happen more over time."

TABLE 4. Roughly what percentage of your company's product waste is included in a waste diversion program that includes monitoring and reporting?

PPAI 100 Suppliers	50%
Suppliers \$250M+	59%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	49%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	43%

It's not surprising that access to investment resources allows promo's larger companies to create programs for monitoring and reporting product waste, which is vital for ensuring a positive environmental impact. A statistically insignificant portion of suppliers under \$5 million reported answers to this question.

TABLE 5. Roughly what percentage of your company's packaging is recyclable, reusable, etc.?

PPAI 100 Suppliers	66%
Suppliers \$250M+	58%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	70%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	67%
Suppliers Under \$5M	63%

Sustainable packaging is beneficial, safe and healthy for communities throughout its lifecycle, which is why the majority of suppliers have transitioned to using packaging that consists of recyclable and reusable materials.

TABLE 6. Roughly what percentage of the products you sold in 2022 were marketed as sustainable?

PPAI 100 Suppliers	24%
Suppliers \$250M+	24%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	25%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	35%
Suppliers Under \$5M	48%

Silvia Pallaro, country manager for North America at New York City-based Atlantis Headwear, argues that it's still not common to find companies in the U.S. promo industry that are fully committed to sustainability.

The industry average "appears to be around 25%-28% here, which I believe isn't totally representative and is slightly too high," Pallaro says. She also notes that it's interesting to see smaller suppliers with a seemingly higher percentage of their offering marketed on sustainability grounds. "While the market is still far from being very sensitive to sustainability, this data demonstrates that sustainability is likely a focus of newer and younger companies and is likely to grow more and more in the future."

TABLE 7. Has your company invested in solar power or another form of reusable energy at your facilities?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Suppliers	23%	77%
Suppliers \$250M+	22%	78%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	22%	78%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	22%	78%
Suppliers Under \$5M	25%	75%



Based on the survey results, there's plenty of room for improvement when it comes to suppliers investing in reusable energy at their facilities.

After all, the investment is certainly worth it. For example, solar power is a renewable and infinite source of energy that's an easy and efficient way to offset carbon emissions. Furthermore, its processes don't emit pollutants, so it doesn't contribute to climate change the way burning fossil fuels does.

TABLE 8. Does your company have an established give-back program donating any percentage of revenue to a charitable cause?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Suppliers	73%	28%
Suppliers \$250M+	80%	20%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	72%	28%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	61%	39%
Suppliers Under \$5M	50%	50%

Although Ball Pro doesn't have an established give-back program, Hanson says the supplier participates in other charitable efforts, such as partnering with nonprofit Feed My Starving Children to pack food for malnourished kids in

nearly 70 countries. Even better, Hanson says Ball Pro employees get paid while volunteering with the organization.

"Giving back to your community is always a great thing to do," he adds.

TABLE 9. How often do your employees participate in DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) training?

	Quarterly/ more	Yearly/ more	Biannually/ more	Have in the past	Never
PPAI 100 Suppliers	8%	48%	5%	18%	23%
Suppliers \$250M+	10%	70%	0%	0%	20%
Supp. \$50M-\$250M	6%	56%	11%	22%	6%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	5%	32%	5%	23%	36%
Suppliers Under \$5M	0%	50%	25%	0%	25%

Aside from suppliers with revenue between \$5 million and \$50 million, the majority of suppliers in each category require their employees to participate in DEI training at least once a year. That might not be enough, according to Bartlett.

"This is one of the lowest categories as far

as participation goes," he says, "which I believe is because suppliers simply don't know where to find these services, especially a costeffective solution."

The PPAI Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Playbook is available for download at ppai.org/ advocacy/diversity-inclusion.

TABLE 10. Does your company employ a person or team dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.)?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Suppliers	95%	5%
Suppliers \$250M+	90%	10%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	94%	6%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	91%	9%
Suppliers Under \$5M	100%	0%

No surprise that this table had the highest percentage of "yes" responses from every supplier category in the report. Product safety and compliance is of the utmost importance, and suppliers clearly understand that designating a person or team to focus on product responsibility is simply a part of doing business in 2023.

TABLE 11. What percentage of your company's non-factory workforce is made up of women?

PPAI 100 Suppliers	62%
Suppliers \$250M+	60%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	64%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	63%
Suppliers Under \$5M	66%

As Josh Ellis, publisher and editor-in-chief of PPAI Media opined in September, "Promo's Future Is Female."

