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Photo courtesy Adera Corporation.

The Grand Exhibit



Exhibitions and trade shows are holding a commanding presence in big cities and small towns alike across the continent. Millions of dollars are being added to local economies where convention centers thrive. Creating a convention-based infrastructure will boost competition for a variety of trade shows. This can extend the bonus to any municipal till. Competition is also heated *at* the exhibit hall itself. So, how do you gain the upper hand over the hall competition? A distinct advantage can be obtained by utilizing large and grand format output.

One important contingent at a trade show event is the exhibitors. They are the people and companies that are, of course, doing the exhibiting, and, therefore, the selling, as well. They have a minimum amount of time to make the maximum impact on the other important group of people, the attendees. These are the persons attending the trade show with the intent of purchasing the goods and services that are on display. These two groups, exhibitors and attendees, go hand-in-hand. What the attendees see at the exhibit hall will affect their perception of the available goods and services. What the exhibitors display affects what the attendees see. Visual impact is one of the most important factors in any successful trade show marketing. Good marketing is often creating a good perception, and good graphics can do this job.



In its simplest form, connecting with the potential customer starts well in advance of the actual show. It can take the form of a simple line of copy at the bottom of a pragmatic *Sign Builder Illustrated* advertisement such as “See us at USSC booth #219.” I know you’ve probably seen them before. If you are going to attend the show, it might translate into a mental note. At the show hall, though, the circus is in full swing, and the commotion and confusion may also become a diversion. Connecting with the on-site customer must begin before they even enter the hall.

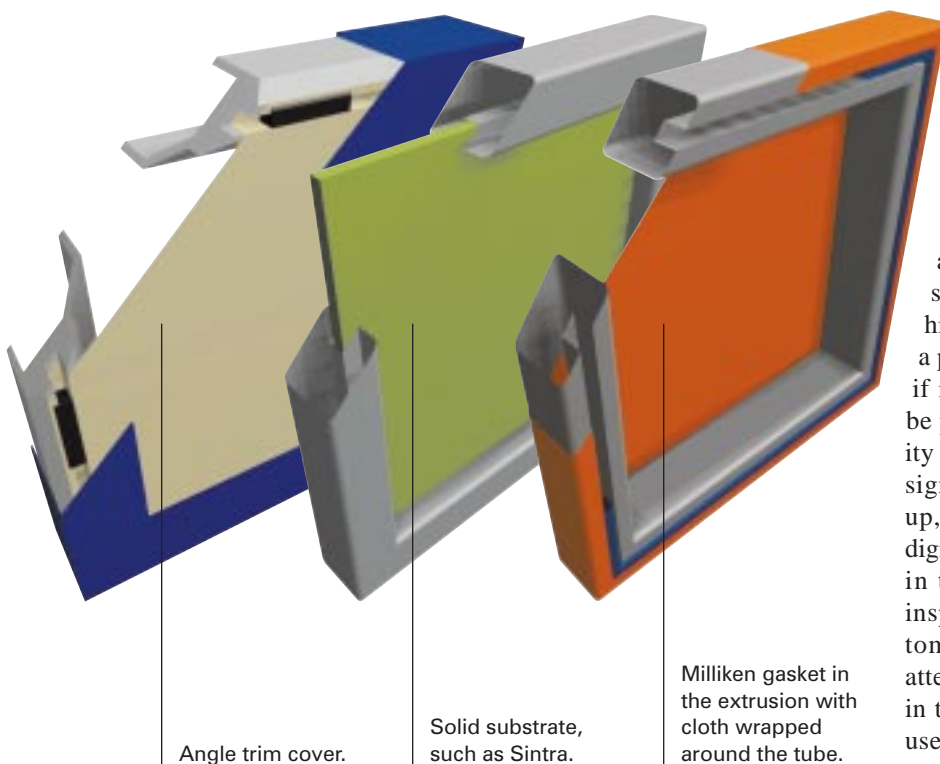
time frame is the key. One must compress the sign industries’ weeks or months of product and brand recognition down into only a few days, albeit days filled with a large quantity of qualified viewers. While outdoor signs and billboards are viewed by thousands of people hoping to catch the potential buyer, trade shows provide a venue where the sign viewers could *all* be customers. In other words, the greater the outlay, the greater the potential.

Bigger is better.

Sign industry experience in large and grand format output is ahead of their exhibit industry counterparts. For example, vinyl cutters have become the norm in the exhibit industry, while they have been mandatory in the sign world for years (over a decade?). Large format output is, and continues to become, a key part of the mix in the sign industry. Tradition has seen the expenses of photographic enlargements, so predominant in exhibits, give way to the lower costs of digital output. While photographic photos have not been a product in the sign industry, the merging of two diverse graphic styles has been implemented by the increased quality of the digital output, towards the level of the photo, and the lowering of the cost factor towards that of vinyl. The sign industry is in the right place at the right time.

Did you ever realize, when you are walking down the aisles at a trade show, that the fraction of time you spend passing a potential vendor’s exhibit is microscopic compared to the days spent at the show as an attendee? Major yearly trade shows warrant more than a few hours cruising the aisles. However, the burden of making the connection is placed directly on the shoulders of the exhibitor.

