Putting The “D” Back In EDPA

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The meetings and convention industry contributes $100 billion to the U.S. economy. It is ranked #22 in contribution to the GNP, ranked higher than agriculture and the printing industry, yet only a minuscule of those employed were trained or intended to be a part of this industry.

The portion of the exposition industry dedicated to exhibit design and associated services is $26 billion. Most of us who have been fortunate to stumble into this industry have discovered the pleasures and fulfillment received from face-to-face communication through trade show marketing. Over the years, we have all become experts in our fields through the experience of meeting deadlines, and by just doing it. Those who are trained and experienced in trade show marketing will be the “neurosurgeons” of the general field of higher marketing. Levels of training and education in the field of trade show marketing on a world scale will serve to add credibility to its value and to the investments that companies make to support it.

The Exhibit Designers & Producers Association (EDPA) in the U.S. believes that its members are not only in the business of building and servicing exhibits, but in the business of face-to-face marketing through trade shows to increase sales opportunities for the companies they serve. The skills required in trade show marketing go way beyond the structure itself. The structure is only a tool, but if the tools are designed and used correctly, they can deliver results beyond expectation. In 2003, Norman Friedrich, Octanorm USA, Lithia Springs, GA, was president of EDPA. All EDPA presidents serve a one-year term, so they are asked to pick an issue and stay focused to make a difference. Norm’s issue was to put the “D” back into EDPA.

In 2002, discussions began with the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City to form a Masters Degree program in exhibit design. Two past EDPA presidents, Norm Friedrich/Octanorm, and myself, lead an EDPA educational committee team initiative to support the program and build the courses to be taught in order to prepare the students for real world experiences. The program first graduated students in 2003. For the past six years, EDPA has continued to support the FIT program and the required eight week internships before graduation.

On May 11, 2009, FIT conducted their annual thesis presentation for 2009 graduating students earning a masters degree in exhibit design. Nineteen students presented their thesis projects to volunteer experts in the field of exposition design. The student body came from all over the world to receive this unique training. Brenda Cowan, managing director of the exhibit design program at FIT, introduced the students to the judges and the criteria on which they should be judged. Each student occupied a table with drawings to support their presentation and conclusions. Judges were asked to listen, offer opinions and complete an evaluation form. Each student was given 15-20 minutes, one-on-one, with the judges. This made for a very long day! The day concluded with words of thanks from Jeff Provost, EDPA director, and a keynote address from Lee Skolnick, FAIA president and owner of a prominent design firm in New York City.

Our industry can rest assured that the level of education at FIT will strengthen our belief in the value of trade show marketing on a world level. The “D” is now truly a strong component of EDPA. Exhibit design training for marketing effectiveness and cost-control methods are key to the continued success in exposition marketing.

Thoughts And Comments From Some Of The Judges

Sagoe Hoyle – Director of Creative/Star Exhibits, Minneapolis, MN
The FIT Exhibit Design graduate program has gotten stronger and better each year. Brenda Cowen, chair, graduate exhibition design, has done a great job providing her students with great opportunities for real work experience which showed in their thesis presentations. I was particularly impressed with the experiential components inherent in most of the work presented and the amount of research done to make it relevant. The key to that research was their understanding of “what makes a brand?”

One presentation that stood out was that of an H&M store. It provided to a very targeted audience the layered experience of an exhibition, a retail store, and a sponsored event, interwoven between two floors of the store. The environment could change with the seasons, the experiences could tie into an event or cause while making it all relevant to the audience.

Jon Horn – Creative Director/3D Exhibits, Inc., Elk Grove Village, IL
As an experienced designer, does the FIT training prepare the students for the real world of exhibit design? The thesis solutions I had the pleasure of reviewing were beyond my expectations. It was obvious to me that the direction the students were given by their faculty advisors provided them with very strong foundations on which to freely explore, ideate and thoroughly plan some truly unique and clever experience environments.

If you owned a design firm, how many of the 19 students would be worthy of hiring as a part of your design team? Of the 19 students presented to me, the vast majority could hit the ground running with regard to delivering fresh ideas with strong visuals to storyboard their concepts professionally.

What impressed you the most about the program or the students? The choice of topics that many of the students chose – like “fog,” “tears,” “the death penalty,” “liberty,” and “peace,” were very challenging subject matters to create visitor experiences within a museum environment. For those who created thesis challenges in the commercial/product promotion effectiveness and cost-control methods are key to the continued success in exposition marketing.

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Page 1 of 2
arena, the solutions were very well planned out and incorporated some unexpected marketing and display approaches. The depth of research that each of the designers had obviously done was most impressive.

Chris Wendel – 25-year veteran in exhibit design, New York
As an experienced designer, does the FIT training prepare students for the real world of exhibit design? Yes – FIT prepares students to think conceptually about the problem at hand. The presentation skills were quite good, both visually and verbally. There will probably be a six month period for the new hire to get up to speed, but I’d expect that from pretty much any new student hire – not an issue in my opinion.
If you owned a design firm, how many of the 19 students would be worthy of hiring as a part of your design team? Of the students I met with, I would hire 80% – 35% were exceptional.
What impressed you the most about the program or the students? I was very impressed with the depth and insight several of the students possessed – they really knew their client and had come up with very creative visual solutions for their client. The quality of thought impressed me.

Debra Roth – CEO/creative director, Pink Inc., New York, NY
(Roth was not a judge but offered up the following comments):
One evening in May in New York City, the students, faculty and others gathered at FIT to view the Exhibition Design Master of Arts program thesis work. I met several colleagues that I primarily know through EDPA – and they had been there all day judging and critiquing the students.
I was impressed to see the set ups – the completed projects included concepts, boards, models, videos, computer demos, whatever it took to get the student’s message across. Coming from fabric and design, I was particularly intrigued with the use of soft forms and unusual shapes that I understood immediately could be created out of tensioned fabric. It is nice to see a new generation of exhibit designers thinking in a complex way about form and function.
Pink Inc. has taken on one of the students, Chen Wu Lin (Wu) for his summer internship. Wu is from Taiwan and he is a delightful addition to our staff as he diligently focuses on the task at hand. We will be very happy to share the work he does with Pink Inc. at the end of our six weeks!

Brenda Cowan notes, “FIT’s Master of Arts program in exhibition design integrates everything from interior design to architecture, lighting to graphic design, industrial design to exhibit production. It is a field in which a deep understanding of audience, storytelling and psychology of space are essential for success. Our students are multifaceted designers whose artistry and technical skills shape the spaces of museums, trade shows, retail spaces and more.
Regarding an integrated marketing approach, I believe that the forms of marketing utilized need to complement each other, ultimately influencing the final decision to buy any product, service or opinion. Of all the marketing tools available, face-to-face marketing (trade show marketing and direct sales) have the strongest impact on the final decision to buy. This is due in part to the emotional influences of human contact. All companies are watching every penny they spend. The ability to measure the results of these marketing decisions also plays a strong part in the continued support of any trade show marketing budget. Training with proven techniques and methodology will be key to the future success of trade show marketing. eb

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