

## **Exhibit Design Part 2: Looking beyond the trends**



**For MOVA, a high-resolution, motion-capture technology company, General Graphic Exhibits designed this 20'x40' custom rental hybrid using dye sublimation fabric and theatrical lighting.**

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As a subject, exhibit design is like an all-encompassing amoeba. Its many aspects are constantly in flux, absorbing new trends and taking on new shapes and forms in accordance with client demands and ever-evolving technology.

This second series installment includes highlights from four industry interviews, each of which focuses on one or more aspects of design's enormous impact on all phases of the tradeshow business.

## **Design as a means to better, more cost-effective rentals**

Chris Radovich, creative director at San-Francisco-based General Graphics Exhibits (GGE, [www.gge.com](http://www.gge.com)), said rental exhibits are benefiting enormously from all the new possibilities offered by recent innovations in exhibit design.

“They’re no longer limited to aluminum extrusion show packages,” he said of rentals. “The design challenge is to create solutions that reduce cost, while still maintaining strong brand identity and providing memorable experiences.”

Radovich, an award-winning designer with a degree in architecture, said GGE’s rental program gives clients exactly that: the possibility of a custom look for a fraction of the price. Options for GGE rentals now include theater lighting, high-end furniture, double-deck structures, hanging signage, desks and demo counters, and the wall system is designed for seamless finish, easy set-up and reduced shipping and drayage charges.

Radovich said rentals are no longer a “last-resort solution.” From a design standpoint, he said they’re becoming increasingly sophisticated.

“As the concept of rental exhibits expands, changes in graphics technology are helping to create custom looks,” Radovich explained. “The ability to print fabric in high color, seamless up to 16-feet wide by 150-feet long, has really influenced the way we design exhibits. We can treat the structure as an integral part of the message.”

Radovich said integrated exhibit graphics reinforce an exhibit’s overall communication program and that more and more exhibits are using multicolor design with extended palettes.

“In the past, a piece might have one or two theme colors,” he said. “Now designers can use the whole color wheel. And they can either print or use LED lighting to add accents in pure, hot tones or pastels. This is a big departure from the cautious palettes of the post-bust/9-11 era.”

Radovich said systems like Octanorm’s are used as an underlay structure, and that custom skins are placed over them.

“In combination with Octanorm, we’ve developed an aluminum panel system that’s very flexible,” Radovich said. “And as we’ve continued to grow this system, we’ve customized elements for integrated graphics, fabric, lighting, and structural design details.”

He said clients on a budget benefit from these improvements. As an example, he mentioned MOVA, a startup firm going to just one show a year.

“This company, a new company exhibiting its very hot motion scanning technology, needed a dynamic exhibit,” Radovich said. “The solution was large-format graphics, black fabric and dramatic lighting in conjunction with custom rental properties.”

Radovich said the MOVA exhibit shipped in just four crates, while a traditional custom exhibit would have taken at least twice that many.

“A combination of large-scale fabric graphics, theatrical lighting, Octanorm and our GGE panel system delivered a lasting impression on the show-floor – and for a budget of under \$84 a square foot.”

Radovich said use of custom rental hybrids “has skyrocketed in the past few years,” partly because they reduce costs of I&D, shipping and drayage. “But they also allow for budgets to be allocated to other marketing areas,” he said. “There are no storage costs. Nor is there any need for ongoing refurbishment or repairs.”

Radovich said today’s rentals can meet any number of exhibiting needs. Additional reasons that point toward the rental option include:

- When planning time is short.
- When several overlapping tradeshows make it necessary for a client to have more than one exhibit.
- When a company doesn’t do enough tradeshows to justify purchasing an exhibit.
- When a client simply wants to expand its current tradeshow display for a particular event.

“And for the international exhibitor, rental exhibits have been a no-brainer,” he added. “Shipping large elements overseas is impractical and cost prohibitive.” Radovich emphasized that international exhibits need to be inherently flexible. They need to be adaptive not only to exhibitor needs, but to multicultural expectations and subtleties, challenges and opportunities of off-shore venues, and demands of global marketing practices.

Rentals are but a fraction of GGE’s overall business. Now in its fifth decade, the company provides complete integrated event marketing services for the tradeshow, museum and creative communities.





**At TS2, Abex introduced a new Studio Abex hybrid exhibit featuring the products and services of its new Studio Abex product line.**

**Design as versatile hybrid:  
the right exhibit for every budget**

For Studio Abex, a new service and product concept for Abex distributors that debuted at TS2, every design is tailored specifically to end-user needs.

“Studio Abex will be featured at the EDPA convention,” said Robbie Blumenfeld, president and CEO of Los Angeles-based Abex Display Systems ([www.abex.com](http://www.abex.com)). “We’re focusing our energies on its products and services.”

Now in its 26th year, Abex is a worldwide builder and manufacturer of portable, modular exhibits for clients typically earning “between \$1 million to \$30 million in annual revenue,” according to Blumenfeld.

