



A GUIDE TO BANNER STANDS AND POP-UP STANDS

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Introduction

The variety of banner stands (sometimes called roll-up stands) and pop-up stands on the market can seem quite bewildering. This is not a guide to all the models available, but rather a resource offering advice on what to look for in order to make an informed choice and to answer the question that may already have struck you: **why is there such a wide range of prices?**

Price disparity is particularly noticeable with banner stands. You see some advertised for £99 while others are over £300. The reasons for this fall into two categories: materials and mechanisms. The same is true for pop-up stands, though prices tend to differ less extravagantly.

Banner Stand Materials

Both the stand itself and the graphic panel can be made of materials of varying quality. The lower the quality, the less the manufacturing cost and so the lower the end-user price, but the consequences are what you would expect: more likelihood of a failure to last the course.

A large number of banner stands are made in the Far East with thin gauge aluminium and little quality control over finish and the engineering involved. At Dragonfly we regularly receive emails from Far East suppliers trying to tempt us into buying very cheap stands in bulk (and we mean very cheap). We find this quite easy to resist, but there is a lot of – to put it kindly – 'rubbish' on the market. European-made stands are usually of high quality. To cater for very low budgets, European manufacturers do also tend to import some Far Eastern models but these are manufactured under licence, are quality controlled and are clearly sold as 'budget' solutions.

How do you tell the difference?

It's easy once you have seen a cheap import and a high quality stand side by side but it's not so easy to tell from a website or brochure photograph. Here are some tips:

- If you can handle the product, cheap stands rattle tinnily while quality stands 'clunk' (there's always some movement of parts when you shake them before any graphic panel is attached).

At Dragonfly we stake our reputation on the provision of high quality stands and graphics. That's why customers come back to us for more, not for replacements.

Examples of stabilising feet from good and poor quality models



>1mm thickness, smooth finish.

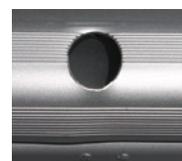


<1mm thickness and rough edges.

The 'hole for the pole'



Solid, smooth finish casing.



Thin metal casing, already distorted on arrival.



- Again if you can handle the product, you will see that a cheap stand uses thin metal and possibly also has some sharp edges, while a quality stand uses metal of a decent thickness and all edges are finished smooth.
- Ribbing in the metal tends to indicate thin metal, with the ribbing added to boost minimum strength as cheaply as possible. It doesn't always do the job.
- If the stand has one or two 'swing-out' feet for stability it is certainly at the lower end of the market, as better stands have a wider casing footprint and are stable without the need for swing-out feet. The use of a swing-out foot does not itself mean that the stand is very low quality, but you tend to find that the better stands of this type have rubber ends on the feet (see picture) while low quality stands do not go to that trouble.
- Ask your supplier who made the stand and what the model is called (hardly any suppliers actually manufacture the stands themselves – they buy in the stands from manufacturers selling to the trade only, but print the graphic panels in-house and attach them to complete the job, sometimes calling that *manufacturing*). Then look on the web for the manufacturer and model and see where the manufacturer is based, though bear in mind that the main European base could still just be a distributor of Far Eastern products. Popular names of European manufacturers include Ultima, Plex, Marler Haley, Nimlok and Nomadic, but that list is not all inclusive.
- The bag supplied with the stand should be padded. An unpadded bag is a sign of a very cheap import.
- Ask what the *manufacturer's* guarantee is on the stand (the hardware, not the graphic panel). The answer will tell you a lot.

Another area where suppliers can skimp on quality is the materials used for printing the graphic panel. Paper is not the right material and yet some suppliers still use it for banner panels. Paper is easily damaged, especially on the edges, even when face laminated and it reacts badly to moisture and condensation. Furthermore it does not block background light from showing through the panel and making the graphic look faded.



Our preferred manufacturer is Ultima, as we think their designs are good, the manufacture is excellent and most stands have a 10 year guarantee against faulty parts and workmanship.



Opaque polyester and PVC are the materials for banner stand graphics and these base materials alone can cost over 3 times the price of paper.

All graphic panels should be laminated to the face, both for surface protection against fingermarking and scratches and because the laminates have (or *should have* if the right ones are used) blockers against ultra-violet light to help prolong the life of the print. The best laminates will be 'scratch-free' which means they have a minutely crenellated surface which reflects light at different angles and thus renders invisible the small scratches that inevitably occur in use. Gloss laminates are great for colour depth but do show scratches and also reflect ambient and fixed lights strongly, often obscuring the graphic. Smooth matt laminates are the worst of all for showing scratches. The laminate also should not be too 'soft' or else the print may suffer edge wrinkling after prolonged use in cheaper stands where edge 'binding' is possible on retraction.

