

Environmental innovator is whipping up a storm in outdoor posters sector

The developer of easy-to-install and eco-friendly ad posters is bucking a downward trend, says *Barney Cox*

A storm is brewing in outdoor advertising. Brands are seeking a premium product while site owners are looking at ways to cut costs, increase flexibility and improve environmental credentials.

"Site owners want to get away from paper and paste-up, which was causing issues with health and safety," says Urban Storm founder and managing director Sam Cook.

"The number of roadside billboards has fallen by 30% in the past couple of years as the installers can't get insurance for paste-up," adds commercial director Kevin Shute.

Add in the problems that paste-up has to stop when it's too cold or wet and that blue-backed paper can't be recycled and you can see the need for an alternative.

The generic solution, which is referred to as a high-definition poster, is a single-piece poster on a plastic substrate. Urban Storm has gone a step further with its Stormflex poster system and Ecoflex substrate.

At the heart of that is a tensioning system Cook developed to ensure every one-piece poster is always "drum tight", so that the graphics are crisp and flat. The firm tests fabrics and the tensioning systems to make sure they can stand a battering by the elements.

Cook is proud that National Rail approves Stormflex for trackside use, where it needs to resist being sucked out by trains passing at 125mph. "Safety is always a concern and so I ensure the systems are well engineered," he says.

Cook started out in 1989 at the age of 19 he formed Scaffolding with a contract to cover a monument undergoing refurbishment in London.

"The idea was to offset the cost of the refurbishment by selling the wrap for advertising," he says. Developing the rigging for building wraps led Cook to Bristol-based Base Structures. The firm specialises in tensile structures – awnings, canopies and roofs formed from plastics and fabrics that hold their shape under tension. Cook's idea – or rather ideas, he has five patents to his name – was to adapt the tensile technology to billboards and truck sides.

Material difference

Urban Storm was born in 2001, with Shute joining in 2007. "He was one of my first customers, and supplies the media expertise," says Cook. "It's essential to have that side; it differentiates us from firms that are just printers."

Urban Storm didn't start as a printer. Print was brought in-house – or strictly speaking into Base's Bristol factory – "when volumes justified it" with a pair of roll-to-roll UV-cured presses.

While Stormflex addressed the need to simplify installation Cook wanted to go further and improve the environmental credentials of his medium. His answer was Ecoflex, which is polyethylene (PE) rather than the more common vinyl.

"PE contains no phthalates, has 75% of the carbon footprint of vinyl and it can be recycled multiple times," says Cook.



Ecoflex is a polyethylene-based outdoor poster system that does away with messy paste-ups

URBAN STORM

Sales £2m

Staff 5

Sectors Out of home advertising, billboards, exterior POS, truck sides and transport advertising

Location London HQ, Bristol production facilities

Founded 2001

Management team managing director Sam Cook, commercial director Kevin Shute

It can, however, be tricky to print. In early trials, UV inks wouldn't stick. However, Fujifilm Sericol inks proved to be sticky and flexible and the firm was flexible enough to help develop the application. It opened Fujifilm's eyes to the opportunity of high-definition poster printing, and as result it launched the Uvistar 3.2m and 5m UV roll-to-roll presses.

Ecoflex isn't just better for the planet. Cook has slashed production costs by 40% through eliminating the time and cost of applying keders – the ridge on the edge of the sheet that engages with the frame to tension it. The result is a flat sheet made of just PE fabric, which makes it simple to recycle. It can also be tightly folded – making distribution easy. Patented clamps, cables and a winch make it a cinch for one man to change a display in 15 minutes from the ground – around half the time it takes to paste up a poster, reducing installation costs too.

With Ecoflex Urban Storm is positioned to take advantage in the eye of outdoor media's perfect storm.