



Design for exhibitions

Large-scale graphics and displays for exhibitions, expos and conferences used to have a staid image, but now, as Nick Spence discovers, it's a hotbed of creativity – and a great opportunity to promote your work to a wider audience

Seeing your work in print, online and on screen can be a thrilling prospect – all that hard work finally pays off and you get the chance to add another completed brief to your portfolio and client list. But beyond the confines of print and screen, there is another world to explore – the world of super-sized artwork: large-scale graphics and displays for exhibitions, expos, conferences, galleries, museums and other public spaces.

This part of design embraces numerous areas, including graphic design, 3D, interactivity, motion graphics, illustration, typography, sculpture and model-making. Offering creative opportunities for many, it can also lead to successful collaborations with everyone from fine artists to industrial printers. It's a potentially lucrative sector of the industry and one that, thanks to its sheer size, is likely to get you seen, whatever your specialist skills.

A new approach

Thankfully, in recent years a renewed focus on good design, combined with the realities of modern business life and technological innovations, has seen even the most bland of trade shows blossom thanks to eye-catching displays. "In the past, many exhibitions were seen as 'flag-waving' exercises, with companies attending shows for appearances and entertaining clients and customers," says Frank Peters, chief execu-

tive of the Chartered Society of Designers and The Design Association. "Such luxuries are no longer affordable and exhibitions must earn their keep to stay on the marketing radar."

Many companies are only too aware that a few posters stuck to a wall with Blu-Tac will no longer do the job properly. "Being a company that offers a range of design tools, having a well-designed exhibition stand is fundamental to showcase not only our creativity but the capabilities of our products," believes Ranjit Matharu, senior marketing communications manager of Adobe UK. "More importantly, it is an opportunity to demonstrate that we understand the needs of our audience by expressing our targeted value proposition. In doing so, we are able to drive people to the stand and create interactive experiences, so we can effectively engage with them."

Advances in technology have also played a major part, offering new ways of exhibiting and dramatically raising the bar of what is achievable. "The increased affordability of technologies has seen a massive increase in innovation," says Alec East, creative director of Do Tank, a company specialising in digital creative solutions. "The public's expectations are higher now than they were ten years ago," he adds. "Take a stroll through your nearest shopping centre to see how stores are including movement and interaction with their displays. Motion graphics are replacing the *PowerPoint* presentations that once accompanied speeches and meetings."

Technology has also helped to level the playing field, so you can now compete with bigger and more established companies than you could even a decade ago, as long as you're armed with a computer, software skills, good ideas and initiative. "Ultimately it's all about ideas and being better than the next person," says East, offering advice on breaking into the industry. "If you have no connections already, it will be tough, but go to a trade show or event you'd like to design for, try and reverse-engineer how much the design cost and see what you could do better for that budget. Then hit the client with a proposal, usually the marketing director. You'll get ignored or knocked back nine times out of ten, but occasionally you'll get through and might even win their next gig."

Attracting clients

Landing that initial job can be tricky, although being a smaller player can have its advantages – you can offer a more flexible, cost-effective approach to potential clients. Once you start to get established, proceedings can follow one of two routes: "Initial involvement always starts with the client," says Stephen Flanagan, creative director international of Four Communications Group, a creative communications company with offices in London, Dubai and Bahrain. "Some clients come armed with very prescriptive requirements, others with a blank canvas; both have their pros and cons."

"The best option is a blank canvas with a focused client, where both parties work coherently to achieve the desired output," Flanagan continues. "I am a firm believer that design should not be something that happens to a client, but a mutual endeavour where the results have a shared ownership. From first concept conversations on creative, briefs are developed, along with production timelines for what's required. From this point, everyone gets involved."

Opportunities can arise at various stages of the creative process – some working with in-house design teams, others calling in third-party talent. “At Adobe, we have an extensive bank of artwork, images and demos that are used in our exhibition stands, some of which are designed in-house and some by external designers,” says Matharu. “When deciding which of these are used at events such as IPEX and Mac Expo, it all depends on the theme of the stand and how we can best use the tools we have to engage with the audience.”

