



The Rado-esque Gryphon watch.



The 1993 'Time to Buy a Renault' watch.



The Russian military case watch commissioned by California-based amplifier company Manley.



The Promotions Collection



A union gift to US postal workers in the 1980s.



A watch to announce a new branch of London's DLR.



Movie time to promote 1992 Spanish film *Jamon Jamon*.



Collecting watches is an inherently expensive pursuit in the eyes of many – at the very least, noteworthy mechanical watches start in the low hundreds, unless you're blindingly lucky at boot fairs. So what would you say to a field of watch collecting that initially costs you absolutely nothing?

Ken Kessler

Promotional watches are, by their very nature, freebies. They are gifts from manufacturers handed out for advertising and good will purposes. The variety is limitless and such watches are intrinsically worthless, because, as one sage told me, "anything given away has no value." You might dispute that if someone handed you a nice, rose gold Greubel-Forsej, but you get my drift.

From baseball caps to t-shirts, carrier bags to umbrellas, promotional items cover a vast array of objects. You wouldn't think that watches, costlier to produce than other items, would lend themselves to promotional generosity – which they didn't before quartz arrived. In the days of mechanical-only watches, those given to customers, sales representatives, journalists or other likely recipients still would have cost enough to limit largesse. They included mass-market watches with automotive connections (QP37), such as novelty items shaped like steering wheels as well as more expensive gifts made by Cartier, Rolex or the like.

With the arrival of battery-powered, plastic-cased clones in the wake of Swatch (and even that watch-of-the-people is too dear to give away in vast quantities), it became possible to produce watches with brands' logos on the dials for as little as £1 per watch. And that is not a lot to pay for something that will cause its wearer to see a logo every time he or she checks the time. Forget the apocryphal subliminal advertising flashing up in movies in the 1950s: a brand's emblem on a watch dial is a blatant, omnipresent reminder that the watch was given to the wearer by a soft drink supplier, hi-fi company, local cinema or pizza restaurant.

Acquiring promo watches requires being in the right place at the right time, or working in an industry that generates a number of promotional items such as the music, film or fashion businesses. My personal selection consists mainly of those that reflect involvement in a field far-removed from watch journalism, namely writing about hi-fi equipment. You could easily substitute 'car journalist' and find a writer with a drawer full of plastic tick-tocks with automotive logos. But let's start with a freebie watch offered to the public rather than to insiders.



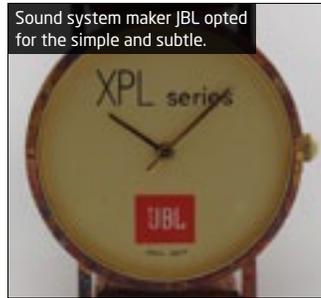
The Swatch lookalike from film company Ilford.



Marantz's steel and gold offering.



A classy look for high end audio equipment supplier Krell.



Sound system maker JBL opted for the simple and subtle.



A selection of Musical Fidelity promo watches from the 1990s and 2000s.

Time to buy

Details are a bit hazy, but back in 1993, Renault launched a UK campaign to pull punters into showrooms with the slogan 'Time to Buy a Renault' (pun fully intended). By turning up at a Renault showroom, you could claim your free watch, which also entitled you to enter a competition with prizes including travel vouchers and £20,000 to spend on a Renault. But forget about that. As promo watches go, it was pretty cool: very Swatch-like in execution, with yellow-and-grey dial, black case, black hands, yellow rubber strap and black

buckle. And for those who hate the idea of wearing something that was obviously a freebie, the Renault logo was so discreet that you could wear it without suffering that particular concern.

Not so a watch from Ilford, a producer of black and white photographic film. They gave away a classy all-black Swatch-alike, but with the company's name in stark white, along with white hours, minutes and seconds hands. Metro Tartan, a film company of a different sort in that it distributed movies to cinemas as well as

producing DVDs, promoted the Spanish feature *Jamon Jamon* with a giveaway that was black like the Ilford, but with the dial showing a bull - the movie's logo - in black with red and white text.

Yet another oddball watch was left to me by my father, a mechanical watch for the 1980 Mail Handlers Conference, for a US postal workers' union of which Dad was a member and one-time local chapter president. It's cheap and cheerful, but also novel: the entire dial rotates, instead of it carrying a seconds hand.