A note on print quality

Large format inkjets used for printing the banners come in 2 main types: aqueous and solvent/ecosolvent. Aqueous inks still give by far the best quality of print. Solvent printers are much better than they were, but still not up to the fine quality of aqueous printers – the ink dots are larger with solvent printing and you need to stand further away to make them disappear to the eye.

In addition, all printers can run at different quality settings. The lower the quality setting, the less time it takes to print, and so for speed some suppliers may run their printers at less high quality than they could achieve. Printer maintenance is also an important factor in the printers continuing to output best quality and here again those interested only in a quick sale can save downtime costs by ignoring all but 'keep-it-running' maintenance.

Despite the lower quality output of solvent printers, they are **the** solution for outdoor prints as they are more weatherproof. Aqueous prints should only be used indoors. Solvent printing tends to be cheaper as it can print on uncoated materials while aqueous printers need specially coated materials which are more expensive.

The image quality crown still lies with the aqueous printer.

We always output prints at the highest quality our systems can achieve. We like to set standards, not chase after them.



Banner Stand Mechanisms

Banner stands are of 3 main types: tension, fixed roller, cassette.

Tension

Basically a top and bottom bar attached to the graphic and a sprung pole with a foot to create a tension between the two. They are not always the lowest price you'll find as the metal needs to be of reasonable quality to do the job without bending in a way it shouldn't. A particular disadvantage is that the graphic needs to be rolled up for transport and will only maintain a good condition if treated with care.

Fixed roller

The case has a sprung roller fixed inside to which the graphic is attached. When the graphic is let down, it retracts round the roller and is therefore stored in the case permanently, which offers good protection.

Fixings of the graphic to the roller vary: Velcro, self-adhesive tape, slide-in bars. Velcro is usually only used on the cheapest stands. Self-adhesive tape is a very common fixing; quality stands use heavy duty tape, but cheap imports may not. With a self-adhesive fixing it is usually possible for the supplier to change the graphic up to about 3 times, but after that all leader material from the roller is used up, as the old graphic has to be cut off. The change requires a long bench and the old graphic cannot be saved for further use. Slide-in bars allow suppliers to change the graphic any number of times and retain the old one rolled up for possible future use, although there is a small danger of the old one getting creased on removal. None of these methods suit graphic changing by the end-user.

Cassette

The banner stand holds a removable cassette which itself contains the roller and graphic panel. The end-user can have any number of cassettes with attached graphics for 'hot swapping', on-site if need be. The better the stand, the easier and more secure is the cassette change.



Rear view of a tension banner stand.



A banner casing with a fixed roller.



High quality cassette stand (cassette shown in front of the casing into which is placed).



What about design and artwork?

The design and artwork for a banner stand is usually not included in the advertised price. Prices should vary for each job (though some suppliers work on a fixed average) as some designs are very simple while others are very complex and so take more time. If design and artwork is offered free, ask how much time is allocated because it's your banner and you want the best. Free design does not necessarily mean you will see more than one design to choose from.

If you intend to supply your own artwork, ask for a specification sheet. Different stand models have different dimensions of visible graphic area – there is **no** universal size and you need to choose your type of stand first. Also different printers require artwork in different formats (some perform best with rgb colour, others with cmyk). It is normally expected that supplied artwork will be made using professional design software, and not MS Office or similar programs that were never designed for commercial print (if they were, they would not be 'office' programs). Always ask for advice if you intend to supply your own artwork, directly or via a studio you customarily use, as anything about the artwork that causes problems on output is likely to incur extra costs for fixing, wasted prints etc. All parties want the artwork to run through the print systems without a hitch.

Banner Stand Summary

The old adage is *you only get what you pay for*. That's not completely true in that a supplier may have stock to get rid of for a variety of reasons (e.g. when a new model comes in), may have been the beneficiary of a special offer from a manufacturer, or may just be having a sale to invigorate business. Bargains do exist now and again. On the other hand, the lowest prices, particularly if on permanent offer, are likely to indicate that the stand, the print, or both are not of the quality and durability you could obtain elsewhere for more money. The supplier always needs to make a profit to stay in business, so ask yourself what the real costs of the hardware and printing must be when the price looks incredibly low. You know from your own business that quality, care and service don't come at a pittance.