Women outnumbered men three to one in the 2023 PPAI Rising Stars, the latest in a three-year trend of women occupying more spots on the list than their male counterparts. Perhaps most striking of all, 130 of the contest's record 170 industry nominees this year were women. As evident by the data, promo firms are making a concerted effort to add and recognize more women in our traditionally male-dominated industry.

TABLE 12. What percentage of your company's non-factory workforce is non-white?

PPAI 100 Suppliers	43%
Suppliers \$250M+	53%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	40%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	38%
Suppliers Under \$5M	42%

Although the overall industry has made great strides, diversifying the nonfactory workforce remains a challenge for suppliers. Of course, it's a journey worth taking, as bringing a wide array of perspectives into your company can yield great results in terms of CSR, inclusion and profitability.

TABLE 13. What percentage of your company's non-factory workforce is under age 30?

PPAI 100 Suppliers	24%
Suppliers \$250M+	18%
Suppliers \$50M-\$250M	25%
Suppliers \$5M-\$50M	24%
Suppliers Under \$5M	27%

"I believe PPAI could provide leadership in attracting younger participants to our industry," Bartlett says. "We need to somehow show how our industry is a great place for young, qualified and educated candidates. This isn't just an industry that people fall back on, it needs to be an industry that young talent wants to be a part of from the start."



New Suppliers Earning High Marks

These firms didn't make our original rankings, but each matched the average responsibility score of PPAI 100 suppliers.























Atlantis Headwear

New York City-based Atlantis Headwear is one of the few suppliers to report that every single product sold in 2022 was marketed as sustainable.

Black Forest

Owatonna, Minnesota-based Black Forest has defined in writing its core commitments to sustainability.

Diamondback Branding

Austin, based Diamondback Branding has an established give-back program donating a percentage of revenue to a charitable cause.

Gill Studios

Not only has the Kansas-based company behind Gill-Line defined its sustainability commitments in writing, it has also built them into its employee code of conduct.

Gordon Sinclair

Gordon Sinclair in Valley Stream, New York, has completed a sustainability audit.

ICEMULE Coolers

ICEMULE Coolers in St. Augustine, Florida, reports that 75% of its packaging is considered sustainable and that 50% of its product waste is included in a waste diversion program that includes monitoring and reporting.

Los Altos Trophy

Cypress, California-based Los Altos Trophy employs staff dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.).

MediaTree

MediaTree in Parsippany, New Jersey, reports that 100% of its packaging is recyclable or reusable and that half of products sold in 2022 were marketed as sustainable.

Opti Print & Fulfillment

Dallas-based Opti Print & Fulfillment has established an internal sustainability staff to lead advocacy for eco-friendly efforts.

Picnic Time Family of Brands

Moorpark, California-based Picnic Time Family of Brands has invested in solar power or another form of reusable energy at its facilities.

Redwood Classics Apparel

Toronto, based Redwood Classics Apparel reports that 100% of products sold in 2022 were marketed as sustainable.

Distributor Benchmarking

TABLE 1. Does your company have an established internal sustainability committee, "green team" or individual head of sustainability to lead advocacy for sustainability efforts?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Distributors	82%	18%
Distributors \$250M+	90%	10%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	74%	26%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	65%	35%
Distributors Under \$5M	27%	73%

"It's great to see that many distributors are creating the space for a dedicated person or team to lead this type of work," says Mel Hubner, director of social impact and sustainability at Raleigh, North Carolina-based Brand Fuel. "It requires an innovative mindset, expertise and passion for elevating our industry. Engaging the team in the company's sustainability efforts is also critical, so establishing an internal committee can drive lots of positive change as well."

TABLE 2. Has your company defined in writing its core commitments to sustainability?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Distributors	85%	15%
Distributors \$250M+	90%	10%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	74%	26%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	70%	30%
Distributors Under \$5M	33%	67%

"Large companies with revenues exceeding \$250 million are at the forefront of internal sustainability initiatives, often forming dedicated committees and documenting their sustainability commitments," says Bart Simpson, president of Hixson, Tennesseebased Flywheel Brands. "They also lead in sustainability audits, office recycling programs and investments in renewable energy. Moreover, these companies have more robust charitable give-back programs and prioritize DEI training."









TABLE 3. Has your company completed a sustainability audit from EcoVadis or a similar organization?

	Completed	Underway	Waiting	Haven't solicited yet
PPAI 100 Distributors	36%	15%	6%	42%
Distributors \$250M+	50%	20%	10%	20%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M	32%	11%	0%	58%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	30%	4%	4%	61%
Distributors Under \$5M	7%	7%	0%	87%

David Tate, president of Memphis, Tennesseebased Signet, speculates that the data shown above shines a light on how distributors are truly faring when it comes to sustainability. "Most all respondents are stretching to say yes," he says. "Note the suddenly low percentage for the EcoVadis audit and you most likely get a truer picture of percentages, or at least

somewhere in the middle."