With deadlines and budgets always a priority, these large-scale projects are often the work of many hands. Few companies, however big, will be expected to produce the work from concept to completion without calling-in help. “Get to know third-party suppliers really well,” suggests Flanagan. “It is in their interests to give you as much information on developments in their sectors, such as printing, fabrication, moving image and interactive, because they depend on design practitioners to feed them work.”

Finding reliable suppliers who can supply key components of the finished project on budget – and on time – is absolutely vital. “Time management is critical to a successful production. You don’t want to be stuck in the difficult position of explaining ‘what might have been’ had you had more time,” says Flanagan.

Typically designers will approach specialists in areas such as large-scale printing to develop briefs beyond the ideas stage. With over 25 years in the industry, Rutters provides a host of image production services to businesses, including designers, broadcasters and filmmakers. If you want to turn your idea into reality, companies like this can help, and even install the finished design. Typically they can get involved with most things, from film and television backdrops to custom-made carpets, to conference and exhibition graphics and stands. “With one or two exceptions, the sky’s the limit,” says managing director Paul Rutter. “Advances in print and computer technology mean that we can print now almost anything at any scale, on any surface – and in record time.”

The technology

Rutters makes use of a giant Vutek UltraVu 5300 digital printing system, a solvent-based inkjet printer, which prints on uncoated vinyl and requires no lamination. The process is ideal for giant billboards, building wraps, vehicle wraps, bus wraps and outdoor signage. As the cost of such printers is upwards of £200,000, designers approach companies such as Rutters to produce the finished graphics. “Designers and design companies normally approach us to realise a client’s plans,” says Rutter. “We usually work with other people’s image files, supplied on CD, mainly on Macs using simple industry standard software such as *Photoshop* and *Illustrator*.”

“Budgets are set by the client and we work to produce a suitable graphic to a set time-scale and within practical limits,” Rutter continues. “Designers sometimes miss practical issues, such as health and safety, particularly when the graphic is destined for public spaces.” Happily, the company has seen a growing demand for more modest projects as the cost of producing large-scale graphics has fallen. Small design studios, artists and collectives can now produce large-scale work with the potential to attract clients and commissions and compete in this lucrative area.

Companies such as Rutters can supply one-off and short-run images on a wide range of materials, including fabrics, vinyls and laminates. As technology advances and the need to make a greater impact becomes paramount, the possibilities seem endless. "Occasionally, people come to us with an idea that seems impossible to reproduce, but our experience allows us to turn imagination into reality," Rutter concludes.

GIVE IT A GO

Fancy trying your hand at hosting your own exhibition? Team work and a head for planning is the key to success

Mounting your own show is one way to make a splash in this potentially lucrative area of design, but you'll need to get to grips with space and scale, budgets and logistics. Founded in 2005 by illustrator Joe Rogers, the We're Still Alive! collective promotes the work of around 20 Midlands-based artists and illustrators.

With a copy of an A-Z firmly in their hands, the team headed south for a successful winter show at London's fashionable Coningsby Gallery. "The budgets, themes, logistics and promotion of the show all had to be carefully planned well in advance," says Rogers. "Here, the advantages of exhibiting as a collective become apparent. As well as the collaboration between artists in a collective stimulating creativity and creative freedom, it also has more practical benefits, such as sharing costs and work load."

The collective called-in favours where possible. The striking exhibition window graphics were, for example, donated for free by a friend. The group then sent invites to magazines, galleries, agencies, art organisations and other interested parties from a database of around 1,000 contacts, as well as promoting via online blogs, forums and MySpace.

"This event will hopefully lead to further opportunities and commissions for the collective as a whole, and its individual members, as well as giving its members the freedom to pursue their personal projects, which they may otherwise neglect to spend time on," says Rogers.