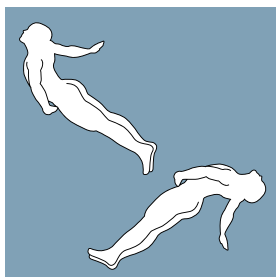




CIMCIG walkabout notes

The difference between success and failure

Interbuild, NEC, Birmingham, 21 October 2009



highwire

Notes and comments following CIMCIG's 2009 Interbuild walkabout led by CIMCIG committee member and stand designer, once-upon-a-time exhibition organiser and exhibitor for 20 years or so Rick Osman. Please note the opinions voiced in these notes and during the walkabout are those of the author and are made without reference to the exhibiting companies whose stands are discussed.

**an exhibition
is a highly
competitive
environment**

Meeting at The Aluminium Village courtesy of the Council for Aluminium the CIMCIG party set off towards a corner of Interbuild with Rick Osman explaining that exhibitions are highly competitive arenas. to make the most of your attendance you need to manufacture every advantage that you can. But you fall at the first hurdle if your stand design doesn't make it clear what you are selling.

Two Chinese stands offered little in the way of posters or a basic product description. They were followed by a balcony manufacturer who had a really rather beautiful stand but with nothing at eye level to indicate what the product was. The only indication was a sign up high, which is good, but without some other information on display, such as a company name, even someone looking for a balcony manufacturer could have walked straight past.

Within a few yards the next two stands, on either side of the aisle, very clearly indicated what they were about – one had a very obvious display of doors and the other access ramps. They showed the necessity of an exhibition display of being about the product. This was certainly true of an adjacent stand which was clearly offering windows. This stand got many things right, there was literature available at the edges of the stand and so on but the whole stand was a bit forbidding. The addition of a few pot plants would have transformed the display.

Our next stand was a good example of how to waste a gift. The display of machinery was obviously an offshoot of another stand, exhibition organisers will commonly offer space that has been cancelled to other standholders. This was a good size piece of space but without a single piece of literature or a poster on show. The only indicator was a handwritten note directing visitors who wanted a brochure to another stand; it is particularly silly to be given an extra free stand area and then not use it properly.

On our left next was a good example of a stand that deserved to be successful, an access lift manufacturer. The stand was attractive, well lit, had few barriers to entry and had some movement.

The next stand looked very good indeed at first glance, a visual symphony of grey and terracotta. Although obviously designed by someone with a good eye it fell down on closer inspection. There was nothing to indicate what the stand was about, two whole sides of the

stand were closed off and there was nowhere to pick up leaflets. All very stylish but next to useless at an exhibition.

The next stand considered was one which displayed expanded polystyrene mould for building concrete walls. There were several companies selling very similar products at Interbuild and they all faced the same problem. It was good that all three or four had used the product to construct their stands however as the products are all very similar indeed there was little to differentiate one from the other.

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We next passed a display which was hardly a stand at all with playground surfaces and specialised fencing; this worked well as it was clear what was on display, the products were allowed to speak for themselves. They spoke even better when teams of youths were playing football in the area.

We next passed a luxury timber cabin manufacturer; our attention was caught by the fact that every visitor had to don a pair of bright blue protective slippers to prevent their shoes damaging the floor. Despite the explanations of the stand staff the general feeling was that this indicated that the finish of the building was such that it would not wear well.

On passing a stand finished in black it was pointed out that some stand designers seem to love black stands. Black stands all too often look forbidding or uninviting, and they show up dust and dirt surprisingly well. This stand also had, for some reason, a large TV showing a rolling news programme. If you go to the expense of having large monitors use them to show your own products, but as we discussed later you cannot show just any old video.

Our next opportunity for a comparison came two stands opposite each other. On the left hand side was one which very clearly showed that they were selling sunpipes -- there were samples and posters and leaflets and giant models and loads of stuff. In fact the stand looked over full but nevertheless there were few barriers to visitors going on to the stand, and visitors would have the reassurance that they knew exactly what they were getting into. By contrast the stand on the right gave no indication of what was on offer, much of the stand was blocked off and entry was up a comparatively narrow ramp with no indication what the visitor was getting into.

A swift U-turn and the party next compared a stand offering fake, or rather, substitute wood with a neighbour offering decorative composite wall lining panels. Whilst the stands were clearly built to different budgets the difference in information offered was manifest. What the panels could be used for, what they were made of, examples of them in use was all clear but the wood substitute balustrades and decking had none of that. Just a brief explanation

that could be read from the gangway would have transformed the potential of the stand – a simple list of benefits over actual timber should have been the starting point.

Next up was another lovely designery stand, plenty of chrome and it looked really good as an object. However as an exhibition tradestand it failed on a number of very basic points. Much of the frontage acted as a barrier to entry, there was no clear statement of what the stand was about, there were no posters allowing visitors to learn about the product without venturing on to the stand, there was no literature easily available and then to top it all, the staff were all clustered around the central counter area chatting away with their backs to any potential customers.

