



NEW EXTERIORS COMBINE FUNCTION AND DESIGN

From Full-Body Paint to 'Sexy' A/C Units, RV Exteriors Continue to Evolve to Meet Consumer Tastes

By Cean Burgeson • Photos by Jeff Stillson

In 1962, the Mallard travel trailer "wowed" RVers with its two-tone stripes and simple graphics. Times have changed.

Today, savvy manufacturers are exploring the full spectrum of custom paint and production graphics technology to make each RV brand more distinctive, salable and profitable than the competition.

Glen Eash, project manager for Sharpline Converting, Inc., is a 20-year veteran of the RV and Marine graphics business. Sharpline has been serving the industry for more than 30 years.

"I started when we did concepts with colored markers on paper with graphics designer Julius Barth," he says.

Eash says that like most of the graphics companies serving the industry, Sharpline creates graphic packages and branding logos from scratch for customers. Working closely with customers,

Sharpline and its team of 20 graphic designers, based in Indiana, Florida and Kansas, create production-ready art for manufacturers.

"It's a seamless network of designers digitally connected so we are completely scalable," Eash says. "Work comes in from the field and is assigned to the design team that is currently available. This gives us a diverse look for our clients. There is always a fresh set of eyes and hands on each project."

He explains the process. The first meetings with a client produce drafts that are then put into board form for up to four different design concepts. After further meetings with the client, the best traits of each design are consolidated into a final draft phase. After those are approved, a prototype graphic must be created to apply to the actual full-sized RV to see if the graphics translate to scale. After modification on-site, the final product gets approved.

Eash says graphics have become more important to RV manufacturers over the last 15 years because of multiple branding efforts that drive the industry.

"At one time we just had a single look for each manufacturer with product names," he says. "Now each brand almost stands on its own with just a reference to the builder."

"But the biggest change in the industry is the onset of digital technology. The days of the big steel, die-cut presses stamping out each graphic color is over. Now all the rendering is done electronically and the output is produced off high-resolution plotter print tables doing multiple runs at a time."

Full-Body Paint Growing in Popularity

Within the last year, Carrera Custom Painting, a Patrick Industries brand, has identified a strong trend toward full-body paint, says Mike Leman, business unit director for Carrera Custom Painting. The company is an OEM custom paint refinishing facility located in Elkhart, Ind., that has been in the business for more than 30 years.

The trend toward fully-painted RVs is being seen predominantly with higher-end models, where consumers are looking for a more resilient finish that requires less maintenance than vinyl, Leman says.

"It definitely lasts longer, and it does look better," he says. "The end-retail customer is looking for that high-end finish. Vinyl graphics tend to fade and crack in the sun. The life span of the

full-body paint is definitely going to outlast anything with vinyl on it. Just like cleaning your car — it's an automotive finish. Fiberglass will tend to chalk and fade over time. There's really no way to clean it. You can buff it out and make it look pretty decent again, but it will chalk out again, whereas the paint will not do that."

"Younger baby-boomers are looking for something that looks cool. Something that is going to set them apart."

Low-end models are not being painted, however, Leman says. "Stick and tin is never really going to get painted. That's a pretty significant cost. And you can't really bake that into a \$40,000 unit or less. But when you start getting into fifth wheels that are \$70,000-plus or motorhomes that are \$120,000-plus, putting a paint job on it is definitely more feasible because of the cost of that unit."

The paint being used by Carrera is solid-based paint that is a base-coat and clear-coat application. The base paint provides the color, with the clear coat giving the coach its glossy shine and



Precision Painting's Jeff Stewart (red bandana) and Mark Banfry mask an RV that's in for paint repair. Precision Painting is a Patrick Industries brand.

protection from UV sunlight. Once they are built, the units are sprayed in paint booths with spray guns. Color is applied with a cup gun. Heavier applications of clear coat are done with a pump fed from a five-gallon bucket. Seven to eight gallons of clear coat go on a single unit.

"Black is starting to trend upwards," Leman says. "Other paints that are on an upward trend are what Jayco or Renegade puts on their high-end models. They are more vibrant colors such as bright red or bright blue accents, versus the old earth tones that were so predominant for so many years. We also do some drop-shadows or effects that make the paint look like it is torn."

Retail customers are looking for something different and new with paint, and some will even seek their own custom paint job from companies such as Carrera, after they have purchased their coach.

