

Building an Eco-Friendly and Sustainable Tradeshow Exhibit

From Interpretive Exhibits, Inc. in Salem, Oregon

As more and more companies move to environmental consciousness and responsibility, the desire to exhibit using eco-friendly and sustainable practices increases as well.

Interpretive Exhibits has been an environmentally conscious company since its inception. As more and more materials become available for exhibit fabrication, we discuss them with clients and make them available whenever appropriate.

Some of the materials that we consider during fabrication:

- Bamboo – produces 35% more oxygen than average trees, matures quickly, and does not require re-planting
- FSC Certified wood
- Metals – recycled aluminum when possible
- Paint – low VOC, organic paint, recycled latex paint
- Tension Fabric – low weight and small shipping and storage space
- Cardboard – large tubes can be used for walls or other structure elements
- Graphics can be printed on recyclable materials such as cardboard

(for more information on eco-friendly graphics see our February, 2010 newsletter on the latest in 'Green Graphics at www.tradeshowguyblog.com/newsletter)

Other considerations for creating sustainable exhibits:



Re-use: what possibility does the material have to be re-used in the future? In many cases old exhibit elements can be incorporated by non-profit organizations.

Re-claimed materials and local sourcing: the Northwest is a good source for re-claimed material. Using locally sourced re-claimed materials is environmentally friendly for a number of reasons: if it's local, it requires less shipping costs. Also, it's documented that for each dollar spent locally, three dollars stay in the community, so spending locally reduces carbon usage and helps sustain the local economy.

Weight: many materials such as plastic recycled faux wood are denser and therefore heavier than typical fabrication materials, which will impact the cost of shipping. In many instances, this is a trade-off between heavier construction and shipping costs vs. a more environmentally friendly fabrication approach.

How do we measure the environmental impact of a proposed design?

Design: can it be incrementally modified so that while some parts may need to be recycled or moved on to other usages, other components can continue to be used longer. Design can also incorporate the story of the sustainable elements; by telling your story to your audience with a small part of your booth, you are demonstrating your commitment to being as green as possible.

Long Life: create an exhibit of high quality that's going to have the longest life possible. This is probably one of the most effective ways to measure a positive environmental impact. A typical booth has from 3 – 6 years of useful life before it is discarded or parts are recycled. With our approach to exhibit building based largely on our skill and knowledge in creating long-life museum-type exhibits, we feel your booth has a chance to generally last longer than many other booths.

Booth Usage at the show: any giveaways should incorporate recyclable cups and dishes; we would recommend putting a recycling bin in your booth and making it available to show attendees – another instance to tell your story and show your commitment to sustainable practices. We suggest being as transparent as possible about how the booth was produced and shipped. If you as the exhibitor create an educational component discussing the process of creating the booth, how you are purchasing carbon offsets for the transportation, you could even tout the fact that the booth is 'carbon neutral.'

Some eco-friendly and sustainable projects that IE has completed:

Over the years, IE has compiled a list of projects which required or desired sustainable or recyclable materials:

- Created kiosks using Trex for the Kona Historical Society in Hawaii. Trex was used to accommodate the weather and as a sustainable recycled material.
- Designed and fabricated a large exhibit for South Slough on Oregon's southern coast that incorporated Trex deck throughout much of the exhibit; real trees in the dioramas. The floor of the exhibit space (done by client as part of the work) was reclaimed lumber from an old mill.



- Nancy's Yogurt of Eugene came to us about four years ago with a desire to use environmentally friendly building materials. We sourced a number of items, including wheat board, bamboo board, and others. Nancy's Yogurt ultimately made a decision to minimize use of the materials because of the prohibitive cost at the time.
- During the process we made a number of connections with suppliers for those types of materials. In the time since then, much has changed in the 'green' building industry: some materials are no longer available, some now cost less, newer materials are available, and there are more suppliers in the industry that offer sustainable fabrication and construction material.
- IE is currently doing a series of interpretive signs for a 'green' golf course on the slopes of Mt. Hood in Oregon. Surrounded by more than 1,000 acres of evergreen forest and bordered by the Mt Hood National Forest Salmon-Huckleberry Wilderness and the nationally designated "Wild & Scenic" Salmon River, The Resort at The Mountain is committed to fostering and preserving its environment through various programs and efforts. For example, The Resort is recognized as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary for its efforts in preserving and restoring wild habitat for native fish and birds, and landscaping draws upon native plants, accommodating wildlife and vacationers alike.
- Designed and fabricated a sign for the Oregon Garden explaining about how their eco-roof works.

Interpretive Exhibits' commitment to environmental issues:

IE has had a recycling program in place virtually from the beginning of the company in 1989. Oregon is very environmentally-friendly so this makes it easier for Oregon companies. For instance, Oregon passed the nation's first bottle recycling bill which was implemented October 1, 1972.

Curbside recycling has been the norm in many of Oregon cities. In Salem, curbside recycling includes household batteries, corrugated cardboard, glass containers, gray board, magazines, mixed scrap paper, brown paper bags, newspaper, plastic bottles # 1-7, tin cans and aluminum and used motor oil. Yard debris has also been a part of our city's recycling protocol for years. By being surrounded by recycling efforts and being involved in recycling, it is natural that we would look to sustain the practice in as many aspects at our workplace as possible.

IE's shop implements recycling and 'green' practices by recycling of paper, cardboard, wood and metal. We also dispose of hazard materials through a certified disposal company in Portland, which provides a certificate of compliance.

