


# Make it Big, Make it Bold

Creating trade show and exhibit displays that really stand out



Renze Displays created a 20x30-foot exhibit for Image Metrix utilizing the Lumiture illuminated extrusion system by Exponents. Graphics were a combination of dye-sublimated sheer fabric, inkjet backlit Lexan and frontlit Sintra panels, and vinyl appliqué.



Renze Display built this 30x70-foot exhibit using the FOGA aluminum extrusion system, with custom canvas awnings, sculpted and painted foam props, dimensional letters, and a combination of frontlit inkjet graphics mounted to Dibond and backlit inkjet acrylic panels to go inside the FOGA frames.

BY JEFFREY STEELE

**R**egardless of the industry, growing numbers of print providers are turning out masterpieces for the trade show and exhibit markets. And that's no surprise. After all, new printer technologies, inks, substrates, and processes are putting enticing profit potential well within reach of many wide-format imaging pros.

To ensure you grasp the trends and opportunities available in this marketplace, as well as the means by which print providers gain and retain the business, we took the liberty of assembling a short list of companies that have navigated the sometimes-difficult waters of these markets and found gold.

In these pages, they tell you in their own words how they charted a course for success serving the trade show and exhibit segment, and how you can, too.

### Renze Display

Serving the trade show market is something Omaha-based Renze Display has been doing for a long time. Established in 1895, the company spent its first 30 years building parade floats. By the 1930s and '40s, it had branched out into all types of signage and traveling displays, which led later to producing point-of-purchase materials, screen printing, and trade show displays. Today, the company is about evenly divided between trade show markets and what it calls "branded environments," such as corporate lobbies and retail settings.

In trade shows, said executive vice-president Michael Compton, "we don't work for a particular type of industry, but we do work for advertising agencies and design firms. They provide the bulk of volume. We don't target or focus on any particular industry. Because of our geographic location [its offices are in Omaha and Kansas City], our bigger clients are in insurance, food, and agriculture."

Renze Display does very little marketing aimed at end users. That's because over the years the company has built solid relationships with agencies and design firms, and those shops have become something of de facto sales people for Renze. Compton doesn't have a single new business salesperson calling on prospects. Renze Display gets almost all new business from referrals.

But that's not to say the company doesn't do any advertising. Some of its most successful promotional efforts have been broadcast emails to past clients, depicting some of the "cool projects" the company has taken on, Compton said.

Because trade shows are such competi-

tive marketplaces, graphics on display at shows have to be as noticeable as possible, he added.

That's why Renze Display stresses to its clients that display graphics must be big and bold. "Trade shows are no place to be subtle," he said, noting gaining attention is the order of the day at a show. "You have to get impact."

Among completed work of which Renze Display is proudest, its ConAgra trade show and event graphics stand out. "It's not just that we're producing their large-format graphics, but the fact that it's food," Compton said. "We've got to really make that food look good. ConAgra's red logo, you have to make sure you hit it, no matter the substrate you're printing on. We're proud of doing just that."

Trends now impacting the trade show market have been taking shape for years, Compton said. Among the leading trends is the continued embrace of fabric. "Trade shows can be very expensive for clients, especially when it comes to shipping and material handling by the people running the show," he said.

"A fabric graphic may cost more than a non-fabric graphic [to produce], but that cost is more than offset by the cost savings in shipping, labor, and material handling.... Through the use of fabric and aluminum extrusion, we can create very large walls that are considerably lighter and easier to assemble than traditional wood and laminate structures."

Within the area of fabric, Renze Display is increasingly working with sheer fabrics. These materials allow clients to enjoy both a graphic presence at the booth and more light penetration for an airier and lighter ambience, he said.

Also within the fabric arena, suppliers have finally made greater strides with backlit fabric, Compton said. That allows Renze Display to create much larger, seamless light boxes than it could burdened with Plexiglas's limitations.

In the past, he said, his company would have to construct a large frame, putting backlit graphics on



or behind Plexiglas, which was very heavy and in very large sizes often was marred by unsightly seams.

Clients are also slowly starting to ask about more eco-friendly options, Compton said. "We do have a fair number of clients asking for green, but I haven't found anybody yet picking green over budget. To be fair, some of the green options don't cost any more than standard options, but some are more costly."

For wide-format professionals just entering the trade show field, one of the most daunting realizations is that many graphics are destined to be installed into modular display systems, where size and fit are absolutely critical. You can be off several feet when wrapping the side of a building. But some trade show systems are such that if a graphic is off by 1/16th of an inch, it won't work, Compton said.

Print service providers must make sure they talk

ically into a wide-format digital printing company.

It has built its reputation focusing upon quality, innovation, and sustainability, vice-president of sales and marketing Steve Kinney reported.

While Portland Color handles some graphic production for retailers and museums, its prime emphasis is on trade show work, specifically work in which it handles the entire build-out, including aluminum and fabric, Kinney said.

Like Renze Display's Compton, Kinney sees a major trend being the increasing reliance on fabric. "Fabric leads the charge, because its print quality has improved so much over the years," he said.