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Out next port of call was a stand selling stacking warehouse systems, one of several in the show. They all share a similar problem, how to make a spiky heavy rather daunting metal system look attractive. Well they didn't even try, most just put up a sample system and then left it at that. What attracted our attention to this one stand was that it had several show offers on display. Show offers always seem to smack of desperation, especially at shows like Interbuild where the event is more about display and attract and the garnering of contacts than out-and-out sales. And of course should a past customer who paid more than the show offer walk past the odds are you will have lost a customer, or at least permanently reduced your margin.

A quick walk past a stand which, unusually for a quango-type organisation, was colourful, seemed to have some purpose and was staffed by people who looked interested in what was going on around them.

Our next point of interest was a standard shell scheme scheme which had benefited from a bit of thought. The exhibitor had obviously asked, or maybe bribed, the shell scheme contracting staff to add an extra few panels sideways above the ordinary shell height. This had the benefit of giving a bit of height to the stand and thus making the name displayed more visible along the aisle.

Next up were two stands displaying the expanded polystyrene concrete formers. Although essentially the same stand but with different names each could have learned from the other. One had clear informative posters and a short (important that it is short) video so that passers by could see what the product was all about, the other had better lighting and (also very important) evidence of success ie pictures of buildings that had been built using the product.

Our next example was a one of a successful stand. This, for a flooring manufacturer, was open and well lit, there was a counter for conducting business but it was off to one side and neither dominated

the centre of the stand nor acted as barrier to entry. There were plenty of samples on display as well a clear list of benefits displayed on the back wall and easy access to literature for those in a hurry or too shy to venture on to the stand. Nearby was another good one, this time for an underfloor heating manufacturer, both these examples were bespoke stands. However it was pointed out that there was no need to go the expense of a bespoke stand, whilst it is unlikely to look as good the basics of successful stand design can be employed within a traditional shell scheme.

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And one thing that stood out at our next visit was that mess should be kept under control and out of sight. We were looking lengthwise down a stand and, despite the stand designer incorporating a place to hide the mess, there was a pile of empty boxes, finished with lunch detritus etc all along the back of the stand. Clearly visible to visitors and non-visitors alike it will only help in deterring trade to the stand. Even with a shell scheme it is possible to get an extra panel put in as in internal return to provide a basic place to put coats and bags etc.

A short walk brought us to another slightly designery stand, this one covered with white cloth emblazoned with the names of the company and of prominent computer manufacturers. Sadly no indication of what went on at the company or on the stand and peeking through the doorways all one could see were stand staff chatting to each other, which was probably just as well as they were unlikely to talk to anybody else.

From a stand which simply failed to explain what or why we next considered a run of four or five shell scheme stands which each gave rise to a pertinent point.

Our first was a pretty standard shell scheme for a flooring company. Of note here was that this is a big, international flooring company but the graphics and general demeanour of the stand made them appear to be a local window installer or similar. Which gave rise to the question that a stand should meet customer expectations of a company. Exhibitions are a place for reinforcing existing customer relationships as well as finding new prospects. Your stand should be appropriate to the size and type of company, or at least to its aspirations, and this one wasn't. Equally irritating was that no-one had thought to put a layer of the company's own flooring on the stand. If you're a flooring company use, and thus display, your flooring, not the shell scheme contractor's.

Beside this was a stand that was so full of product, some sort of extractor fans, and staff that not only was there no room for visitors but visitors would have been actively put off by the solidity of what appeared before them.

Our next stand was not a shell scheme and was a stand which got so much right. The staff were open and welcoming, there were explanatory graphics, it was clear what the product was and although the stand had a counter across the front it was designed so that it was not intimidating to visitors. It all went a bit wrong with the amount of mess and empty boxes that seemed to fill the back of the stand. This together with a colossal pile of unused cardboard coffee cups on top of the coffee machine on the counter made the whole thing look disorganised. To take so many coffee cups, far too many than you would get through at the show, out of their boxes and then to leave the torn empty boxes strewn across to back of the stand almost amounted to an act of sabotage.

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Next door to this one was a small stand without lighting, a single piece of A4 tacked up on the wall and a rather disconsolate chap without literature or any other support. Without collateral there is no point attending an exhibition.

Our final stand in this little run was another shell scheme, this time for a manufacturer of lighting controls. Lighting is all important on an exhibition stand, you only have to look at an unlit stand to realise that. Here was a heaven sent opportunity for the standholder to invest their stand with the very ethos of their product – a chance to use their products to control the stand lighting. Instead there was a boring standard shell scheme contractor fluorescent at each end of the stand...