Dragonfly is first and foremost a professional design studio, with the addition of in-house large format printing for exhibition stands, so you can be assured of the best in design as well as stand production.



Pop-up Stands

The situation with pop-stands is much the same as with banner stands. Lower priced systems tend to be made of inferior materials and to inferior designs. Similarly, suppliers can skimp on the print materials and printer quality settings in order to offer rock bottom prices.

Pop-up Stand Mechanics

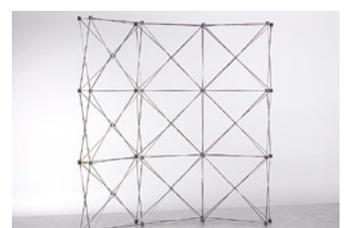
Pop-up stands work through the ingenious connection of vertical and cross-bracing struts that allow a collapsed stand to take up a size of approximately 17cm x 17cm x 80cm but expand to form a framework wall of over 2 metres x 2 metres (these sizes are based on a '3 x 3' frame).

When expanded, the framework shows distinct 'boxes', which are usually known as quadrants. A framework is usually 3 quadrants high. The most popular size is 3 quadrants high x 3 quadrants wide and stands can be curved or straight (the former require no stabilising feet but straight stands are better with the feet). You can use either side, or both sides to form an island of graphic panels. The inner curve is most commonly used on curved stands. Using the outer curve requires a few additional parts to ensure the graphic panels stay pushed outwards and is a little more expensive; the same is true of straight stands to ensure panels stay flat.

The footprint of a stand is larger than the footprint of the framework as the quadrants hold vertical graphic panels but the frame ends are covered with panels that form a semicircle outside the frame width. Pop-up stands require a certain amount of room and it is advisable to ask for the footprint with panels attached before deciding if this stand type will suit your needs. Panels are normally held on the frame by a variety of model-dependent fixings at the top and by magnetic strips attached to the back edges which marry with magnetic bars attached to the expanded framework.

Materials

The struts can be made from thin gauge aluminium, thicker gauge aluminium or powder coated steel. There is obviously a weight difference here, but it is worth considering that heavier structures have more inherent stability. In our view thin gauge aluminium tends to produce stands that are rather 'rickety', something that can be partially cured by additional cross-bracing struts across the quadrants (see picture on right), but then that adds metal so the weight advantage is partially lost.





Powder coated steel is very strong and generally cheaper than the thicker gauges of aluminium. Aluminium struts are more likely to get bent through any misuse and so need replacing. It is quite possible to mistakenly step (not stamp!) on a collapsed steel frame without causing real damage (though we accept no responsibility for any results from this practice...).

Print materials are an issue, just as with banner stands. Again paper is cheap but undesirable. The panels are stored in a loose roll in the stand case or a separate graphics case (always with the image to the outside to prevent delamination problems) and undergo considerable handling when being attached to the framework. Paper does not survive this at all well. Polyester/PVC with good opaqueness to prevent light 'show-through' is the true material and should ideally be 300 microns thick (250 microns minimum). This helps the panels hold their shape on the stand and makes for easier crease-free handling. 'Lightstop' and 'Opaljet' are two specific trade names commonly used as generic names to describe this material type. Check the material's type and thickness with your supplier before commitment. A laminate, preferably 'scratch-free', should be applied to the image face of the panel.

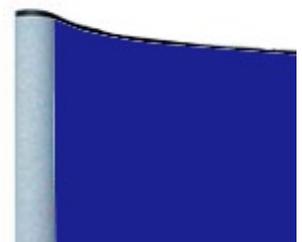
Pop-up Design

Pop-up stands come in different dimensions according to the model and manufacturer, with a corresponding variation in panel width and height. Inner curve, outer curve, and straight panel widths are all different. Some stands are of narrower depth than others (front to back).

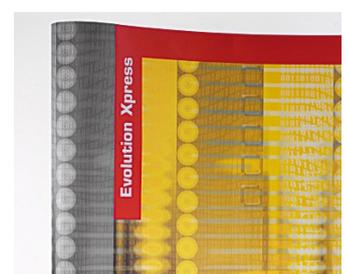
The disadvantages of narrow depth stands are that they are inherently less stable and more prone to distortion on uneven floors. An advantage is that the two end panels are narrower than the width of a main panel and can be printed side by side on standard width material, saving some of the print costs (the supplier may not always tell you that).

