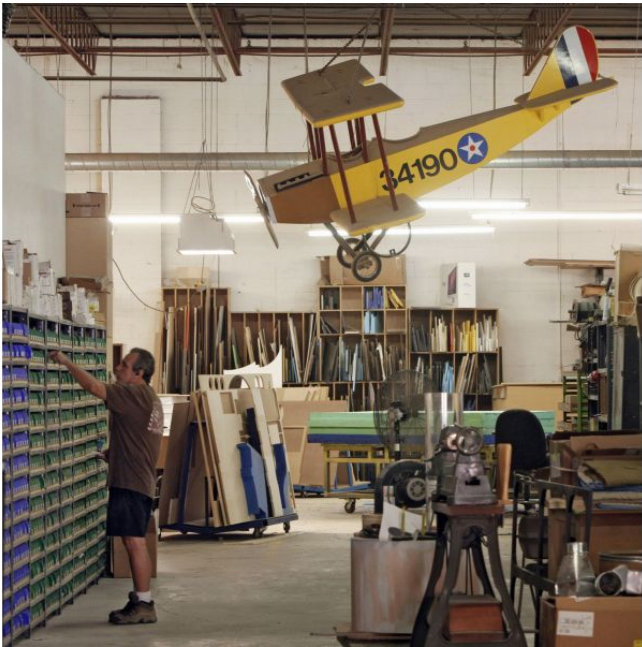


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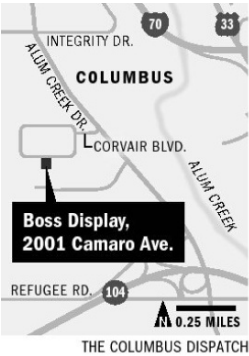
Boss Display makes educational exhibits

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Richard Ollangg looks for parts at Boss Display on the South Side. The company, founded in 1934, employs about 20.



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Boss Display Corp.

2001 Camaro Ave.,
Columbus

Employees: about 20

Annual sales:
undisclosed

By Amy Friedenberger

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH • Sunday July 14, 2013 6:41 AM

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Recycling’s a good thing, and so is conserving energy. But try telling that to most kids.

Show them why it’s important, though — and make it fun — and the message and habit might actually stick.

That’s where Boss Display comes in.

The company, based in Columbus, designs and manufactures exhibits for children’s museums in Ohio and around the world.

For example, this month, COSI Columbus will unveil a 4,000-square-foot exhibit focusing on energy, said John Shaw, director of experience and production at the Columbus science museum. To help show kids how and why to make environmentally conscious decisions, COSI commissioned Boss to create an energy display in which children will try to fix a neighborhood blackout.

The challenge, Shaw said, will be that returning electricity to one area could knock out the power to another area, teaching the children about the distribution of electricity. The children can continue to press buttons to turn lights off and on in an effort to return all of the power. “We try to create different levels of interaction at

Year opened: 1934

President: Tom Durfee, based in Columbus

Products: exhibits for science and children’s museums, corporations, visitor centers

Website:
www.bossdisplay.com

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COSI,” he said. The exhibit has children choose a character and make decisions, such as which transportation to use or which energy-using products to buy.

Another Boss Display exhibit at COSI is a water table, which squirts water out of different spots and around a spiral, creating a small current. Children can aim a tube squirting water to make items like a small windmill spin or try to grab at items that are moving around. The goal of that display is to demonstrate physics principles.

The displays are typical of Boss’ exhibits, which often use balls and water and kid power to make their point.

“You want to get the message across and still keep it fun,” Boss Display President Tom Durfee said. Carl Boss founded Boss Display in Columbus in 1934, and then sold the company to Ohio State University graduates Bill Tucker and Dennis Kennedy in 1978. Durfee, who had been working there since 1986, bought the company in 2002.

“I thought the company was a good fit for the creative side of me,” said Durfee, 57, who received a bachelor’s in business from East Carolina University, but also had an interest in design and construction. He came to Ohio after working for a trade-show group in Dallas.

