

LIGHTING NEWS LETTER

a periodic newsletter on lighting design issues

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WHAT DOES A CLIENT NEED TO KNOW TO MAKE THE LIGHTING IN HIS AUTO SHOW EXHIBIT OUTSTANDING? LIGHTING DESIGNER STEFAN R. GRAF IALD, LC OF ILLUMINART HAS SOME IDEAS.

Q: Why a newsletter on auto show lighting?

A: A few weeks ago, I was talking to an exhibit manager, explaining how lighting for an auto show is provided. He was surprised and noted that I answered a lot of his questions and thought I should pass along the information, because it gave him a better understanding and new awareness of some important considerations.

Q: In the auto exhibit market, who typically hires the lighting designer, the client or the lighting supplier?

A: When a client hires a lighting supplier, that company owns a rental inventory they have incentive to use—they certainly don't want their equipment sitting in the shop, collecting dust. The lighting supplier may then hire a lighting designer to provide a service to the exhibit. When a lighting supplier hires the designer, they're obligated to use the equipment available from that company. If a better design solution exists, one that may be more cost effective, and the lighting supply company doesn't offer that particular equipment, that solution most likely won't be considered.

Q: So if the lighting supplier hires the lighting designer, the designer is actually obligated to the lighting supplier?

A: Unfortunately, yes. A friend of mine, an independent show lighting designer, accepted work about 4 years ago from a lighting rental company to work as the designer for a major exhibit in Detroit. He was told that the client was sold on the idea of a new light the company had just invested in and told the designer he had to use these lights. Worse still, the sales rep then told him to use only one light per car! My friend told them it was not a good way to light the exhibit and it would look bad. Well, you can imagine the rest of the story. He was obligated to follow their direction, the lighting definitely didn't work and he vowed never to work that way again.

Q: Is the lighting supplier usually chosen before the lighting designer in most industries?

A: Not at all. Lighting in the auto exhibit industry has evolved through relationships with lighting suppliers and their sales representatives. It's a process that's quite often product driven instead of design driven, and the best interests of the client may actually come second. Some automotive lighting is designed first, but quite often the designer has experience in a limited area of lighting, and may have a background in theater or concert lighting rather than exhibit lighting.

Q: How does the process work in other sectors?

A: Typically, for important architectural projects or major shows, a lighting designer is hired and works directly with the client to create a lighting design to meet specific goals, objectives, and budgets that are in the clients interests. A detailed specification is then produced and it is put out to bid to suppliers/contractors.

Q: Hasn't this worked well for auto show exhibits in the past?

A: In a few instances it's worked OK, in others, it has definitely not worked. Significant problems are evident from this approach. Although it may seem easier overall to have the lighting supplier provide a lighting designer, this method of thinking can result in poor design solutions or costs to the client that are actually higher than necessary.

Q: Isn't it more cost effective to have the lighting supplier provide the lighting design free of charge?

A: The improvements to the design and cost savings offered by a independent lighting designer will more that be offset by a fee for service, guaranteed. Pay something now or pay even more later with a system that's over designed or an exhibit with less than satisfactory lighting.

Q: The relationship clients have with the lighting suppliers is very strong. Why change now?

A: Old relationships are important to some, and there's no reason the current supply companies won't continue to do what they do best- supply equipment. It may seem stressful to consider forging new relationships, but looking at other options can mean a higher quality product, as well as saving money. I'm interested in creating awareness and doing what's best for the client- creating good lighting and visibility.

Q: So what can be done to ensure that the lighting works in conjunction with the exhibit and is cost effective?

A: Simply hire a qualified professional lighting designer early in the design of a new exhibit.

Q: What qualifications should a lighting designer have?

A: First of all, make sure they're not tied to a sales or rental company, which could be a conflict of interest. Look for experience in a variety of areas-including any retail, architectural or concert experience- check their references, see if they're active in continuing lighting education programs and interview them to see if their personality and company culture is a good fit with your team.

Q: Would it be cost effective to consider different lighting suppliers in the bidding process?

A: Of course. There are dozens of lighting suppliers in the market that could be included in the bid process. If the design is properly done and good specifications are produced for bidding, more, competitive bids could be received, bringing the overall cost down. But the lighting bid specs should be done professionally with clear and precise detail of the equipment, its condition and the qualifications of the personnel companies provide. Detailed lighting specifications will enable companies to bid apples to apples and guarantee the design integrity to the client.

Q: Is it best to hire one lighting supplier to provide the lighting for all of the cities in an auto-show season?

