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## Space is Traffic Design's frontier

Makes commercial, promotional kiosks. Frigon's artistic side comes to the fore in design and layout of exhibition stands

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"My mother is an artist and my father an engineer," said Marie-Josée Frigon, 37. "I ended up being a mixture of both."

The president and founder of Traffic Design Inc. needs both the artistic and the technical sides to manage her company, which "designs commercial and promotional spaces."

The bulk of her business is designing and cobbling together kiosks for consumer-product exhibitions, like Montreal's annual auto show.

Her clients include Gaz Metro, Hydro-Quebec and Mazda Canada.

The artistic side comes to the fore in the design and layout of an exhibition stand - the message conveyed, the lines of the furniture, the lighting and the functionality must all be co-ordinated to project a unified image. It can be cool or hot, dignified or brash, muted or loud.

Marc Rodrigue, president of Protocole Communications d'Affaires, a Montreal firm specializing in branding and image molding, said he used to do the kiosk part of a company's branding in-house - until he gave Traffic Design a sub-contract for a show a few years ago.

"She went much further in her designs than we were able to - she combines all the elements for the kiosk. Since that time, we've entrusted her with all of our kiosk designs," Rodrigue said.



CREDIT: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE

Traffic Design founder and president Marie-Josée Frigon, seen here beside a 3-D model in her studio, has won acclaim for her ability to create artistic kiosks for consumer-product exhibitions. The company's clients include Gaz Metro, Hydro-Quebec and Mazda Canada.

Working with Mazda, she came up with a concept of a roller-coaster, placing the cars the company wanted to highlight on a large trailer, inclined at various angles.

"It's spatial design, and we find her astonishingly good," Rodrigue said. "It's happened several times that our people were sitting around scratching their heads trying every which way to come up with a concept. Then she gets involved, and within one hour, comes up with a super solution."

Frigon said she has "a passion for this business - learning about new industries and their clients."

She meets clients to understand the event and the objective, and she takes it from there.

"It's a turnkey deal - I take care of the whole thing, from materials to transportation. I generally keep the continuum of the project. An exhibition is firmly fixed, and it's not like you can be three days late. So you have to keep a close watch on the development of the project."

The Pointe à Callières museum wanted to advertise its presence and services, and designed an unwieldy mini-stand it would exhibit in the lobbies of various Montreal office buildings to drum up business.

"But it was hard to transport and looked awkward," Frigon said. "So I designed a small portable window behind which there were various small objects" - a mini-museum unto itself.

Montreal company LBX-Communication-Marketing also initially asked Frigon only for reception-area furniture to reflect the company's image.

"But I showed them how the lighting needed to be adapted and refined and to make it so the space was functional, intelligent and coherent.

"It may seem arrogant because that's not what they had asked for, but it worked out well."

Frigon's career path has followed a straight line from the beginning.

After earning a degree in environmental design, she briefly worked for a kiosk manufacturer.

"I realized quickly that I couldn't go much farther if I stayed, so I went into business with two associates." That was in 1990, when she was 22.

Fifteen years later, she is on her own. The first partner left after a few years, and Frigon parted ways with the second about five years ago after it became clear the two had fundamentally divergent visions.

"We were doing a bit of graphic design, and she wanted to concentrate on that part of the business. So she struck out on her own and I kept up this company."

For Frigon, sticking to her plan has been rewarding.

"I kept all of my clients."

Her husband, an MBA graduate in marketing who owns 15 per cent of Traffic Design, helps her out on business strategy.

Traffic Design's revenues climbed steadily, but in the last three years, they have seen-sawed.

She has a 3-year-old and a baby who just turned one, and the births have caused the usual upheavals for the self-employed Frigon.

"In the last three years, my sales have fluctuated in line with the arrivals," she added.

This year "is looking very good - I'm re-immersing myself in my network, and there's nothing to worry about.

"I'm not a millionaire, but I live well and this company affords me a chance to do what I love."

Frigon is not out to conquer the world's kiosk industry.

"I want to grow, sure, but I don't want to get to the point where I do mostly managing. I need that contact with clients."

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