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Founded in the late nineteenth century as a manufacturer of parade floats, the U.S. company has reinvented itself, year after year, with courage, creativity and passion

Renze Display: For more than 100 years, a protagonist in the history of sign & display

di Gabriele Lo Surdo



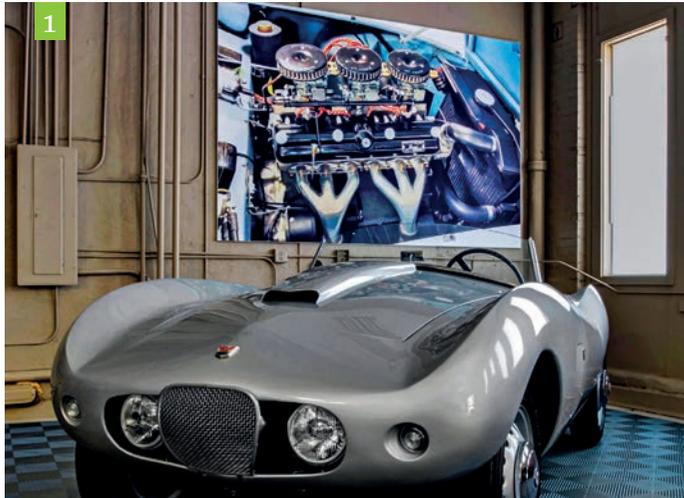
Despite its relatively short history, the United States is a treasure chest of evocative and sometimes legendary stories. And it is precisely one of these that prompted me to travel to Omaha, in Nebraska — a state with an economy strongly linked to agriculture, but also containing one of the highest number of millionaires and billionaires per capita in the United States. The story in

question is that of Renze Display, a printer that, in the “About us” of the company website, places its birth in 1895 and associates itself with parade floats. As soon as I get to the Eppley Airfield airport, I understand this isn’t going to be just any visit. Waiting for me is Doug Buchanan, owner of Renze Display. Contrary to my expectations, he doesn’t drive a huge pickup but an elegant Mini Cooper, the ultra-compact icon of the British car industry. “And my

wife has an Alfa Romeo Giulia,” the entrepreneur says with a smile. Before heading to the company, we stopped by his garage, where he keeps a precious collection of vintage British cars: a Triumph TR250 (signed by the historic drivers Bob Tullius and Kas Kastner), a Triumph GT6+, a Jaguar E-Type Series 1.5 and an Arnolt-Bristol Bertone (one of 130 sold). Buchanan told me about the life, death and miracles of each of his cars. Then I noticed the numer-

ous lightboxes that decorate the walls of the garage, with photos and illustrations of vintage cars. “These are some of the products we sell as ‘Garage Graphics,’ an e-commerce brand that I’ve created for car collectors who want to turn their garage into a totally immer-

|| Above, some of the latest works carried out by Renze: on the left, the lobby of DMSI Software headquarters; on the right, a Tate & Lyle booth which Renze has also designed.



sive visual experience,” explains Buchanan. “We have a database with hundreds of graphic files on the world of vintage cars, including photos of historic races, internal and external details of the most popular cars, as well as engines and other mechanical parts that distinguish the various models.” At this point, I quiver with curiosity to see the company, but Buchanan insists on a stop at Goldbergs, a neighbourhood bar a few hundred meters from the historic home of Warren Buffett. “Here you’ll have one of the best burgers in Omaha,” he says. And so it is.

It all starts with a parade

The history and name of Renze Display are linked to its founder, Gustaf Renze. In 1895, encouraged by the founders of Omaha, who aimed to make the city attrac-

tive to tourists, Renze visited the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. At the end of the festivities, he bought some of the floats he saw at the parade and transported them to Omaha. Here he had them modified, adding electric lights and a pantograph to connect them to the overhead line already used by the city’s trams. Thus, on the occasion of the October 1895 harvest festival, the first “Renze’s Electric Night Parade” took place. Renze founded his company to construct original floats, and soon received requests for signs and shop windows: the shopkeepers with stores in the streets where the parade took place wanted to be noticed by the event’s participants. In 1927, the company burned down and risked bankruptcy. During these years Walter Renze (Gustaf’s son) and Maynard Buchanan (Doug’s grandfather) became friends, and

Buchanan got so passionate about Renze’s work that in 1934 he resigned from his job at the Eppley Hotels Company to take over Renze’s business in 1935.

From generation to generation

In 1948, together with six other entrepreneurs, Maynard Buchanan helped establish the Screen Printing Association, which later became SGIA. In 1953, John Buchanan, Maynard’s son, joined the company before taking over in 1960. In 1967, the company introduced the first automatic screen printing machines. “We were printing large-format billboards and sending them all over the Midwest,” says Doug Buchanan. “Then, in 1987, my father told me he wanted to move to Arizona with my mother and sell the company to me. At the time, I had al-

|| 1) The very rare Arnolt-Bristol Bertone of Doug Buchanan, owner of Renze Display. 2) Some of the projects on view in the company’s showroom. 3) Part of a stand created by Renze Display using aluminium frames and sublimation-printed polyester fabric.

ready worked for Renze Display for 8 years, after getting my business degree. But I wasn’t prepared to take the baton. However, after a few sleepless nights, I decided to accept.”

Renze continued to grow even in the hands of young Doug, although, from time to time, he confronted complex issues. “One of the most important challenges has been that of space. When I took over Renze in 1987, we were 15 people in an old building in the centre of Omaha. We were producing on the fifth floor, and to receive a customer, I had to let him come

up to the office with a freight elevator,” continues Buchanan. “From there, we first moved into a 2,000 m² building and then into the current location of almost 9,000 m². In the meantime, we’ve grown to more than 40 people working here.”