Studio Abex exhibits combine modular panels, fabric structures, collapsible truss, aluminum extrusions and unique POP and merchandising solutions. End users get the advantages of a custom tradeshow booth with the economy of a portable modular display system.

Each Studio Abex team includes a senior designer, project engineer and senior graphic designer.

“We turnkey the entire exhibit,” Blumenfeld said. “The spec design work is provided free of charge – provided specific criteria are met in pre-qualification.”

In describing those criteria, he said the size of the proposed exhibit must be “within Abex’s niche market range of 10’x10’ to 30’x30’ and that the budget “must be based on the industry standard of \$125 per square foot or \$1,000 per linear foot.” In addition, the date of the show or function must leave enough time for design and presentation, “generally

between eight and 12 weeks,” Blumenfeld said.

He explained that prior to Studio Abex, distributors bought exhibit parts and pieces – aluminum extrusions, tension fabrics and traditional custom elements – from Abex, then “hybridized” the exhibits themselves. With Studio Abex, the distributor meets with the client for pre-qualification and covers everything from beginning to end, starting with whether the preference is for a portable, portable/modular or traditional custom exhibit and going on to cover such specifics as flooring and lighting options. The client is later shown the conceptualized design from various angles.

Technological advances, many of them exclusive to Abex, make it all possible.

“Over the last 10 years, we’ve been developing a very proprietary CAD system and software library that allows for very quick estimation,” Blumenfeld explained. “Studio Abex allows our distributors to spend more time selling and less in product management.”

He said his company sells thousands of exhibits per year through its distribution network, and that his 150,000-square-foot factory specializes in metals fabrication and plastic rotational molding. For Studio Abex, the company creates hybrid designs from aluminum extrusions, tension fabrics and traditional custom elements.

“Studio Abex solutions for end users cover the gamut,” Blumenfeld said, “including the sector of savvy exhibitors who want flexibility as they go from show to show. At the bottom end are those who formerly used only pop-up exhibits, but lately they tend to be stepping up from 10’x10’ pop-ups to 10’x20’ hybrids. Those buying solely for price alone still lean toward the old-fashioned panel systems. But we’re not seeing too much of that now.”



**This environment designed by Dusan Mosscrop (owner of Studio PDX) and Tim Prinzing for Luxottica creates a sense of focus and clarity by allowing the sight lines to remain spare, thereby increasing the visual impact of the rear LED wall.**

**Design as delving into  
brand and finding clarity**

“Great design? At the end of the day, it’s all about branding,” said Dusan “Dewey” Mosscrop, owner of Studio PDX in Portland, Ore.

A former senior designer and creative director for Exhibitgroup/Giltspur, Mosscrop launched Studio PDX earlier this year after working several years as an independent designer in the Portland area.

“More than ever, our audience is becoming more design savvy, more visually literate as a culture, he said. “The visual ante has risen considerably. It’s simply not good enough these days to download some logos, add some curves to a rectangle and call it good.

“As a result, our solutions need to be ever more inventive and original. It’s this ‘delving into the brand’ — finding a nugget or truth that can be expressed throughout the exhibit — that has really shifted over the last few years,” Mosscrop added. “And this is good news for us, as it makes us look further into the client, and to reach further for innovation and invention.”

He called the current emphasis on fabric “a bit of a red herring.”

“If there’s no brand insight, no vision, no clarity to a particular solution, it doesn’t really matter if that solution is expressed in fabric, wood or slate,” Mosscrop commented. “A poor idea in fabric is just as bad as a poor idea in wood.”

He said some designers get the specific medium confused with the actual art of brand expression.

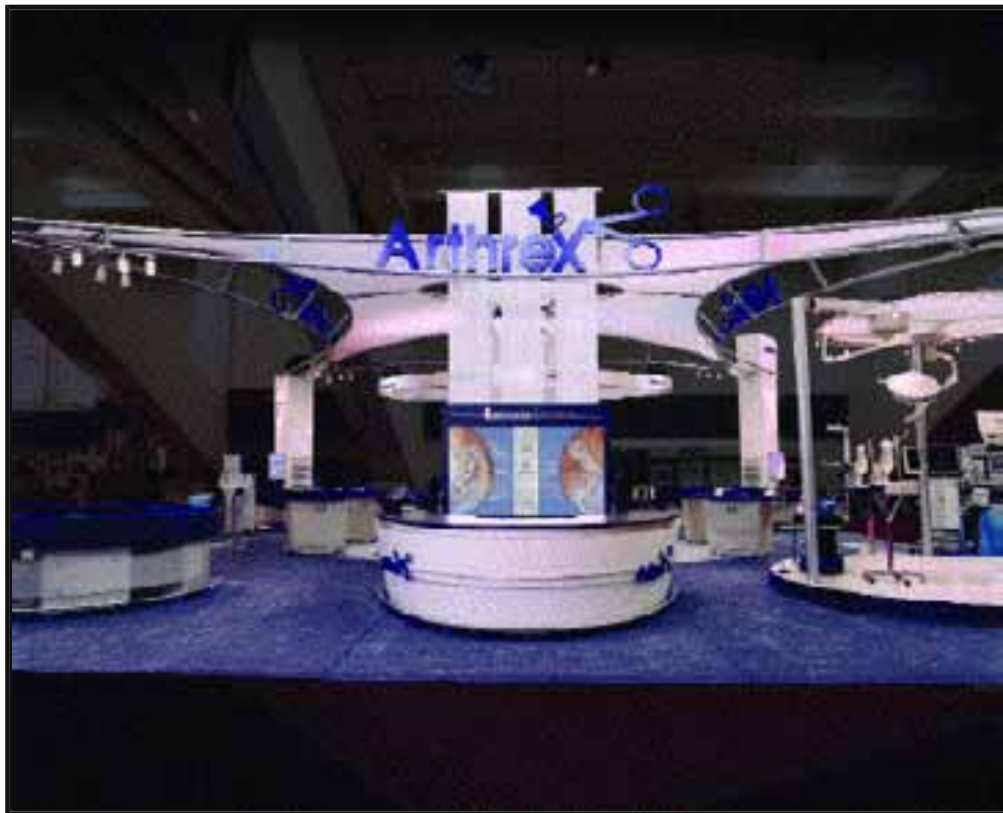
“Too often we hear about the preoccupation with a specific medium, in this case fabrics, over other materials,” Mosscrop said. “But everything depends on how that medium is used. So many different companies use exactly the same physical architecture that the brand communication actually gets diluted.”