Regardless of how accurate the percentages may be, Tate stresses that there is a "great need" for the industry to be "mindful and purposeful" about CSR. "The real key is, are we as an industry dealing with these issues - and the answer is yes," he says. "The good news is that more and more will make progress."

TABLE 4. Has your company implemented a comprehensive office recycling program that includes monitoring and reporting?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Distributors	70%	30%
Distributors \$250M+	90%	10%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	58%	42%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	39%	61%
Distributors Under \$5M	27%	73%

"As usual, the larger companies have a larger percentage of participation in all the areas because they most likely devote personnel and resources to them and can justify them due to their volume," Tate says. "Smaller distributors aren't willing to deploy the resources due to the cost."

TABLE 5. Roughly what percentage of the products you sold in 2022 were marketed as sustainable?

PPAI 100 Distributors	21%
Distributors \$250M+	23%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M	24%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	22%
Distributors Under \$5M	29%

"In order to ensure we're moving in the right direction and setting realistic but also ambitious goals, distributors must be able to measure and track our sales based on impact-driven categories, such as sustainability, DEI, small business, etc.," Hubner says.

"It's not a secret that most of us are still trying to figure out the most efficient and accurate way to do that," she adds. "At Brand Fuel, we believe this process starts by increasing communication and collaboration between distributors and suppliers. We all hold a piece of the puzzle we just need to come together and create a common system for categorizing products and tracking sales."

A seeming anomaly is that PPAI 100's industry-leading distributors say they sold fewer products marketed on sustainable grounds than other segments. Alok Bhat, PPAI's market economist and senior manager of research,

explains there is likely some self-selection bias among smaller segment companies that elected to take the responsibility survey. Likewise, larger companies may be more careful about their claims to avoid greenwashing concerns.

TABLE 6. Has your company invested in solar power or another form of reusable energy at your office(s)?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Distributors	30%	70%
Distributors \$250M+	70%	30%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	16%	84%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	13%	87%
Distributors Under \$5M	0%	100%

Considering their lack of resources, it's no surprise that distributors with \$50 million and under in revenue face challenges in matching the sustainability efforts of their larger counterparts. "Still, the survey underscores the growing importance of CSR, highlighting the need for all businesses to incorporate sustainability into their strategies to meet evolving consumer and stakeholder expectations," Simpson says.

TABLE 7. Does your company have an established give-back program donating any percentage of revenue to a charitable cause?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Distributors	61%	39%
Distributors \$250M+	100%	0%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	53%	47%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	57%	44%
Distributors Under \$5M	67%	33%

Philanthropy is a pillar of the promo industry, as evidenced by more than half of distributors in each category having an established give-back program. Many firms partner with charities for fundraising efforts and volunteering opportunities to make a difference in their community.

TABLE 8. How often do your employees participate in DEI training?

	Quarterly/ more	Biannually/ more	Yearly/ more	Previously	Never
PPAI 100 Distributors	30%	9%	46%	3%	12%
Distributors \$250M+	30%	20%	40%	10%	0%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	26%	5%	47%	5%	16%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	9%	9%	44%	9%	30%
Distributors Under \$5M	0%	21%	7%	7%	64%

When dealing with Fortune 500 clients with diversity departments and sustainability groups within their companies, Tate claims they rarely have passion for either effort.

"As long as one gives them lip service, they tend to move on," he says. "Many of our large clients give it lip service as well. Of course,

TABLE 9. Does your company employ a person or team dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.)?

	Yes	No
PPAI 100 Distributors	85%	15%
Distributors \$250M+	90%	10%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M+	74%	26%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	70%	30%
Distributors Under \$5M	33%	67%

Distributors' percentages across the board are much lower than suppliers' percentages, which makes sense considering that the latter are more hands-on in the production process. However, in the promotional products industry, product safety is everyone's responsibility.

one needs to check all the boxes for sourcing, RFPs, etc., but past that, we still don't see much interest in the compliance factor. That said, even if we don't have to comply nearly as much as indicated by clients, we still need to be doing it to be good citizens, stewards of the earth and for so many other altruistic reasons."

TABLE 10. What percentage of your company's workforce is made up of women?

PPAI 100 Distributors	64%
Distributors \$250M+	60%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M	64%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	70%
Distributors Under \$5M	82%

Chris Huebner, president of Bethesda, Maryland-based Mac Mannes, was impressed that the majority of distributors in every category report that half or more of their workforce consists of women. "I'm pleasantly surprised that number is so high," says Huebner, hopeful that the trend continues.