"Younger baby-boomers, for example, are looking for something that looks cool. Something that is going to set them apart," Leman says. About 95 percent of its business, however, is painting for RV OEMs, so those "cool" paint jobs are not just for those who want a custom job; they must also carry over into the work they do for major manufacturers.

Attention to Exterior Touches Adds Up to Higher Perceived Value

"The biggest trend over the past five or six years has been power awnings," says Dave Schultz, vice president of RV OEM Sales and Marketing for Dometic. The global company, which supplies a variety of equipment to RV manufacturers, has seen a shift from manual to power awnings. "Eight years ago, 70 percent of our awnings were manual. Today, they are 90 percent power."

In addition to providing protection from the sun and the elements, awnings are now designed to match the overall exterior look of the coach. "The design element is an important aspect of how it looks up against the coach," Dometic Product Sales Manager Rory Leitch says.

"We have always taken the stand that we want the awning to blend in with the exterior of the coach as much as possible," he says.



From left, Dometic's Industrial Design Director Bryan Bergin, Product Manager Rory Leitch, and Senior Product Engineer Clayton Meyers pose with the company's PowerChannel Rail.



This Renegade unit is an example how RVs arrive at Precision Painting before painting begins.



Holly Clark inspects LED lighting at Dometic. The company developed and patented an application where the LED light strip is mounted at the awning rail on the wall, which gives the consumer back-lighting.

"Some awnings on the market stand out from the coach and announce themselves more."

The seamlessness with the coach exterior is accomplished through color, size or profile of the arm when it is retracted against the coach. Dometic's awning design hides the motor inside the tube of the awning so it's not visible, giving it an even more streamlined appearance.

Besides awnings, LED lights are also a new trend, according to Schultz. "We're unique in that we developed and patented an application where the LED light strip is mounted at the awning rail on the wall. This gives the consumer back-lighting. Previous lighting was out on the roller tube assembly eight feet out in front of you."

The newly launched system employs "power channel technology" that allows accessories to be added to the awning, such as additional lighting on the roller tube, electric fans and a Bluetooth speaker. More applications are planned for the future.

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A move away from plain white toward colored sidewalls such as tan, cream, bronze or silver-grey over the years has made it necessary for RV OEM equipment vendors to keep pace by customizing their products to match.

"We've color matched water heater and furnace doors for a long time," Schultz says. "With so many RVs being fully-body painted or wrapped, it's so important to try and make the access doors a little more invisible. A lot of

color matching happens at the OEM, where we make sure the material used in the doors is paintable and won't peel off eventually."

Another aspect of making the doors less visible includes designing them to be more flush and sleeker looking against the RV body. Vendors such as Dometic are designing and selling windows that are frameless or flush to blend in better with the sidewalls of the coach.

Vents and other extruding pieces are changing colors to meet trending manufacturer designs as well. "Black is now a big color," Leitch. "We went from 80 percent white to now about 70 percent black. It's completely flipped the other way around and we're even seeing more black-on-black design choices."

One highly visible exterior piece that Dometic is also working to blend more seamlessly into RV designs are air conditioning units. "Most air conditioners look

like a shoebox up there," Schultz jokes. "We have two models that are a very racy looking design which use new technology, and while they aren't low profile, their shape gives the appearance of something very aerodynamic and sexy."

Keeping Pace with the Changing Consumer Market

Whether it's vinyl, paint, or exterior utilities and accessories, one thing RV OEM vendors agree on is that OEMs continually look for any innovations in exterior style, color or form that will help to set their units apart from the crowd in an ever-changing market. While coach construction, floor-plans, utilities and amenities are still important, smart manufacturers know that consumers are searching for an RV that looks just as good on the outside as it does within.



Precision Painting's Buffer Supervisor Allen Longacre sands an RV. It's the first stage in buffing after being clear coated.



Maria Sandanol assembles SlideTopper hardware kits at Dometic. The SlideTopper is an awning that covers slideouts.



Dollie North sews a canopy at Dometic. Canopies and awnings are now designed to match the overall exterior look of the coach.



This RV just got base coated in black at Precision Painting, a Patrick Industries brand. Mike Leman, business unit director for Carrera Custom Painting, also a Patrick Industries brand, says the color black is trending up for RVs.



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