Our next stand showed the perils of not being sure what you're selling. This stand had a catchy and highly memorable name for the product, but the name on the shell scheme fascia (and in the show catalogue) was completely different. So a potential customer might have seen the product name, recognised that they would easily remember and then go back to the office and get out the show catalogue to get the contact details and they would have absolutely no chance of matching the catchy product name to the supplier. Make sure you use your product (or company) name consistently throughout an exhibition, the shell fascia, catalogue, display, literature should all carry the same name.

Staff are the key element in exhibition success, their performance (and it is exactly that) outweighs every aspect of stand design. Us Brits almost take a pride in not being pushy which probably explains why, with a single exception, in two days at Interbuild the only stand staff to approach me as I paused at a stand were from overseas, Chinese, Australian and German. A corner stand we paused by had no lighting and poor display material but the staff overcame that.

Opposite the outgoing Australians was a small shell scheme that showed how even something as simple as a pop up display can be

fraught with error. In any display the words and pictures need to work together but on this stand the words 'Stand out from the crowd' (in themselves pretty anodyne and pointless) were allied with a picture of trees. All of which had little to do with the product. On top of this the contact details for the company were at the base of the display, carefully obscured by the feet of the staff, their briefcases and computers and the desk which blocked up a good part of the small stand frontage.

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Having seen one quango's stand a short walk brought us to the stand of another organisation, an important one to Interbuild's audience of architects, as it is one that all architects have to belong to practice. Apart from a roll up display and a plain chair, an old filing cabinet and plain desk there was nothing else on display, no staff, no explanatory posters, no leaflets.

Our next comparison was about video displays. Our two stands both dealt with computer based systems but on one there was a very short PowerPoint type video and the other was showing the corporate video, we didn't stay to find out how long it was but it was far too long to be appropriate for an exhibition. Video displays are good for an exhibition stand, they introduce movement and can help sell the product but it is wise to bear in mind that nobody will want to stand and watch a 15 minute corporate video struggling to hear what is being said. So observe three rules – don't use sound as it will have to battle with the exhibition hubble; keep it short, a minute maximum; have a very simple but relevant and interesting message.

On our run towards the final few stand we passed through a German section where one blindingly obvious fault, and one which British companies are renowned for, became apparent. Your exhibition displays and literature should be in the language of the show's visitors. Posters in German work as well at Interbuild as posters in English work in Essen or Munich. The cost in money and time of going to an exhibition overseas, even as part of organised group, is considerable so the additional cost of translation and extra signage is a small, but essential, extra expense.

Ahead of us at the end of the German corridor was a small stand for a louvred roof system which showed what can be done on a limited budget. The stand allowed visitors to work the louvres, and of course once one person did it others joined in. Despite poor lighting and few graphics the stand obviously worked well as a result of being built around the product.

As we approached the Aluminium Village we had time to consider a trio of stands all together, all were bespoke and therefore comparatively expensive. One gave no idea what it was about, the name was ambiguous and there were no explanatory graphics; the

other two had most of the requirements of a successful stand in that they were rooted in the product, had a bit of height to help people find them, had a storage area, effective lighting, few barriers to entry, information at different levels including wall graphics and easily available literature. In the past CIMCIG has provided a judge for the Best Interbuild stand in the Construction Marketing Awards and these two would certainly have been shortlisted.

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Rounding our final corner we came across a stand that was the antithesis of these two. A blank wall of panels of some sort without a hint of company or product name, a board with some gutter bits attached lying against the wall and the staff huddled at one end. No literature, no explanations and no smiles.

The final stand to be considered showed the importance of orientation. As we approached it, across a wide aisle, there was no indication what was on display but on seeing the next side of it the stand blossomed into a pretty welcoming door display with explanatory graphics. It was a shame that this side, presumably the front, faced a narrow gangway by which few people would approach the stand. Ideally an island stand should be approachable from all sides, it not you are effectively cutting off a good proportion of your audience. If this stand had been turned through 90 degrees it would have been more attractive, better yet the constituent displays could have been re-jigged so that it was attractive from all approaches. Exhibitions provide many opportunities and you must be prepared to adapt to what happens on the day.

During our walkabout a number of things came to be discussed – other than staff, accessibility of information was probably the main concern as was messy stands. When preparing for an exhibition you must remember that it is a highly competitive environment and the difference between success and failure will be down to small things. You have to do all you can not just to encourage people to visit your stand but also to make sure you do all you can not to deter them. And people will be deterred by a host of almost subliminal signs: having a pile of coffee cups on the counter may not be a deal breaker; forget to put literature at the front and you can still have a good show; let the mess build up and most will not notice; making your stand ‘intriguing’ will probably kill it but one or two may venture on board, as it were, but combine all these things and eventually you will reach the stage where your staff might as well chat to each other and sit down and read the paper and eat and drink beer on the stand and play football with a paper cup and wander off to catch up with rivals because they’ll have nothing else to do.

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