

Upping The Ante In Las Vegas

A Show-Stopping Mix of Videowall Programming And Live Staging

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"We want more sales the first day of this trade show than we had the entire show last year." Such was Jason Greenburg's challenge to Audio Visual Headquarters (AVHQ), Rancho Dominguez, CA.

As the advertising director of Skechers USA, Greenburg was looking to the August 7 - 10 Western Show Association trade show in Las Vegas as the place to "wow" wholesalers with a new kind of booth -- one combining a dynamic videowall with a staged, choreographed footwear fashion show.

"Our whole thing at Skechers is image, image, image," explains Greenburg. "And we knew from experience AVHQ could bring together the technical talent to help us deliver something exciting and new."

Skechers USA, based in Manhattan Beach, CA, appeals to high school and college students as the funky, in-your-face, MTV-like answer to traditional shoe manufacturers. With their emphasis on image, Skechers knew they had to give a knock-out presentation.

"Everyone involved had a take-no-prisoners attitude," says Greenburg.

Creating The Design

Before contacting AVHQ, Skechers approached architect Allen Wix of Wix Design, Redondo Beach, CA, and Premiere Displays and Exhibits, Cypress, CA. For videowall and stage design, Wix brainstormed with the Premiere Displays' staff, who would be responsible for building the furniture, and the Skechers' staff, which included marketing director Martin Brown.

"The design quickly got bigger, more sophisticated, and more complex," says Brown. "The space we had to work with was 100' wide, 60' deep, with a 16' height limit. Wix put together some great drawings based on all our ideas, but we knew we had to get AVHQ involved to help us determine the technical feasibility of the design within that space."

Brown then called Warren Tash, Skechers' account executive at AVHQ, who showed the drawings to his technical team.

"They had some fascinating design ideas, especially with Premiere Displays' suggestion of a non-traditional videowall," explains Tash. "We've seen thousands of 4x4 videowalls, but this unorthodox design caught our attention. They had 42 monitors (Sony RVP400Q multiscan-compatible videowall cubes) arrayed in a kind of curved, inverted, asymmetrical pyramid. The booth was oriented like a baseball diamond with the videowall arcing from first to third base. We could tell the program design was going to be interesting enough, but they also had designed an arched stage connecting both ends of the videowall to a center ramp (at the pitcher's mound) for a choreographed fashion show."

Between shows, customers had to have access to the booth, so the design called for the two side ramps, which connected to the middle, to be electronically lowered and raised on detachable chains anchored to the ceiling.

"And on top of all that," says Tash, "Skechers wanted the choreography integrated with live video to hook the audience, not only into the beautiful dancers, but also into the product images behind them. The technical set-up was definitely do-able, but the programming challenges proved quite extraordinary."

Integrating Video Programming

Skechers wanted four programmed segments -- one 25-minute fashion show, and three 10-minute looped segments. Tash called in David Elliott, vice president and chief designer at South Pacific Image, Irvine, CA.

Elliott immediately saw the



creative opportunities. "We tackled what were in effect three 10-minute television commercials -- for men's shoes, women's shoes, and children's shoes," said Elliott. "Skechers had hired a great cinematographer to shoot over 3-hours of fabulous footage, with more than 50% of it usable."

Using Adobe Premiere and After Effects, Elliott and his team created 15- to 20-second wide-screen (3x1) openings and closings for each segment, and then created an eye-grabbing mix of images in between. They decided to run four Sony CRV laserdiscs, three for left, center, and right, and one utilities disc for a kind of random access of images to cover those monitors that did not fit into the wide-screen layout.

"Those four video streams gave us lots of flexibility," explained Elliott. "For example, for the women's sport segment, we could run a 2x2 left image of a girl dancing, a 2x2 right image with a young woman's face turning toward the camera, and a 4x4 center image of a woman's shoe spinning around. We could switch and combine images, background colors, and product shots, and then fill in the remaining monitors with randomly accessed stills. We could even switch between wide-screen mode and videowall mode in the middle of the segments for some cool transitions."

Elliott worked with AVHQ's Linda North, who keyed in the actual programming. Together, they determined exactly how images would move panoramically across the entire videowall.

"That involved some fun programming to sync between the three main CRV discs," says North. "The discs run precisely synced, with images being passed, so to speak, between discs. We wanted to move beyond simple video wallpaper. We created dynamic moves, spinning logos and products, and random pop-up stills."

With the flexibility of stored programming, they could easily get approvals from Skechers and implement changes on the spot.

Live Video And The Fashion Show

For the fashion show, Skechers hired Los Angeles choreographer Bob Talmadge. He worked with almost three dozen dancers to create a 25-minute series of dance segments involving teams of young women, men and children. Behind them, Skechers logos and products spun, and images moved and switched to a combination of hip hop, techno, and even old-fashioned swing, as a green laser splayed out overhead from a series of mirrors.

For an intriguing effect on some of the segments, Skechers introduced the idea of filming the dancers the night before and displaying that in the background in sync with the actual show. AVHQ's Larry May directed the video

and worked all night on the edit.

"We really had the audience going," reveals May. "The video showed action from several angles, and because it synchronized with the live action, people were looking around for live cameras that weren't there."

Audio Challenges

The Skechers booth was by far the biggest on the floor. With all of its enhanced visual and audio production values, everyone had to be concerned about the sound encroaching on neighboring booths.

Tash's technical team met the challenge by using a special class of high-end sound equipment to control the sound, the EAW Concert Series, from Eastern Acoustic Works, Whitinsville, MA.

"We did things that weren't obvious to the audience. As you stepped up to the stage to watch the show, you stepped into a tightly controlled zone of both light and sound. Right there, it sounded really loud, very punchy, but as you walk out of that tightly controlled zone, over to the booth across the aisle, the sound level dropped dramatically."

Audience Reaction

How did the audience take to the final presentation?

"They loved it," says Greenburg. "We had the fashion show every two hours with the pre-programmed segments looped in between. The crowd got pretty thick in front of the stage, especially when they saw those ramps being lowered to set the stage for the show."

And how were sales that first day?

Greenburg laughs. "We easily surpassed the entire weekend of last year's show."

And he stops and thinks for a moment. "I guess we have to really up the ante for next year. But somehow I think everybody is up to the challenge." **eb**

