

We took the opportunity while sitting in one of the more familiar “quiet times” that we have seen in 2020/21, to pose some questions to our CEO, Alex Parmee. Here are his thoughts on the effects of the Pandemic that has hit our industry in such a destructive way.

1. What was the biggest lesson learnt from the challenges of 2020?

Never underestimate the power of a pandemic!

If last March we knew how long this was going to last, we would have evaluated and reacted differently which would have helped us to stay commercially stronger. We remained hopeful for too long that things would bounce back sooner, and ultimately ate into our reserves quicker than we should have.

2. When does DG expect / hope to be able to work again – government restrictions allowing?

It takes a reasonable amount of time to plan an exhibition, and as we sit here today we do not anticipate to see a huge amount of planning to start much before mid-February. There are many scenarios we could put forward, but in reality it is impossible to say when things will change. We hope to see some work coming in before for the summer, but in reality we do not feel we will see any consistent business levels return until September and we will then grow from there. When this time comes, we feel that initially jobs will be UK based, until the simplicity of travel outside the country becomes more straightforward.

3. What can be expected from DG in the coming years – what can customers look forward to?

At the beginning of year we recruited a new head of design, who started with us in Q2. Matt Lampard has over 15 years’ experience in Exhibition design and project management and is a significant step for us in the growth strategy we have for the business. In addition, we were due to receive our brand new CNC machine in April ready for when the industry bounces back. This combined with Matt’s designs will give us more capacity and the ability to deliver more creative and complex projects in house. Our aim is to get the business back to where it was, and bring back as many staff as we are able to, before focusing again on our growth strategy and building on the 35 plus years of the companies success.

4. What were the impacts of the Covid situation for Display Graphics

The whole events industry literally shut down within a week. Initially the shows were being postponed, but eventually these became cancellations or moved to the following year but this is all still up in the air. Our income has reduced by about 90% on previous years, so we’ve had to make significant cost savings to be able to remain in business, including redundancies across the business, taking all our vehicles off the road, and cutting back all non-essential services where we can.

5. Were you able to do anything to adapt to the downturn in business

Initially we diversified into building wooden planters for gardens, and when things started to improve after the initial lockdown we moved towards supplying acrylic screens and vinyl graphics to help provide Covid safe spaces to aid businesses in reopening. Using our in house design team, plus some help from HenBe with the PR (<https://www.henbe.co.uk>) we created a marketing campaign to broaden our network and create some opportunities within our local area.

6. How do you plan to position the business going into 2021

Our objective is to position the business to be ready to go when the industry returns. With our core team on Flexi furlough, a new CNC machine in place and other assets maintained and ready for action, we feel we are in a strong position to support clients old and new. Timing is key for our next steps, too soon and we could lose money and too late and we’ll miss the opportunities.

7. Will Brexit have any impact on working in Europe

This is a difficult one to answer at this stage, without any clear data from other industries to compare against. However, aside from the added paperwork of getting into / out of Europe we do not currently see huge obstacles to overcome. There are many different reasons our clients buy in the UK and ship their stands internationally, and we very much hope these reasons will continue to be relevant, and we can remain a competitive solution.

8. What are you most looking forward to in the next 12 months

Doing what we do best – getting our team back to work, delivering jobs, and getting back a real sense of achievement each day

9. Can you offer any advice to anyone trying to sustain their business throughout a Pandemic?

- Be realistic and plan for longer than you think you need to.
- Stay positive and try to remain optimistic – your attitude as a business leader will have a strong effect on your team
- Keep it tight – lower costs quickly but retain key services
- Retain your core team and experience where practical – things will start again and you’ll need them
- Remain relevant – keep your marketing and social media alive, and keep in touch with your clients

10. If you could go back to the start of the Pandemic what would you have done differently over the last 12 months?

The biggest thing we would have done differently is reacted sooner and taken appropriate steps to protect our reserves. Having not been through a scenario like this in our lifetime, we applied logic and our own experiences, along with a degree of hope to an unknown situation.

11. What has been the biggest eye opener to you throughout this period, 1 positive 1 negative?

Negative – the infodemic. The sheer volume of conflicting information being reported has made it very difficult to make informed decisions.

Positive - how we have managed to adapt, be it professionally or personally and to generally remain positive despite the continued onslaught of the virus.