A: It depends on the motive of the client. If the reason is that they only want one company and sales reps to deal with for billing, that's one issue. If they really want to reduce costs and improve quality of service, they might want to re-consider the idea. There's simply too much overlap in some shows for one company to supply all of the equipment. They end up sub-renting it from other companies, which drives the cost up. On the other hand, they may provide sub-standard equipment since that's all that's left in their warehouse.

Q: Will suppliers actually provide less than ideal equipment if they're short on inventory?

A: I saw this happen this year in Chicago. A couple of exhibits had poor lighting and it was obvious to me, as a professional lighting designer, that substandard, as well as inappropriate, equipment was being used. I'm not one to argue with a client's motive, but it is important to have all of the information before making important decisions. It is possible that this idea is being driven by the existing suppliers to gain a stronger foothold in the market, and I can't blame them- that's just good business strategy on their part. But is it really best for the client's interests?

Q: In the end, isn't lighting all about the instruments you're using?

A: Not at all. Lighting design is really about how patterns of illumination and how they affect visibility and psychological impressions. The hardware comes later. The process to achieve lighting in this industry is different than in other design disciplines where good lighting is important to the success of a project.

Q: From a design standpoint, isn't it common knowledge that the best way to light cars is to use moving lights?

A: No. I used the first automated lighting in 1990 at the Detroit Auto Show in the Ford Exhibit to create animated effects around a fountain they had, these lights are great when they're used for special type of effects or in areas where it is impossible to reach a light to focus it. Automated lights cost five times as much as conventional car spotlights, they are less than half as bright (per watt) they're prone to repairs from all the moving parts, they weight 3 times as much, are twice the size and they require more setup time because you have to run 2 sets of cables. Worst of all, many of them adversely affect the color of light they produce. The lenses shift the light to a shade of green, making the cars look awful.

Q: If the cars actually look bad in the light from these instruments, why are they used in so many auto exhibits?

A: A number of years ago, sales reps from a lighting supplier did a demonstration of this new technology for lighting cars, got their clients really excited about it and told them it would save time and reduce cost on site because it could be focused remotely.

Q: Won't using moving lights that are focused remotely save in labor costs?

A: Let's do the math. Two electricians on overtime are approximately \$230 per hour, plus boom rental of \$100 per hour. I've done careful studies of this and even the slowest electricians can focus 1 light every 3 minutes, including coffee breaks, etc. So, let's be real conservative and say 5 minutes per light. That's comes to a cost of \$30 per light. Now, compare the rental cost of a moving light per week to that of a conventional light. There are no cost savings using this expensive technology for lighting cars- Automated lights still require service with a boom lift when lamps or the electronics fail. There's also the cost of a moving light programmer, which can be considerable.

Q: If using moving lights don't save money, then why are they still being used in auto exhibits?

A: I don't think the people paying for the equipment are aware of these issues and besides, in most cases, it's the rental companies that determine the design solutions! If they only have automated lights in their warehouse, why would they bother to incur extra expense by providing a lower cost light that's brighter and better for the job? The rental companies may not like it and may try to discredit some of what I say, but it's really time for our clients to understand some of these issues so they're better able to make informed decisions.

Q: Should the current technology being used in car lighting be changed?

A: Not necessarily. However, before it's applied, the design should be thought through and all options reviewed, which is why an independent professional lighting designer is a necessity.

Q: Can auto exhibit designers learn something from the retail lighting sector?

A: Think of an auto show like a shopping mall. You have various retailers competing for the attention of the shopper with products, graphics, branding, attractions etc. In a shopping mall, the lighting varies from retailer to retailer. It's designed to support the product and brand image. Why should each brand be lighted the same way using the same equipment and techniques? It doesn't help support the brand image. Unfortunately, auto show lighting just isn't thought about that way. One of the reasons for this is because the experience of many of the designers hired for car lighting is limited to concerts and theatrical productions. That's what they know, that's what they do and that's how they light cars. At Illuminart, our designers all have backgrounds in retail, architecture, concert and nearly 20 years of auto exhibit lighting, which gives us an advantage in the market, since we're experienced with concepts like brand images. Someone who does concert lighting for 10 months out of the year might not have the same viewpoint.

Q: Where can I find out more about the services that Illuminart offers?

A: To find out more about Illuminart go to our web-site at www.illuminart.net or call 734 482 6066.

Q: Where can I find out more about retail lighting or lighting in general?

A: Visit the websites of: The IALD / International Association of Lighting Designers (www.iald.org) and the IES / Illuminating Engineering Society (www.iesna.org). Sites that aren't sponsored by manufacturers are best, since their information is free from possible conflicts of interest.

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