



Signage for exhibits

PLASTICS IN THE
SIGN INDUSTRY

by Alusuisse Composites, Inc.

Signs are a vital part of exhibits, ranging from those at trade shows to museums, where signs are expected to attract attention, point the way, inform, persuade and more. These signage roles can be accomplished using modern, innovative, plastic products of various types — even when the exhibit illustrates the history of signs and historic sign materials.

David Benko discovered this as he began to construct an exhibit to display some of his vintage signs. "My collection of signs mainly covers the time period from the birth of neon in the 1920s through the end of the 1950s," said Benko.

For the base structure of his exhibit, Benko selected square tubular steel and attached ½" sheets of a composite board with a foamed polyurethane core, using industrial strength Velcro. (Three sheets of 5' x 10' material and eight sheets of 4' x 8' material were used.) One of the most recently available substrates, this composite board was introduced to

North American and Latin American markets in 1999. "The material has excellent rigidity and stiffness, resulting in good bending strength, pressure resistance and humidity resistance," said Benko. "The construction proved to be a strong but lightweight combination that assembles, transports, and knocks down easily."

The exhibit features large-format graphics output on photo-base paper using a 60" inkjet printer. The prints were laminated, then spray mounted by Benko onto the composite board used in the exhibit. The full-size figure of a man in a suit was generated in the same way. Among other backdrop graphics are an enlarged page from a vintage Federal Sign catalog depicting porcelain letter components and a blow-up photo of the famous "Camel Smoking" sign, created by Douglas Leigh for Times Square in the late 1940s. The creative use of material and the graphics make it hard to tell where the exhibit ends and the signs begin.

Now traveling out of Benko's Rocket City Neon Advertising Museum in Camas, Washington, this successful exhibit became the impetus for a far more ambitious effort — a "prototype" American Sign Museum. This exhibit was on display at the International Sign Association (ISA) Sign Expo 2001 in Las Vegas, March 22-25. The most spectacular features of the exhibit were three "full-size" storefront replicas that established a "Signs on Main Street" theme. These replicas included a drugstore, a clothing store and a service station with a pump island.

"The construction proved to be a strong but lightweight combination that assembles, transports, and knocks down easily."

David Benko

In constructing the prototype museum with storefronts, Benko relied on a composite material which consists of two sheets of .012" aluminum bonded to a plastic core, and available in thicknesses of 2 mm, 3 mm and 4 mm. This is a rigid, durable material that is relatively lightweight and fabricates easily, Benko indicated. He used nearly 40 sheets of the material in construction of the storefronts, applying it primarily over a framework of tubular steel. In fabricating the service station, for example, Benko applied the material with its white side facing out to simulate the look of the porcelain storefronts of long ago. The ability of the material to fabricate into a smooth curve was especially important to achieving a curved center module.

The evolving American Sign Museum, a non-profit organization, will display the history of signage in America, in a Las Vegas site still to be determined. Alusuisse Composites, Inc., was among



David Benko's first exhibit features large-format graphics (including a full-size man) laminated then spray mounted onto Kapa®-Bloc Material from Alusuisse Composites, Inc. of St. Louis, MO.



Skyline® exhibit makes creative use of Sintra® Material which is an expanded PVC sheet.

the prototype museum's contributors and sponsors. The prototype museum shows, in part, an evolution of materials that has transformed other, more commercial exhibits and displays, including trade show exhibits.

Skyline of Eagan, Minnesota, is among companies responding to this growing choice in plastic materials for exhibits and exhibit signage. The company wanted to help its clients achieve a substantial visual presence, while maintaining the lightweight and economical features of smaller exhibits. In combination with a metal truss system, Skyline selects materials carefully to meet each client's needs. Atop Skyline's own exhibit, for example, is a sign fabricated using letters made from a 4' x 8' board of rigid, moderately expanded plastic. The board was first covered with laminate and then cut by computer controlled laser cutter and router. While the board is available in various colors, black is stocked for this procedure, and covered with laminate to provide exactly the color needed on a moment's notice. Below its dominant sign, large towers in the Skyline exhibit that appear to be brushed metal, are actually fabricated from the moderately expanded plastic board in 1/2" thickness that has been covered with laminate on both sides, using contact cement.

The material provides a combination of strength and ease of fabrication, as well as relatively light weight. Other materials in the exhibit include a thin, flexible polycarbonate that can be curved over the metal trusses for display and later rolled up for shipping. A smaller sign echoes the letter treatment atop the exhibit and leads into type that winds its way through the exhibit to more signs — attracting attention, pointing the way, informing and persuading. ■