

A Profitable Niche

When truck trailer graphics need to be swapped out frequently, soft-side frame systems are hard to beat.

By DAVE KING



Dave King is “Commander of Results” at MarketKing, a marketing agency that offers the Print Shop Makeover. The program is designed to visit and teach business owners about digital printing. For more information, e-mail him at david@the-marketking.com.

Though much attention has been paid to self-adhesive vinyl type vehicle and fleet graphics, soft-sided truck graphics has quietly become a solid and profitable niche in its own right. Customers interested in soft-side truck graphic systems tend to be the owners of trucks in manufacturer and retail sectors who want to be able to change graphic messages on a regular basis, but also want to keep costs down

and keep their trucks on the road as much as possible. For these companies truck frame systems and interchangeable soft-side graphics make perfect sense.

The cost issue is huge for these companies, and even though the initial cost of the frame-and-graphic installation can be more expensive than a self-adhesive vinyl job, subsequent graphic change-outs tend to cost much less than a change-out of a self-adhesive vinyl job. Plus, the change-out time is very short. Two people can change out a full soft-side truck graphic in about two hours, while stripping and re-installing a full truck PSA vinyl wrap takes two good vinyl installers more than six hours — which basically would pull the trailer off the road for an entire day.

In most cases, the soft-sided graphic material of choice is vinyl banner material, some have a bead while others are attached with grommets; and there is a new system that attaches with Velcro-like heavy duty



Once the frame system is in place, applying a new banner graphic is a simple job that can be done in a couple of hours. (Image courtesy of TruckAds)



Soft-sided graphics is a viable niche, especially for clients that need to swap out their graphics frequently. Rather than PSA vinyl, soft-side applications use a banner material that is held on the truck using a framing system. (Image courtesy of TruckAds)

fasteners. Once printed, soft-side truck graphics can be reused over and over again as seasonal promotions, such as Christmas, rotate.

ADVANTAGES AND DRAWBACKS

From the graphics provider/installers perspective, there are many advantages and only a small number of drawbacks to soft-side truck graphic systems. One major advantage is that the trailer's exterior doesn't have to be in pristine condition and the number rivets or depth of corrugation doesn't matter – banner graphics just covers everything. Plus, when the client decides to purchase new trailers, the frame can be transferred to the new trailer (provided the new trailers are close in size).

One drawback is that the system does not work well on trailers that have a side-access door unless you don't mind losing



Some soft-sided truck graphic frame systems are all but invisible once installed. (Image courtesy of TruckAds)



Since the graphic simply covers the side of the trailer, the number rivets on the trailer has no affect on the time it takes to install. (Image courtesy of Epic Media Group)

Soft-Side Truck Graphics

access to the door, or lose graphic real estate by building the frame so as not to cover the door. I have seen a trailer where the frames were added and the side door was wrapped with PSA vinyl, but this makes swapping out graphics a more involved process. And although it's true that banner

material weighs much more than PSA vinyl, a banner and frame system weighs only about 150 lbs. The savings to the client are very attractive.

I have a client who each year rents several 24' straight trucks during their busy season. They mount frames to the trucks,

then install the banners. Each year they have their name on these rentals and at the end of the season the graphics and frames are removed till next year. They calculated a savings of more than \$10,000 per year after the first year.

One more huge benefit for those of you who may not have a truck bay to install graphics: you can do soft-sided truck graphics in just about any location and weather condition. I have installed them in the dead of winter and the heat of the summer. Plus, you don't even have to print the graphics, just about all the frame-system manufacturers offer print services along with the frames they sell.

FROM THE FACTORY

As market demand for soft-side graphics grows, truck trailer companies have started to take notice. Today a number of the trailer manufactures are starting to ship trailers with the graphic frames build right into the design of the trailer. Clearly, this is a trend that makes sense, both financially and environmentally (you know, that Green thing).

Another type of truck that accepts banner-type graphics is the curtain-wall truck, like those used by lumber delivery trucks and some vehicle transport and special material handling delivery trucks. Basically, the driver pulls back a side curtain each time he needs to access the load. The material used with curtain wall trucks is much heavier than the vinyl banner material used on frame-system trailers; and requires a totally different system to support them. These trucks come from the factory with the side curtains and in a lot of cases the truck manufactures will offer full printing services themselves, or they will outsource it.

FRAME SYSTEMS AND THE LAW

If you are going to get into doing soft-sided truck graphics you should know



UK-based Epic Media Group offers the Kwik Zip aluminum soft-side graphics frame system. (Image courtesy of Epic Media Group)

Soft-sided graphic framing systems can even be used on rented or leased truck trailers. Some systems require no drilling or other modifications to the trailer and can be easily removed when the lease is up. (Image courtesy of TruckAds)



about a law that the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) has on the books regarding the width of truck trailers. Truck trailers are generally manufactured to the maximum allowable width so that truckers can get as much on the trailer as possible. This could affect you if adding a frame system to the trailer makes the trailer wider than the law permits. Make sure you know exactly how much the frame system adds to the trailer's width before installing.

DOT federal regulation 23 CFR 658.15 establishes that the maximum width of commercial motor vehicles is not to exceed 102.36", excluding mirrors and certain safety devices. Each state is mandated to be "as stringent as" federal law and may elect to adopt more stringent requirements.

In an effort to maximize the cargo space (payload area), many truck and trailer manufacturers build box trucks and trailers

to be 102" inches wide. This leaves only .36" inches to add hazmat signage and other truck add-ons, including soft-side graphics frame systems to permanently or temporarily affix to truck sides for the purposes of displaying advertising media. Anything over 102.36" inches could be considered illegal and therefore subject to citation and fines up to \$500.

One more thing. It's important to remember that if your client is going for the full-wrap look you'll still have to wrap the rear doors of the trailer with traditional PSA vinyl. However, it is very nice to see a truck wrap that does not require a squeegee to apply and a blowtorch to remove. Soft-side graphics systems are easy – just about anyone can sell and install them.

Good luck. Be smart with your money and I will see you on the show floor. 

NEW TYPE OF FRAME

There is a relatively new soft-sided truck graphics framing solution that meets DOT width restrictions on 102" trucks because it offers a very slim profile. TruckAds LLC, based in McLean, Va., has been selling this type of soft-sided truck graphics solution for more than three years. Rod Harris, CEO of TruckAds told me other benefits to this new technology include the fact that it does not require any drilling, rivets, plates, or anything that requires holes or modification to the trailers.

Rather than an aluminum frame, the system consists of a hard, durable polymer material that adheres to metal, glass, fiberglass and other non-porous surfaces. It is invisible when the banner is installed and barely visible when the banner is removed. Once installed, the frame and banner projects less than .25" from the mounting surface. It will not make a trailer exceed DOT trailer-width regulations. Best of all, the system can be installed on a trailer in about two hours. According to the manufacturer, the system was successfully tested at real-time speeds of up to 75 mph for consistent periods, and 120 mph impact speed with two vehicles passing very close to each other.

All you need for installation is a ladder, a foam roller (\$25), a pair of scissors and some labor. A typical wrap on a truck 53' truck trailer is about \$6,000 and takes two skilled installers most of a day to install. Your cost to replace soft-side graphics after the frames are installed is about \$2,500 and you can sell them for \$4,000 or more.

After the trailer has finished its term (the lease is up) you can simply remove the adhesive-backed frame and the trailer is ready for sale. No holes to fill, no large pieces of metal to deal with, and you can do the removal yourself in a few hours. 



Once the frame system is installed on the truck, graphics can be swapped out quickly and inexpensively. (Image courtesy of Epic Media Group)

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