Mosscrop said another common design error is to become too enamored with one particular technique or effect that happens to be in vogue for each exhibit element, causing the tradeshow floor to become “homogenized” with a particular look. “The trick is to stand out,” he stated. “Our job is to create memorable experiences, and that’s not the way to do it. When all the exhibitors of E3 do similar treatments of monitors, light trusses, plasma screens and so on, they’ve unwittingly diluted any brand presence they hoped to create.”

What makes an exhibit design stand out from the pack?

In a word: clarity, according to Mosscrop. He said top designer Mitchell Mauk (profiled in a separate two-part series that concludes in this issue) shows a very definite restraint and almost graphic understanding of positive and negative space. “Mr. Mauk is the master of putting ‘just enough’ in front of your eyes,” Mosscrop said. “His ‘areas of negative space’ allow the balance of the environment to truly sing.

“Stay away from simply more of the same,” Mosscrop advised. “And continually remind yourself that the point of the exhibit is to communicate.”



**Blue Sky Exhibits created this 50' x 60' exhibit for Naples, Fla.-based Arthrex, the nation's second largest manufacturer of orthopedic surgical tools. Shape, materials, complexity and size (50' x 50') of the canopy in relation to the structure below created considerable dynamic tension. The exhibit debuted at the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) convention and generated overwhelming positive response.**

**Design as looking beyond trends to create an emotional state**

“People often come to us and say, ‘I really like so-and-so’s exhibit, can you design one like that for me?’” said Tim Kelley, principal and COO of Atlanta-based Blue Sky Exhibits ([www.blueskyexhibits.com](http://www.blueskyexhibits.com)). “That creates a danger zone, because it’s the easy way out. We shouldn’t just be lazy and build what’s already been built.”

Kelley said designers need to learn exactly what it was about someone else’s exhibit that made the client feel so strongly and start with that.

“Our job is to ask the right questions and then create a new exhibit – one that maintains his excitement but suits his needs rather than someone else’s,” Kelley emphasized. “Our design will probably wind up looking completely different from that other exhibit. And it should.”

Kelley said the “homogenized look” at some tradeshow has little to do with the materials used. “Some people may say fabric is overused and passé,” he commented. “But it’s only a tool like color, laminate or plywood. Any tool used meaningfully will never be passé. If all

the exhibits at a show look alike, it's not the materials, it's the craftsmen. Materials, light, sound, color and motion are tools. And there's no such thing as a bad tool."

Kelley emphasized originality and the need to tailor the exhibit to the client's goals. "Forget the trends," he advised, "and don't focus on technique. Focus on principles."

As an example, he described an exhibit Blue Sky created for Naples, Fla.-based Arthrex, the nation's second largest manufacturer of orthopedic surgical tools. The 50'x60' exhibit debuted at the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons convention. Attendees were orthopedic surgeons, administrators and operating room personnel. The exhibit generated what Kelley called "an overwhelming positive response."

He said attendees often can't put into words exactly what attracts them about an exhibit.

"People found the Arthrex exhibit dynamic, but may not have known why," he said. "The color scheme was conservative and safe, as medical audiences expect, but the structure and general shape created tension and excitement. And it was mostly the canopy – its shape, complexity, materials and 50'x50' size in relationship to the structure below – that created that dynamic tension. It reflected the quality of the product and offered what I call 'restrained exuberance.' The canopy pulled the product offerings together, creating continuity and connectivity."

Kelley said Blue Sky designs never rely on gimmickry to draw crowds. "You don't want everyone to come into your exhibit — just the people you want to reach," Kelley said. "The fabric in the Arthrex canopy was used as an element to evoke an emotional response, not to be the focus of attention."