
Fujifilm and Urban Storm stretch the limits in outdoor advertising

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It's immediately apparent when talking to Sam Cook, director of UK-based Urban Storm, that here is a company setting out to make a real difference in the outdoor advertising and billboard sector. In order to do so, they have partnered with Fujifilm to make use of both its technological and business expertise.

Bristol & London-based Urban Storm has been in operation since 2001, specialising in the large format market, outdoor advertising and banner sector. Sam started out in 1989 with 'Scaffolding' and so far has five patents to his name. He is also known for being the first company in the UK to wrap a building. From 2007 his partnership with co-director Kevin Shute has allowed him to focus on media expertise as well as his passion for engineering, differentiating Urban Storm from other printing firms.

Outdoor advertising has been suffering for some time as brand owners demand premium quality products, while site owners aim to reduce costs and alleviate negative effects on the environment. Recognising the need for something innovative to resolve this conflict, Sam and Kevin have been looking for ways to produce a high-quality, environmentally friendly and lower-cost (to the printer) outdoor system.

New horizons

The result is the design and patent of the STORMFLEX system. This is a rigid frame containing a number of patented quick release poster clamps which can each bear 85kg on light weight 110g polyethylene (PE), holding a fully recyclable PE ECOFLEX poster in place, and meeting all engineering standards required for outdoor use. The weight-bearing capacity of the clamps allows the poster to be fully tensioned in order that it remains drum-tight and the graphics lie completely flat, giving a high-definition finish. Further to reducing costs for clients, the increase in quality is so great that a perceived increase in the value of the site is also recognised.

"When considering our objectives for the new system, the environment was high on our list. PE material can be recycled into any number of other products after use, time and time again, unlike PVC which can only be recycled once", says Sam. "It is also four times lighter than PVC, and has twice the strength; but the downside is that it's also incredibly tricky to print on, and UV inks simply wouldn't stick to it. But, we elected to develop a system using PE because we feel that this is the future of the outdoor advertising world, it meets the needs of the site owners who want to use less paper, and as I'll explain, Fujifilm came to the rescue with regards to the inks."

"The system has also been designed to eliminate any finishing requirements as the material is stretched via the clamps into the aluminium frame. This cuts the cost of banner production by up to 50%, a potentially huge saving that enables printers to maintain margins in an increasingly difficult market."

Overcoming challenges with Fujifilm expertise

In order to print effectively onto the PE material, Urban Storm was looking for a superwide format printer and ink technology that could provide the same depth of colour and vibrancy that can be seen on traditional pasted billboard hoardings.

Sam explains, "After a number of trials with different suppliers it was clear that Fujifilm was the only real contender. The business development skills demonstrated by everyone we have been in contact with, and their knowledge of UV ink development and manufacturing, is second to none.

"I have to say that we have been absolutely delighted with the advice from Fujifilm. We worked together to turn the output from the new Uvistar UV inkjet roll-to-roll printer from meeting low end output requirements to producing high quality, high volume work.

The Uvistar can print on rolls up to five metres wide, and in combination with the Uvijet QK inks that have been specially developed for PE, are perfect for Urban Storm's STORMFLEX systems. "Fujifilm has gone to enormous lengths to ensure that the inks stick well, with fantastic resonance of colour and adhesion. I believe it will alter the way that material for both billboard and POP applications will be prepared in the future," adds Sam.

Currently, designs are submitted to Urban Storm which uses its Uvistar to print 18m² (48 sheet) posters onto the PE fabric, with guide marks for the clamps. The posters are then laid flat onto an air table, trimmed to size and can be packed immediately into a pizza-sized box for shipment. The sheets are dry when they come off the printer, there's no nasty smell, they're tough but extremely light and can be tightly folded for easy distribution. Sam explains, "We can produce up to 500 posters of 18m² a day, printing posters every five to ten minutes, and are currently in operation 16 hours a day. From this it is easy to see how we have the potential to expand."

The STORMFLEX system is incredibly simple to operate and enables one man to change a poster display in approximately 15 minutes. A far cry from the two men needed to paste up traditional billboards, which even for an expert could take anywhere between 25-30 minutes. It really does provide a remarkable time saving and environmental benefit with no pasting mess, no water needed, and no tools other than a winch required.

For outdoor advertisers and printers all over the world this system will open up new opportunities. With such a quick turnaround possible, more posters can be produced and changed over. This brings a huge number of commercial advantages for brand owners and finally enables outdoor advertising to become more of a premium advertising prospect.

In order to capitalise on this new opportunity, Urban Storm and Fujifilm will develop business plans with individual printers to show them what their ROI would look like, and how this can benefit their organisations.

Sam concludes, "There is no doubt in my mind that from now on we will look to Fujifilm for all printing requirements. The quality of service and development know-how has been exceptional."