"That's as a result of the inks, the machine, the transfer paper, and the operators. Plus, it's much more cost-effective for shipping and set up. And it's elegant and presents a higher perceived value as far as the booth goes. Curved structures that can be wrapped with fabric make for beautiful presentations."

While Portland Color's customers are requesting green solutions, Kinney senses they aren't as savvy about sustainability as they should be. Clients, he said, "are calling for green materials, but do they know why? We want people to understand why it's important for us to give them recycled materials, and that they know how to 'close the loop.' If you start with something that's completely recyclable, where's it going to after the show? Will it go to Waste Management in a Tyvek envelope? Will it wind up in children's furniture, or perhaps in synthetic decking? This question applies to any kind of material, not just fabric."

As mentioned, Portland Color also handles exhibit work for museums, and here Kinney believes the trend is the move from silk screen to digital printing as UV flatbed and roll-to-roll technology improves.

"It depends on the run, and the adaptability of the piece, but there are cost savings there," he said.

Portland Color handles a substantial amount of work for the stores of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Kinney is seeing a migration of materials used in stores cross over to exhibit space. "The quality of digital printing has improved to the point where it's of museum quality," he said.

In fact, some of the company's most impressive work has been for the Metropolitan Museum of Art Alexander McQueen exhibit, he added. "We produced the McQueen design repeat using wall covering printed on our UV machine for the museum's retail locations."

Kinney's advice to newcomers: "Don't lose sight of being innovative, offering image quality, while focusing on sustainable print alternatives."



This is an example of the "build and burn" exhibit construction process for Leggett & Platt at Interzum 2011 in Germany. "Build and burn" is a common process in Europe where the exhibit is literally built right on the show floor, then the materials are recycled at the end of the show. Graphics are a combination of inkjet onto rigid substrate, vinyl appliqué on the woodgrain laminate and the clear plexi panel.

to the manufacturers of these modular systems to ensure their graphics will fit the specs, he added.

For many providers, growing accustomed to the time-sensitive nature of the business represents another hurdle. "The show must go on," Compton said. "So anyone getting into trade show graphics has to know there's no such thing as a rush job. Everything is a rush job."

### Portland Color

Also known for its work for the trade show industry is Portland Color. The 30-year-old company started out in the photo lab industry and grew organ-

## ColorEdge New York - Los Angeles

To a greater extent than does Portland Color, Burbank, CA-based ColorEdge New York - Los Angeles focuses on museum exhibit graphics. ColorEdge was a traditional photographic print house, and once duplicated a million slides a year, said senior account manager John Gibson. “Now we’re a digital print house, but we also have a ColorEdge Professional Services division,” he reported. “That offers design services, where we render things, help design firms with their business, and have a robust digital asset management division, in which we manage digital assets for them.”

While most of the company’s business is serving the retail industry, “exhibit signage is a fairly large part of our business,” Gibson said. “We did all the graphics for the King Tut exhibit that is still moving around the world. Every time it moves, it has to be reprinted. We value-engineer it with the designers, so we know ahead of time how close the public can get to the exhibit graphics. We become our customers’ best friend. By thinking ahead, and protecting them, we ensure they have fewer reprints next time the exhibit moves.”

At Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry, ColorEdge printed all the wallpaper for the Science Storms columns, Gibson added. The columns were 16 feet round and 16 feet tall, and all the wallpaper was printed in four individual pieces butt-seamed together to ensure no overlap. “The seams are almost invisible,” he said. “You have to get six inches away to see them.”

In addition, ColorEdge is handling the Dinosaur Mysteries exhibit at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Huge images of dinosaurs on pieces up to 60-by-20 feet serve as exhibit backdrops. Some murals have images of dinosaurs whose bones appear in front of the murals, Gibson said.

Trends in this segment, he said, include wallpaper, green consciousness, and what he calls “extreme customer service. If you don’t have that in your DNA, you’ll never make it.... Anticipate the needs of your clients, be their best friends, and be their partners. I give all my clients the same amount of attention. When they know you’re on their side and protecting them, they’ll come back to you because they know you’re on their team. Anyone in this business knows that.”

Gibson has actually dropped in at museums and told directors, “Some



## Chocolate: The Exhibition

**Customer:** MUZEO

**Production Shop:** Coloredge New York - Los Angeles

**Location:** Anaheim, CA

**Flight Date:** June 11 – September 11, 2011

**Project:** Help MUZEO to promote its new exhibit about chocolate.

Chocolate: The Exhibition and its national tour were developed by The Field Museum in Chicago and have most recently found its way to MUZEO in Anaheim, CA. ColorEdge New York - Los Angeles created multiple signs and graphics—from window graphics to sidewalk displays—to promote the four-month-long exhibit.

of your graphics need to be redone.” More often, however, ColorEdge is brought in on projects by design houses, exhibit producers, and companies hired to do what Gibson calls “the fixturing,” such as large display pieces for museums. “Museums are very complicated,” he concludes. “You work with all these trades, and have to really coordinate your efforts with theirs and the [museum] directors.” ●