David Duggan

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A ref. 1400 Rolex Air-King with Domino's Pizza logo, circa 1997 sold at Antiquorum's New York sale on 18 June 2008 for \$3,120.



The Rolex Oysterdate Precision with Coca Cola logo on the dial made in 1981 that sold at Antiquorum's Geneva sale on 11 November 2007 for SFr.14,400.



Kenwood's fashion conscious black timepiece.



NAD kept it dark and simple.

Career privileges, though, account for how I ended up with a few dozen promotional watches of a singular theme. Because the hi-fi industry is techy and all about boys' toys, a freebie wristwatch for reps, retailers, distributors, the press, repeat customers and the like is a natural for spreading the word. The pile built up over the years, and it was only when I pulled out the box full of watches, ranging from cheesy plastic to cool plastic to a bunch with proper stainless steel cases, that I realised how the genre of 'Promotional Wristwatches' now has its own sub-categories.

Sound gifts

Amongst them were timepieces mainly from the major audio brands, for they have (or had) the budgets that enabled them to commission such items in the many hundreds or even thousands. The smaller companies, especially those selling costly high end audio gear, would issue fewer pieces but they could afford to specify nicer watches. The slim, metal-cased watch from Danish hi-fi manufacturer Gryphon, for example, actually has a whiff of Rado cool about it, and its long, rectangular box wouldn't disgrace a commercial offering.

Marantz's steel-and-gold confection, and Monster Cable's, Krell's and JBL's gold-plated models looked dressy enough from a distance. Clearly, they chose a different path from loudspeaker manufacturer Tannoy, who went for a funky green item. Kenwood's and NAD's watches actually feature black-coated metal cases, which give their watches a bit of heft and make them more covetable.

Manley, an amplifier company based in Chino, California, is owned by a delightful whacko named Eveanna Manley - a

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Shouting out the message with Tannoy.



An early incarnation of an Ernst Benz sold by phono cartridge manufacturer Benz-Micro.

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"biker chick" who's obsessed with valve amplifiers. Typical of her approach to marketing her products is a t-shirt that reads "Chino - Not China!!!" For the now-rare Manley giveaway watch, Eveanna commissioned a batch of Russian watches, in a pukka Russian military case with rotating bezel and cheesy cardboard box.

One hi-fi manufacturer, however, upped the ante with a series of watches from the mid-1990s and into the Noughties, pieces, which vastly transcend the humble nature of promotional watches. The reason is simple: the company's founder, Antony Michaelson, is a hardcore watch enthusiast, with a taste for tourbillons. And while he wasn't inspired to commission, say, Philippe Dufour or Parmigiani Fleurier to produce a batch of watches with 'Musical Fidelity' on the dials, he did eschew the Swatch-alike route.

"I wanted to generate goodwill, a way of saying thanks to dealers who supported

us, plus the press and the distributors. And I wanted the watches to reflect the quality we strive for, even though they were given away." Over the years, he handed out watches - in the thousands - with stainless steel cases, one model a black-coated steel diving watch, others with solid silver cases, all housing Japanese quartz movements. Four of the 16 models he released even had Swiss-made mechanical movements. And the selection shows that the person who designed the watches knows his haute horlogerie.

Among the models that inspired the Musical Fidelity pieces were Breguet's Type XX, a Jorg Schauer chronograph and a A. Lange & Söhne. They came in metal boxes, wore leather or rubber straps, felt and looked expensive and never seemed to leave the wrists of their recipients. For his company's 20th anniversary, Antony sourced a tonneau-shaped dress watch reminiscent of certain Cartiers, with guilloche dial and Breguet hands. As

freebies go, the Musical Fidelity watches certainly undermine the adage about something free and its lack of value.

Cream of the crop

For some companies, though, only a watch from a major house would do, provided the watchmaker didn't mind its logo sharing dial space with another brand's and, as those who pore over the auction catalogues know, sometimes the famous and familiar watch brands allowed the odd promotional model to emerge. Amongst the most famous is the Rolex Air-King with the Domino's Pizza logo on the dial. These show up occasionally in auction; recent Googling turned up a typical example, one from 1997, with a price in the \$3500-\$4000 region. Find the right Rolex obsessive, and it will go higher. Whether these were given to employees for exceptional service or only to franchise owners is unclear, but there have been a number of variations spotted by Rolexophiles, so Domino's certainly had a reasonable number made.

