

Salem company makes understanding easy

Interpretive Exhibits turns ideas into informative and engaging exhibits.

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The Oregon Museum of Science and Industry knew that trying to explain combined sewer overflows to children wouldn't be easy. So, they enlisted the services of a Salem company to make it both child-friendly and informative.

Interpretive Exhibits has been designing and fabricating exhibits for trade shows and museum visitor centers since 1989.

The Combined Sewer Overflow exhibit at OMSI is one in a list of projects that is gaining the local business a wealth of national and international interest.

Owned by Ed Austin, IE employs about 15 full-time workers in various capacities of design, construction and marketing.

With a client list of almost 150 corporate and government agencies, IE works on several projects at once, currently 60, ranging in price from \$2,000 to more than \$100,000. Most projects take months to complete; a rough price estimate for an IE exhibit is \$120 per square foot.

Overseeing IE's accounts is Tim Patterson, who came to the company with a plan on expanding IE's business into the corporate trade-show market.

"It's sort of like advertising, really," Patterson said. "You have to distill the essence of all this information into one little paragraph on a sign or one activity that can involve people very quickly."

The OMSI exhibit simulates how the combined overflow of rainwater and residential sewer waste spills into the Columbia River:

A series of diagrams show pipes that lead from homes to a sewage treatment plant, and a push-button that creates rain and the resulting overflow.

OMSI exhibit design and production director Ben Fleskes thinks that the IE-designed exhibit teaches children about a serious issue in a lasting way. "We're very pleased with the end result," Fleskes said. "We wanted something that kids could learn from, and Interpretive Exhibits really did a good job of listening to what we had in mind."

Understanding what the customer wants can be the trickiest part of IE's relationship with a client, according to Patterson.

"Everything has to be thought out really well," Patterson said. "In the case of OMSI, they came to



TIM PATTERSON / Special to the Statesman Journal

Interpretive Exhibits designed the combined sewer overflows exhibit at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. The Salem company makes child-friendly and informative displays.

us with a design that they had put together and we just kind of helped flesh out what they really wanted.”

Design director Phyllis Auger understands that sending a message is crucial to getting noticed.

“It has to be with some kind of focal point, be it color, or structure or height or largeness,” Auger said. “But once you catch their eye, you can’t overwhelm them with information.”

An example came in the exhibit that IE built for another Salem company, Kettle Foods.

The potato-chip maker went to one of its annual trade shows in California earlier this year with the goal of creating a bigger buzz about its product.

Kettle Foods public affairs manager Jim Green said that he was amazed at how IE was able to create a 20- by 30-foot wooden structure that was dynamic and comfortable.

“Hands down, it was the coolest booth at the show,” Green said. “There’s so much glam and glitter at these things, and ours was really impressive and understated. We stopped keeping track of all the compliments we got.”

Patterson wants to turn some of those compliments into referral business. Virtually all of IE’s work comes from proposals and estimates that compete with other firms throughout the Northwest and the nation.

Bidding for jobs can be costly, and Patterson said one of the dangers in operating a design firm is structuring an internal budget that won’t sink the company with unforeseen project expenses.

“When we get down to bidding on a project, our guy is looking at everything from the price of the lumber to every other material that will be needed because you can go under.”

Since the average exhibit typically lasts four to five years, IE has to keep a wide client base and keep existing customers coming back.

One of IE’s longtime client’s is A.C. Gilbert’s Discovery Village. The interactive children’s museum in Salem has two IE exhibits, and recently agreed to partner on a project that will educate children about the Willamette River.

“What impressed me most was that they wanted to know what the educational goal of the piece was. To me, that speaks volumes,” said A.C. Gilbert assistant director Kim Baldwin.

Upcoming projects include a trade show booth for Nancy’s Yogurts, a West Coast company trying to make an impact in New York and a European backpacking company.

Also on tap is an educational exhibit being constructed for the Army Corps of Engineers in Hawaii that will identify the importance of preserving the islands’ wetlands.

Patterson said that IE creates the vision that the client has in mind, but Green said the company did much more than that for Kettle Foods. “To a person here, this thing exceeded our expectations,” Green said.

“We think they did an incredible job.”

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