IE's shop typically will find uses for extra wood and other cast-offs; due to our diligence in waste diversion and pollution prevention our garbage usage is kept to a minimum.

Portland's 'ReDirect Guide' is a resource for consumers and businesses. In its seventh year, the guide is dedicated to promoting sustainability and helps connect people to greener options for everything from bio-diesel and wood flooring to organic food and cosmetics. We've used it as a resource a number of times for referrals. Oregon and the Portland-Salem metro areas continue to be leaders in environmentally sound and sustainable practices.

We are familiar with GreenMeetings.info, a Portland-based organization dedicated to promoting green and sustainable practices in the meetings industry. One of the board members, Lisa Lynn Anderson, has consulted with us informally on green and sustainable practices and urges exhibit builders to create exhibits using such practices.

Salem is part of the larger Portland metro area; Portland is one of the top three cities in the country in 'green building,' the other two being Seattle and Chicago. This gives us access to a number of resources that otherwise might not be available.



IE offers low-energy, long-lasting LED exhibit lighting.

IE recycled/donated our old computers to Tigard High School, which salvages parts from them to use in the school's computers and also as training for the students there

IE's owner Ed Austin volunteers and donates to the Willamette Valley Humane Society. It has also long been company policy that the company will pay for shots, spaying and neutering for any employee who wishes to adopt an animal.

When IE's shop and offices were remodeled about 15 years ago, it was done to achieve a high level of environmental efficiency. It was particularly done to meet standards of our local electric company, using techniques which qualified us to receive a certificate of achievement from the electric company.

Solvents and other hazardous materials we use are disposed of by a certified firm, which provides a certificate showing the material was handled appropriately.

IE's owner, Ed Austin and his wife Pat are enthusiastic environmentalists. They recently built a new house using as many green, sustainable and environmental elements as possible such as Trex decking, heat recovering ventilators, 2.5 times the mandated insulation, solar water heating and more.

Shipping with an environmental conscience:

Carbon offsets: consider offsetting the carbon usage of shipping by purchasing carbon offsets. One program and planting trees, through programs such as Gaiam's Go Zero program, which allows shippers to purchase zero-carbon credits which are then 100% converted to tree seedlings (tax-deductible, too).

[CarbonFund.org](#). We consulted with this Silver Spring, MD organization for specifics on carbon offsets and this is an example they offered on how to determine offsets:

“Shipping 200 pounds 2500 miles by truck results in approximately 137 pounds of CO2 emissions. We can offset that for about 35 cents. Even if you overnighted it by air and took into account the additional climate effects of air travel, the emissions would be about 1300 pounds and could be offset for under \$4. For your use in your calculations, figure 100 pounds shipped 1000 miles by truck results in 28 pounds of CO2. 100 pounds shipped 1000 miles by air results in 260 pounds of CO2.”

Lightweight Materials: as a design option, many elements of the booth could be design and fabricated using tension fabric, which is very lightweight, costing much less to ship and less space to store.

Exhibiting in an environmentally-friendly fashion:

From the **Convention Industry Council's 'Green Meetings Report'** (2004):

Establish detailed environmental practices and a strategy to implement them. Consistently communicate the policy in various ways to engage all employees, vendors and clients.

Ask event organizers to inform exhibitors in advance about on-site waste reduction and environmental efforts.

This may include encouraging vendors to:

- Print collateral materials on double-sided, post-consumer recycled paper using vegetable based inks
- Provide materials via digital downloads
- Bring only what they need for the event, and take away what they don't distribute at the event
- Provide on-site recycling for paper, cardboard, metals, glass, plastics, and other recyclable materials. Offer exhibitors re-use opportunities for their decorations

and display materials. These items may be in demand by local schools or charitable organizations.

Exhibitors could be informed by show organizers of **Exhibit Production Minimum Best Practices:**

- Inform exhibiting organizations of the event's environmental strategies. Include a clause in the exhibitor agreement that states their commitment to comply with the event's environmental requests.
- Include a clause in the exhibitor agreement gaining their commitment to comply with the following:
 - Minimizing the use of collateral materials, and, for any necessary materials, producing them on double-side, post-consumer recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.
 - Minimizing packaging and participating in recycling packaging when appropriate.
 - Using recycled or consumable products as giveaways when possible and not using gift items made from endangered or threatened species.
 - Attempting to use locally grown/made products.
 - Providing materials via PDA downloads.
 - Bringing only what they need for the event, and taking away what they don't distribute at the event.
 - Inform facilities and decorators of the environmental strategies the event is considering and ask about their environmental practices.

Include a clause in the agreement with the facility and/or decorator to:

- Provide recycling for cardboard, pallets, paper, cans, plastic, glass and other recyclable materials that are generated.
- Ensure clean-up crews are trained to keep recyclable and reusable materials out of the garbage.
- Choose decorations and display materials that can be reused and/or are made out of recycled materials.

As you can see, there are a number of ways that you can participate in sustainable tradeshow exhibiting. As with any emerging market or niche, quick changes and evolution are inevitable.

If you would like more information on how to create a sustainable and environmentally tradeshow exhibit, from design to fabrication, through the actual exhibiting, please contact us and we would be glad to discuss it.

Tim Patterson, VP of Sales and Marketing
Interpretive Exhibits, Inc. in Salem, Oregon