Signs are most often long-term, like a main identification at a fast food restaurant or of the contracted type on billboards, walls, and kiosks. The short-term nature of the exhibit market may befuddle the average sign company. On the other hand, the potential revenue may beguile. The cost of creating large and grand format graphics for exhibitions and trade shows is no less than normal. The understanding of the short



Angle trim cover.

Solid substrate, such as Sintra.

Milliken gasket in the extrusion with cloth wrapped around the tube.

Think in different terms for a large-scale exhibit graphic, such as short-term use (even though many graphics are eventually reused). Exhibit graphics are typically used and stored indoors and produced in very limited quantities. There are fast turn-around times (short, almost impossible lead times) and the desire for a higher level of quality. Quality is not a problem with the sign industry. So, if it’s not, then what is? That would be perception. The judgment of quality is based on close-up scrutiny. If a sign is on a building wall thirty feet up, it could have a reduced level of digital resolution that won’t be noticed in the final installation. Close-up inspection by the exhibitor, the customer and their customers, and the attendees is the norm for any graphic in the exhibit world, especially those used inside the hall. This potentially

higher level of quality may require additional attention and expertise. It also deems a different pricing structure.

Mounted

The variety of substrates used in exhibits depends on the end use. Some graphics are hung as banners, printed on traditional sign vinyl and complete with grommets and hems. Other graphics can be rolled up to ship in portable cases. The addition of flexibility often is in the form of a polycarbonate-based laminate or reverse-printed film. Reverse printing, on the second surface, becomes a protective coat in a world where there may be no chance to reprint a replacement. Sub-surface is a trait the sign industry understands all too well.

Solid substrates, such as PVC, foams, and graphic boards, also fit the bill for laminating graphics. Lightweight material is a requirement, with hand labor being the typical installation mode. Flammability is a rising concern. It is often better to address this issue than to second-guess it. The concern for safety, in a place of assembly, is an important one.

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Innovation

So, is a 10' x 20' flexible face print, in a lightweight, extruded aluminum frame considered to be innovation or old hat? The potential to transfer sign industry construction and components over to the exhibition market is often untapped. Again, keep in mind the perception that exhibit graphics need a higher level of quality. With the proliferation of large format digital printers, the printing may not be the essential ingredient to sign-designed exhibit graphics, but the overall execution of the job could be. A large format print in a simple aluminum frame, especially a large one, fills several requirements never often found in the sign business,

such as reduced weight, large size without the real mass, and simplification in the installation.

Exhibition installations are a manual process. They are short, and often, not so sweet. After all, time is money. The easier an exhibit property is to install, the higher that component's value will be. Case in point, cranes don't normally show up in an exhibition hall. If the procedure can be simplified, then the perceived value is again higher. So is weight an important factor? Yes! In handling for the installation? Yes! In shipping the

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graphic across the country to the next show hall? Yes! In saving drayage? Definitely, yes! And what exactly is drayage? I'm glad you asked. Drayage is the cost, to the exhibitor, to cover the handling and unloading of the exhibit properties. It is a tariff that is determined by the weight of the exhibition properties. Reducing the weight of the exhibit saves money time and time again.

Several sign industry components make the large and grand format graphic easy to use. Aluminum awning extrusions can be fabricated, cut, and rolled into simple or exotic frames. Prints are crated on, or applied to, light fabrics. The tensioning is limited as the weight of the fabric makes them easy to handle. A gasket seal may be all the holding power needed since flexible face retainers tension and hold, especially in the grand format. Framing is any excellent way of concealment. If the fastening system is bulky because of the graphic size, retainer or trim cover refines the look.

The usual bill of goods

If we skip the comparison of digital signs to digital exhibits, the sign industry has a batch of tricks that are well suited for use in exhibits. Big wall graphics (definitely grand format) can be printed and installed like outdoor

advertisements, assuming they aren't already large outdoor advertisements. This is definitely a sign installation. Finding the location, acquiring the permits (even short term), and masterminding the grand scale of the installation fits the sign industry to a "T." On occasion, a complete angle frame billboard structure is bolted together in a nearby parking lot and serves as a grand entry banner, even if only used for one week. Sign structures that are permanently standing serve an immediate need close to a convention facility, the main drive approaching the hall, or near the airport. Since grand format billboard prints are easy to place over an existing sign, a short-term customer's requirement can be easy to fill at a busy location.

Knowing when the show is in town is a very important factor in attracting and filling exhibition graphic needs. The services required for exhibits are very cyclical. Shows reoccur on an annual basis. Some are in the same city, again and again. Still, most others rotate. In the case of large format graphics on the inside of the hall, who you know matters more than where you are. These graphics are created in a variety of places. You'll probably want to ask yourself if there is an exhibit manufacturer nearby? Teaming up is a way to get a part of the business. The norm is for an exhibit customer to contract with a single source versus shopping for and assembling different aspects of the trade show themselves. It's like hiring an architect to take care of the designing, the planning, and the building of a facility.

Graphics that are located on the outside of the convention center are based on where you are. The location requirements, for readership on a outdoor billboard structure, hold true for grand exhibit graphics. Only the time frame changes. Contacting the local trade show organization, the one that promotes your locality, is a good start to knowing when the show is coming to town. ❏

Resources

TSEA or EDPA
To find a local exhibit builder

IAEM
To find the management of the local facility.