The difficult entry into the digital world

In the early 1990s, Doug Buchanan confronted the rapid evolution of printing technologies and the progressive change in his target market. “I wanted to change the way we work and focus on digital, but it was not easy to involve the company’s staff in this process. Then a large offset printer in Omaha confessed to me that they had relied on a consultant to solve a similar situation,” says Buchanan. “So I asked the same person for help. An extraordinary man. Without him, I don’t know how we would have gotten to where we are.” In the following years, Renze Display hired new professionals in key roles, introduced new services and completed the final turn toward digital. At this point, it began to offer exhibit displays that customers would use at trade shows and other events. Everything went smoothly until September 11, 2001, when the company suffered a severe blow. “After the attack on the Twin Towers, no one was flying to exhibitions anymore. As a result, customers were not investing in new stands,” explains Buchanan. However, the company survived, both because its product range is incredibly wide, and because it began to specialize in the creation of branded environments: offices, representative corporate headquarters and points of sale.

New skills

As mentioned, Omaha is the city of Warren Buffett and his company, Berkshire Hathaway. But it also houses the headquarters of many other major companies, including Union Pacific, ConAgra Foods, Lindsay Corporation and



TD Ameritrade. The latter two have entrusted their headquarters to Renze Display, and join the almost two hundred “branded environment” projects the printer has carried out over the years. Dwelling on the work done for Lindsay Corporation, I am amazed by the multitude of materials used: panels and films printed with UV technology, glass films, custom wallpapers, artificial moss, as well as fabric printed by sublimation and applied within large aluminium frames.

The brainwave for textile

So I discover that the fabric is crucial in Renze Display’s offerings. “We saw how polyester was gaining ground in Northern Europe and we started offering it too, initially through external suppliers. The customers liked it and,

in 2013, we bought half a million dollars of printed fabric,” says Buchanan. “But the print quality of what we bought wasn’t always good. So we decided it was time to equip ourselves with a sublimation printer.” From the very first demos, however, the Renze Display team faced the difficulty of obtaining deep and homogeneous blacks. In the end, the choice fell to the Italian technology of ATP Color — a love at first sight destined to turn into a long-lasting partnership. “I love textile because it has completely changed the way we create exhibition stands and branded environments,” says Buchanan. “I’m 62 years old and have been working for 40 years. I could retire in three years but, somehow, the fabric is holding me back here: it has changed the perspective of what this company does and can do.” Today, Renze Display prints

|| 3) The meeting room of the new headquarters of Lindsay Corporation, whose walls are decorated by Renze Display with custom wallpaper and lightboxes. 4) Some samples of rigid materials printed with UV-curable inks. 5) Doug Buchanan poses in front of one of the two 3.2-meter wide ATP Color machines used by Renze Display to print polyester fabric. 6) Renze Display’s prepress workstations, at the centre of the printing and finishing department. 7) Renze Display’s Zünd 3XL-3200 digital cutter. 8) Matt Rusek, head of the finishing department, sews some printed fabric sheets.

fabrics with a pair of 3.2-meter wide ATP Color, both equipped with inline sublimation units, which have replaced the 2.5-meter wide ATP Color purchased in 2013. The elements that have allowed the company to assert its offer of fabric products also include its ability to develop advanced structures,



with and without backlighting systems, that are easily transportable, mountable and dismountable.

A complete company

In Renze Display, nothing is left to chance, not even the layout of the production spaces. “The digital department is at the heart of the company so that it is isolated from the outside. Humidity and temperature are controlled 24/7,” explains Buchanan. “Then we hired a specialist in managing airflows and made sure that they were oriented outside the company so that the dust was kept away from the printers.”

The ATP Color textile printers are flanked by two HP Latex units of 1.6 and 3.2 m, mainly used for printing on adhesive PVC, wallpaper and other flexible materials for special applications. Flatbed

printing is entrusted to a brand new swissQprint Nyalá 3, chosen by Renze for its high print quality and excellent colour gamut. The combination of UV-curable, Latex and sublimation is a form of technological complementarity tenaciously pursued by Buchanan. It underlines the opportunity to use the ideal technology for each application, in order to obtain the best aesthetic and functional characteristics, as well as the best environmental compatibility.

To achieve precision and productivity in cutting polyester and other flexible materials, Renze Display uses a G3 3XL-3200, Zünd’s flagship, equipped with a conveyor belt and high-capacity Center Winder unwinding machine. The finishing of rigid supports is entrusted to a Zünd G3 XL-3200, dedicated to high-precision milling and engraving, and a

milling cutter from the American manufacturer Multicam.

In the Renze Display’s prepress department, a team of experts checks the quality of the files sent by customers, prepares the nestings, and creates the colour profiles for the various printers. “Some time ago, we worked on a project for a European glass printer. The customer wanted to reproduce a Union Pacific locomotive on a 1:1 scale. Precisely on glass. On that occasion we handled a nearly 6 GB file,” says Buchanan.

Our exploration of Renze Display continues through the carpentry, painting and logistics departments; the latter is where the company tests the booths and other exhibit facilities it produces before packing them up for storage and shipping. The company also keeps an inventory of booths that customers can rent and

return. “What makes me proud of this company is that we do ‘a little more’ than many others do,” says Buchanan. “Some cut the wood, others design display systems and stands, others print. We do all these things under one roof.”

Towards new challenges

Renze Display has been a successful family business for three generations, ready to change and take on new challenges. “In our future, I see wider and more productive presses. We are increasingly involved in the dialogue between end customers, architects and designers. This allows us to propose ambitious solutions that customers often fall in love with. That’s why we’re soon going to need more performative technologies: to make all of this even bigger, and even more exciting,” concludes Buchanan. ■