

How to Protect Exhibition Graphics from Scratches

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An exhibition stand can look immaculate on the press bed, then pick up scuffs before the doors even open. Panels rub together in transit, roll-up graphics catch on hardware, and high-touch displays are quickly marked by bags, fingernails, cleaning cloths and repeated handling. To protect exhibition graphics from scratches, the finish must be planned as part of production, not treated as a last-minute packing precaution.

Scratches are more than a cosmetic issue. On dark colours, solid ink areas and high-gloss designs, even fine abrasion can turn a premium display into a visibly tired asset. For exhibition suppliers and print producers working to tight installation schedules, a damaged graphic can also mean an expensive reprint, rushed replacement and unnecessary material waste.

Where exhibition graphics pick up scratches

The greatest risk is rarely the few days a display spends on the exhibition floor. Damage often begins during finishing, packing, transport and build-up. Rigid boards can scrape against one another in flight cases. Fabric and banner materials can be dragged over rough tables or aluminium frame edges. Printed vinyl graphics can be marked during application, especially where installers need to reposition or squeegee a surface.

Once installed, exhibition graphics face a different type of wear. Reception counters, product plinths, interactive walls and retail-style display areas receive constant contact. Staff may wipe surfaces with unsuitable cleaners, while visitors lean bags, samples and equipment against printed panels. A graphic designed for one event may then be packed down, stored and reused repeatedly, multiplying the chance of abrasion at every stage.

This is why protection should be matched to the graphicâ€™s intended use. A one-off ceiling banner has different needs from a portable backdrop, a high-touch counter wrap or a set of reusable shell-scheme panels.

Protect exhibition graphics from scratches with a coating

A correctly selected protective coating creates a sacrificial barrier over the printed image. It helps the surface resist scuffing and abrasion without obscuring colour, detail or the chosen finish. Unlike an adhesive film laminate, a liquid laminate is applied as a coating and dries or cures directly onto the print. This can be particularly valuable for graphics with awkward shapes, textured substrates, raised details or applications where film edges are vulnerable to lifting.

Water-based liquid coatings are often well suited to exhibition graphics because they can provide a clear protective finish without adding another plastic film layer. They are available in gloss, satin and matt options, allowing the finish to support the visual brief as well as the practical requirement. Gloss can deepen colour and increase visual impact, while satin is a sensible compromise for many display panels. Matt can reduce glare under exhibition lighting, although it needs careful selection because some matt finishes show burnishing more readily under repeated contact.

For high-volume production or graphics requiring fast turnaround, UV-curable coating systems may be the better operational choice. They cure rapidly and can offer excellent abrasion resistance, but they require suitable equipment, process control and substrate compatibility. The right answer depends on print technology, ink set, material, required finish and the way the display will be handled.

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A protective coating should not be described as scratch-proof. Sharp objects, grit and excessive force can damage almost any finished surface. The objective is to reduce visible scuffing, improve resistance to everyday handling and keep the print presentable through multiple events.

Choose the finish for the real environment

Do not choose gloss, satin or matt purely from a swatch. Consider lighting, traffic and how closely visitors will view the graphic. A high-gloss finish may give a premium look to a feature wall, yet reflections from spotlights can distract from text and images. A matt finish may photograph well and suppress glare, but a counter panel that receives constant handling may need a more abrasion-tolerant formulation.

Also consider the printed substrate. Smooth PVC, self-adhesive vinyl, paper-based boards, fabrics, wallpaper materials and rigid display media behave differently. Ink adhesion, surface energy, flexibility and porosity all affect coating performance. A small production test is far less costly than discovering incompatibility after an entire exhibition set has been finished.

Build protection into the production process

Surface preparation is fundamental. The printed graphic must be clean, dry and fully cured before coating. Applying a coating over residual ink solvents, dust or silicone contamination can compromise adhesion and leave defects that become obvious under exhibition lighting.

Coating weight matters too. Too little protection may not provide the required resistance. Too much can affect appearance, drying time, flexibility or texture. Apply the coating evenly using the correct equipment for the job, whether that is a roller system, spray process or a dedicated coating machine.

Edges and corners deserve particular attention because they are the first areas to rub during transport and installation.

Allow the finished graphic to dry or cure fully before stacking, rolling or packing. A surface that feels dry is not always ready for pressure. Premature stacking can create blocking, imprinting or surface marking that no amount of careful packing will solve. Production teams should follow the coating systemâ€™s recommended cure conditions and build that time into the dispatch schedule.

For demanding jobs, Landor Liquid Lamination can help print professionals assess the substrate, ink and use environment before committing to a full run. Technical guidance is especially useful where exhibition graphics must combine premium appearance with repeated reuse.

Pack and transport without undoing the finish

Even well-coated graphics need sensible handling. The coating reduces risk, but it cannot compensate for abrasive packing materials or poor case design. Rigid panels should be separated with clean, non-abrasive interleaving and secured so they cannot move in transit. Avoid placing printed faces directly against rough cardboard, exposed Velcro, metal fixings or unprotected frame components.

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Rolled graphics should be wound with the printed face and coating system in mind. Use a suitably large core to avoid tight curl and creasing, then protect the roll with a clean outer layer before placing it in a rigid tube or purpose-made case. Do not allow loose tools, fixings or samples to travel in the same container as finished graphics.

At the venue, create a clean unpacking area before opening cases. Grit is a frequent cause of scratches, particularly on dark panels. Keep protective interleaving until each graphic is ready to install, and never slide boards face-down across a floor or trestle table. A few additional minutes during build-up can prevent a replacement run.

Reduce damage during installation and dismantling

Installers should use clean tools and replace worn squeegee edges, dirty cloths and damaged gloves. When fitting adhesive graphics, use the appropriate application fluid and technique for the material rather than forcing the vinyl across a dry, high-friction surface. Excessive pressure, trapped debris and poorly maintained tools can all leave marks that are only visible once the stand lighting is switched on.

During the show, give venue staff clear cleaning instructions. A coated surface may resist water and common handling, but aggressive solvents, abrasive powders and rough paper towels can still dull or scratch it. Use soft, clean microfibre cloths and approved cleaners, with light pressure rather than vigorous rubbing. If a display is in a public or hospitality area, specify a finish that also stands up to the planned cleaning regime.

Dismantling deserves the same discipline as installation. Remove graphics in a controlled sequence, wipe away dust only where necessary, and repack each item with its protective layers. Reusable exhibition assets should be inspected before storage so that minor marks can be addressed before the next booking, rather than discovered on-site.

Make reuse part of the specification

The most sustainable exhibition graphic is often the one that can be used again. Reprinting a damaged panel consumes more ink, media, energy and transport than specifying suitable protection at the outset. Liquid coating systems can help reduce reliance on additional plastic finishing films while extending the working life of printed displays.

That does not mean every exhibition graphic needs the highest possible level of protection. A short-life internal sign may only require a light, visually clean finish. A touring display, vehicle-based roadshow asset or high-touch product demonstration area warrants a more demanding specification. Match the coating system to the genuine risk, then test it under realistic handling conditions.

A display should arrive at its tenth event looking as considered as it did at its first. Specify protection early, allow time for proper curing, and treat packing as part of the finishing process. That is how exhibition graphics keep their colour, finish and commercial value long after the stand has been dismantled.

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