TABLE 11. What percentage of your company's workforce is non-white?

PPAI 100 Distributors	26%
Distributors \$250M+	27%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M	26%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	22%
Distributors Under \$5M	34%

Conversely, there's plenty of room for improvement when it comes to distributors having a diverse workforce. "Clearly, we have a ways to go in the ethnicity department," Huebner says.

TABLE 12. What percentage of your company's workforce is under age 30?

PPAI 100 Distributors	28%
Distributors \$250M+	32%
Distributors \$50M-\$250M	26%
Distributors \$5M-\$50M	22%
Distributors Under \$5M	25%

Although the promo industry traditionally skews older, there's been a push in recent years to inject more youth on both the supplier and distributor side. In order to better understand young consumers' interests and preferences, it's wise for distributors in particular to recruit more millennials and Gen Zers who are more aligned with buyers. Of course, to ensure young people will enjoy lengthy, fruitful careers in promo, it's up to companies to educate and train them on the inner workings of the industry.



New Distributors Earning High Marks

These firms didn't make our original rankings, but each matched the average CSR score of PPAI 100 distributors.





















American Diversity

Glenwood, Minnesota-based American Diversity employs a person or team dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.).

Artcraft Promotional Concepts

Moorestown, New Jersey-based Artcraft Promotional Concepts has invested in solar power or another form of reusable energy at its office.

Barker Specialty

Cheshire, Connecticut-based Barker Specialty is currently waiting for its sustainability audit from EcoVadis or a similar organization to begin.

Bob Lilly Promotions

Bob Lilly Promotions in Garland, Texas, has an established internal sustainability committee, "green team" or individual head of sustainability to lead advocacy for ecofriendly efforts.

Boost Engagement

Dayton, Ohio-based Boost Engagement has completed a sustainability audit from EcoVadis or a similar organization.

Brand Fuel

Raleigh, North Carolina-based Brand Fuel, which earned its B Corp certification in September 2022, has an established director of social impact and sustainability.

City Apparel + Merch

Findlay, Ohio-based City Apparel + Merch requires employees to participate in DEI training at least twice a year.

Concord Marketing Solutions

Concord Marketing Solutions in Glendale Heights, Illinois, has completed a sustainability audit from EcoVadis or a similar organization.

Flywheel Brands

Hixson, Tennessee-based Flywheel Brands has implemented a comprehensive office recycling program that includes monitoring and reporting.

Grapevine Designs

Lenexa, Kansas-based Grapevine Designs employs a person or team dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.).































Graphic Stylus

Houston-based Graphic Stylus has an established give-back program donating a percentage of revenue to a charitable cause.

Haymaker Promotions

Baltimore-based Haymaker Promotions, whose entire workforce consists of women, has an established give-back program donating a percentage of revenue to a charitable cause.

Kite Meeting Management

Kite Meeting Management, a womanowned business in Piqua, Ohio, has defined in writing its core commitments to sustainability.

Logotology

Richardson, Texas-based Logotology employs a person or team dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.).

Mac Mannes

Bethesda, Maryland-based Mac Mannes has defined in writing its core commitments to sustainability.

MadeToOrder

Oakland, California-based MadeToOrder requires employees to participate in annual DEI training.

MARCO Ideas Unlimited

Portland, Oregon-based MARCO Ideas Unlimited has an established give-back program donating a percentage of revenue to a charitable cause.

Martket Branding

Canadian distributor Martket Branding, headquartered in Vancouver, British Columbia, reports that 80% of products sold in 2022 were marketed as sustainable.

A Ton of Graphics

A Ton of Graphics in Mountain Top, Pennsylvania, requires employees to participate in DEI training every year.

North Georgia Promotions

North Georgia Promotions in Alpharetta, Georgia, employs a person or team dedicated to ensuring product responsibility (product safety and compliance such as California Prop 65, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, etc.).

Quality Resource Group

Plymouth, Minnesota-based Quality Resource Group has completed a sustainability audit from EcoVadis or a similar organization.

Show Your Logo

Oswego, Illinois-based Show Your Logo has invested in solar power or another form of reusable energy at its office.

Signet

Memphis, Tennessee-based Signet has implemented a comprehensive office recycling program that includes monitoring and reporting.

Social Good Promotions

Carey, Ohio-based Social Good Promotions requires employees to participate in DEI training at least twice a year.

To The Market

To The Market in Lexington, Kentucky, reports that every single product sold in 2022 was marketed as sustainable.

Corrigan is a news editor at PPAI.