Less common is a Rolex with the Coca-Cola logo and "25 Years Service" on the dial, a gold Oyster Perpetual given to employees for a quarter-century devotion. The genuine Rolex with Coca-Cola logo should not be confused with a fake Rolex Submariner currently being flogged online, with red dial and bezel and Coca-Cola logo at the six o'clock position, and bearing the almost witty model name of "Colamariner". It's a fake, pure and simple. And as for the term "Pepsi Cola Rolex", that has nothing to do with promotional watches: it's the nickname given to the Rolex GMT with red and blue bezel because they're Pepsi's colours.

Airlines, too, sourced top brand watches for promo purposes. Gruen once offered the AirFlight with the American Airlines logo, a watch now worth \$1,000-1,500, while Pan-Am had its own watches, far removed from the Rolex GMT they inspired: a 1960s watch made with a Lucite case, the Pan-Am logo filling the dial.

In June of this year, while on a press trip, I saw that a colleague was wearing an



Yamaha's recent Victorinox Swiss Army watch.



A Jean Richard chronograph commissioned by Nagra in 2000.



A Zeno-Basel automatic with day and date, promoting and subsidised by turntable maker EMT.

interesting chronograph. Stainless steel, quartz, Swiss-made, handsome and robust, it was a proper Victorinox Swiss Army of fairly recent vintage. But also on its dial was the Yamaha logo. Fortunately, I had my camera with me, so I grabbed a shot of it, if for no other reason than to illustrate how two utterly disparate brands can come together for unusual one-offs with a certain amount of cachet and collectability. For the pianos, audio equipment or motorcycles? It worked for all of Yamaha's pursuits.

Selling the brand

A slightly grey area, peripheral to watches that are given away, consists of a recent phenomenon: promotional watches you actually purchase. Some years ago, a hi-fi company called Benz-Micro, which manufactures phono cartridges, turned up at a hi-fi show with a titanium-cased, oversized automatic, with date and red sweep hand. It was only a few hundred bucks. Take off the 'Micro', put 'Ernst' in front of 'Benz' and you find it was the precursor to a now-well-established watch brand with its roots in hi-fi.

This year, while attending the huge specialty audio fair in Munich, I visited

the EMT stand, the company responsible during the heyday of the LP for producing some of the world's finest turntables, beloved of radio stations because of their durability. The brand is back, and is extremely proud of its Swiss-ness. On offer, for an embarrassingly low price, was a steel military-style automatic with day and date, and Zeno-Basel's name at the 12 o'clock position. EMT's logo nestles at the six. Based on one of Zeno's entry-level basic models, it's a terrific little watch with its price subsidised in some manner by EMT.

But do any of these watches enjoy collector's values? It all depends on your sense of humour and fields of interest. If, for example, you adore Renaults, and the Renault giveaway watch turned up on eBay, you might be tempted to bid for it up to a point beyond what you would pay for a current Swatch. If you're a hi-fi nut, the brand closest to your heart might inspire the same.

But such watches are, for the most part, given away because they are so downright inexpensive. It's the Rolex Domino Pizza watches that fetch serious money, and I,

as one whose prominent girth owes much to that company, would have no problem wearing a Rolex with their red and blue logo on it.

What cannot be priced with any accuracy are models without precedent, and which enjoy an element of obscurity. Swiss brand Nagra, one of the finest hi-fi manufacturers in the world, commissioned a handful of Jean Richard chronographs in 2000, with the Nagra logo on the back. The watch was given to certain employees, as well as being handed out as an award to a handful of writers for excellence in the field. This model was emphatically not for sale.

Conversely, in 1997, high-end audio manufacturer Cello sourced around 100 watches with gorgeous porcelain dials, in solid rose gold cases, as gifts for special clients, employees and other worthies. I was once told that they could be purchased for \$6,000-7,000, while there were whispers that a certain *haute horlogerie* manufacturer supplied the movements. Then again, a friend of mine that owns one tells me it loses three minutes a day. But if you loved Cello hardware, that probably wouldn't matter. ☺