Boss Display is one of only a handful of companies in the world that builds interactive and meticulously assembled designs, mostly for children’s museums but also for trade shows and others needing interactive displays.

Boss Display builds 50 to 75 displays a year, depending on size and complexity. Those displays, which can range in price from \$10,000 to more than \$50,000, can take about 10 to 12 weeks to make from design to finish. About 80 percent of the displays are made for locations in the U.S., and the rest are for locations abroad, a figure that Durfee said has increased during the past few years.

The market for its displays has increased because of a surge in construction of children’s museums. The Association of Children’s Museums says that 76 children’s museums opened in the past two years, bringing the total to about 350 in 28 countries.

Typically, clients approach Boss Display with a concept or basic design — a display about automobiles or a ball display to teach physics — and then Boss Display will make any design adjustments for durability or creativity before building it.

Durfee said Boss Display never builds the same display twice.

Because designs are different every time, each project is unique, making it more challenging for Boss Display’s workers.

“The guys back there never know what they’re building, and that’s fun for them, but that’s also the challenge and what causes the most anxiety because when you’ve never built something before, you’re not sure if it’s going to work,” Durfee said.

The 20 or so employees at Boss Display aren’t your average construction workers. Durfee prefers to describe their work as art.

Many of them hold master’s degrees in fine arts or sculpture, while others are skilled project managers, designers, logistics managers, carpenters, electricians and painters.

Christopher Westoff, 34, joined Boss Display about six years ago after earning his master’s in fine arts with a background in sculpture at Ohio State.

As a project manager and design engineer, he receives initial designs that firms may submit to Boss Display and then adjusts them to ensure functionality. He has free rein to design and build displays to meet his customers’ needs.

Google, for example, wanted an interactive ball display with a sports theme of pool balls shooting down hockey and lacrosse sticks and other simple machines. Google wanted the display, which requires a person to spin a wheel to move balls through the display, to go along with its creative, playful atmosphere.

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“I take a project from a napkin sketch to a finished installation,” Westoff said. “Whatever someone dreams up, I make it happen.”

Toys have become more sophisticated over the years, so displays designed to engage kids likewise have become more elaborate and hands-on.

Gone are the days when “interactive” museum displays consisted of video monitors that were activated with the push of a button, Durfee said.

“Now, what museums want is a little more full-body engagement,” he said.

That’s the case at one of Boss Display’s highest-profile clients, the Indianapolis Children’s Museum, which is considered one of the best in the country.

Charity Counts, the associate vice president of exhibits at the Indianapolis museum, said she has noticed that children tend to spend more time with interactive displays that are more open-ended.

The museum currently has Boss Display building a ball machine for its renovated Playscape, a large area dedicated to early-childhood development. In the past, Boss Display built a scaled-down construction zone for children to learn how to solve problems and think spatially.

“We look at what interactives are on trend, then we decide what messages we want to get across,” Counts said.

Interactive displays include multiple steps, with children turning a hand crank or pushing a pedal to trigger a result that goes on to produce some other action and so on.

“But at the same time, you’re learning something about maybe energy or physics,” Durfee said.

He has noticed a considerable increase in the requests for displays that focus on social or political issues, such as recycling, energy and oil, water runoff and pollution.

Durfee said a good museum display should be physically engaging, challenging and educational for children while also thrilling them.

“Sometimes you want them to experience failure in what they do, so they are challenged to try and shoot for success,” Durfee said.

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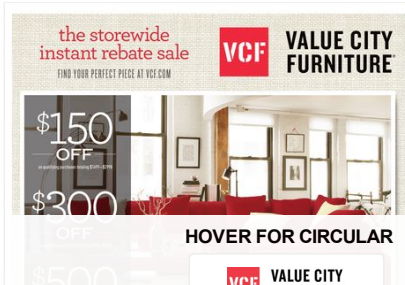
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