

# Ray Kuhar, design director, Bowman Design Group

By Samantha Stewart  
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**ECN: What is your background and when did your interest in design start?**



Ray Kuhar

**RK:** My background is in industrial design, specifically space planning and design. I became interested in design while I was in college, through a friend who was in the ID program

at Ohio State. Although I was majoring in dentistry at the time, I felt more inspired by the projects and assignments in the industrial design program and eventually changed majors and pursued design with a passion I had never even known existed in myself.

**ECN: Who influenced your work most growing up?**

**RK:** I didn't grow up planning to be a designer, or even knowing there was such a thing as industrial design. I would consider my father my greatest childhood influence. We spent all our time together restoring vintage British sports cars and constantly building things around the house. While it wasn't design influence in the traditional manner, the work sharpened my problem-solving abilities and gave me an aesthetic sense. Interestingly, I'm a Virgo, and true to form, everything has to be perfect.

From a professional perspective, Michael Graves and Neils Diffrient inspired me and were strong influences



Kuhar's 50'x50' two-story exhibit for AUVSI.



Kuhar's Florida Crystals, 10'x20' booth for Expo West.

Photos courtesy Ray Kuhar

early in my career. More recently, I've enjoyed the work of industrial designer Marc Newson.

**ECN: How did you get into the exhibit design field?**

**RK:** Like so many in the field, I didn't find exhibit design, it found me. When the facilities design firm I worked for closed its doors, I used a headhunter to find another job. She connected me with a prospective junior design position with an exhibit house in Chicago. I discovered that space planning was the root of exhibit design – how people move about and use a space, how it makes them feel. The rest, as they say, is history. My work has taken me from Chicago to New York, to San Francisco and, finally, to Los Angeles.

**ECN: How do you approach a new project?**

**RK:** I approach every project as if it's brand new. I start by understanding the client's goals, such as what defines them and their product. While I design, I'm conscious of the sub-conscious. I use subtle details like lighting, ceiling height and textures to translate the client's physical and emotional requirements into the exhibit space. M

**ECN: What is a normal workday like for you?**

**RK:** From the minute I arrive in the office, my workday requires a lot of energy. Everything moves at such a fast pace and there are so many projects going on simultaneously! As design director, I see pieces of almost all the projects we do and that means I need to switch focus at a moment's notice. I have to keep track of a lot of details – I make a lot of lists.

**ECN: What are some common misconceptions clients – especially new clients – have about the design process?**

**RK:** I think one of the most common misconceptions of new clients is how long a project will take from start to finish. Good design takes time – there's no "design" button on the computer. Thoughtful designers spend time gathering information, capturing brand essence and visualizing the overall concept before they begin designing. There's no fundamental right or wrong to a design concept. Designers have to consider many creative solutions and optimize the design by balancing all of the client's needs.

**ECN: What design trends are you seeing at the shows?**

**RK:** I've noticed people are replacing heavier construction materials with tension fabric; it's lighter and easier to ship. People are also spending more money on lighting to enhance atmosphere. I love to use lighting design within an exhibit. Good lighting design is the sparkle on the diamond and lifts an exhibit out of the ordinary. Additionally, the showfloor has seen plenty of "green washing" in the last year, which indicates that people are eager to do something green but may not always know about the best options. I hope the green trend continues and evolves to truly impact the industry as a whole.

**ECN: How does the short time frame for tradeshow displays impact design?**

**RK:** Exhibit designers have to take many factors and much input into consideration: material specs and availability, client budget, shipping and setup requirements, venue restrictions, etc. With the luxury of time, designs could be optimized endlessly. Our compressed schedules mean fewer design iterations and more quick thinking. Some of my cleverest design solutions have come when I'm facing a deadline.

**ECN: Can you tell us a bit about a current project you're excited about?**

**RK:** I'm currently working on an exhibit to portray a Zen garden. I tend not to work in literal translation, so I'm really having fun capturing the emotion of Zen without doing an exact re-creation of a Zen garden in the traditional sense. I'm also developing some vehicle branding for a client's fleet of home-delivery vehicles. Since I'm a car freak, I love working on this canvas!

**ECN: What is your advice for aspiring designers wanting to go into exhibit design?**

**RK:** One of the best ways to break into exhibit design is through an internship. It really helps you understand the field and develop early expertise. During an internship, learn everything you can about every aspect of design – the more you know, the better designer you'll be. Keep your work fresh and inspired by pursuing other creative activities outside of work, not necessarily exhibit design-specific. Photography, painting, clothing design – anything with a creative bent will sharpen your design eye.

**ECN: How easy do you find it to break into this field versus other design careers?**

**RK:** Exhibit design really isn't any easier or any more difficult to break into than any other design field. The schedule is rigorous and demanding, so it's not for the faint of heart. But for someone who can develop client relationships, visualize concepts and define them in space, this is an exciting and stimulating career. You have the opportunity to work on everything from space planning and architecture to graphic design and event planning. It's always different, and the challenges of these projects keep me interested and excited about the field of exhibit design. ■