Deeper stands tend to sit better, which is important when you are trying to line up panels that have text or images going across the sections. However, the end panels are usually the same width as main inner curve panels and therefore cost the same to produce as a main panel. You can usually tell a narrow depth stand by looking at it, even on a website. Also narrow depth stands sometimes (but not always) have a black strip along the top and bottom – more of that later. Deeper stands very rarely do (we actually can't think of a model that does).

For pop-up stands we always print on a 300 micron 'Lightstop' type material with the addition of a 125 micron 'scratch-free' face laminate.



Narrow stand (c. 120mm)



Deeper stand (c. 300mm).



The ease with which you can erect a pop-up stand is obviously a concern. In our experience, the powder coated steel and deeper type are easier than narrow gauge aluminium and narrow depth stands, if only because they are more robust. How the magnetic bars fix to the stand and how the panels fix to the top are also issues for ease of use.

Magnetic bars are not the only methods of panel fixing, but they are the kind we recommend. Velcro, adhesives and hooks are alternatives used by some manufacturers but they are fiddly and also make it difficult to line up panels for text and images that go across several panels. Magnetic fixing is quick to set up and allows minor adjustments, like getting two parts of a small letter 'e' to match across the cut between two panels!

Magnetic bars can be fixed by plastic lugs in sockets or by further magnets. We recommend the magnets. You just press the magnetic bars at top and bottom into recesses in the framework joining pieces and the magnets hold them in place (see picture on right).

Panel attachment to the top of the stand, after which you can smooth the edge down to sit on the magnetic bars (remember there's magnetic strip on the back edges), is the first procedure in hanging the panels. With the best systems (in our opinion) the panel has a neoprene strip attached to the back at the top which either has more magnets or a plastic 'inverted cup' to sit over some wide headed pins. We think both systems are fine and the 'cup and pin' type does save a bit on stand price. The system shown in the picture on the right is a magnetic fixing with moulded guide piece to sit on the top of the framework joining piece.

Any fixing method that requires us to make a cut in the graphic panels (holes, slots etc) is in our view well past its sell-by date, as is the method which results in there being a black neoprene strip at the top and bottom of the panel that shows from the front (i.e. the panel is stuck only half way up this strip which then has slots for hanging on pegs).

All such strips, which have a further function of stiffening the top and bottom of the panels, should be invisible from the front, being stuck to the top edge of the panel as in the picture shown right. Anything that lets you see the hanging mechanism from the front is an example of poor design relative to other methods available.



Magnets



No part of the black hanging strip shows on the panel front.



It is considerations like these that make the Ultima *Evolution Xpress* and *Evolution Quick* pop-up systems our preferred choice. We are very close to breaking the 3 minute barrier for single-handedly putting up one of these systems from start to finish, but we don't expect end-users to be quite so fast.

We are also able to supply systems from a range of other manufacturers and can provide replacement panels for existing stands so long as we can either measure the existing panels or identify the model .

A Note on Cases

Unlike banner stands, the carry cases for pop-up stands are not usually included in the stand price, though you may see 'bundled' prices that include cases and possibly also lights. The main reason for this is that there is quite a choice of cases at different prices, some of which can have graphic panels wrapped round the empty case to form a small customised 'counter'. We normally recommend cases with wheels, as the total weight of a pop-up stand and its panels is not something you want to carry far. We have seen one supplier offering unwheeled cases and a 'free' collapsible sack barrow, but unless you want the sack barrow for other purposes, we can't really see the point when the wheels can be on the case itself. Perhaps it's just a means of offering something apparently for free.

Design and Artwork

The matter of artwork is much the same as for banner stands (see page 6). Different manufacturers' stands and models have differently sized panels so you need to choose your stand model before approaching any artwork. The method of panel fixing can also affect how artwork should be arranged and then there is the important matter, if you are supplying your own artwork, of making sure you or your studio work exactly to the supplier's specifications.

As pop-up stands can present a 'graphic wall' but there are cuts between the panels, we recommend avoiding having small text going across adjacent panels if at all possible as it presents a minor lining up problem when hanging the panels, especially if the floor is uneven and the stand gets slightly distorted as a result (we often supply a few small pieces of 2mm and 3mm foamex to slide under stand footings to counter any uneven floor distortions).



We can easily print wrap-round graphics for your case to create a counter. It is common to have a logo prominently displayed in this way and it saves finding somewhere to hide the case.





One factor that is often forgotten is that all materials expand and contract a little depending on heat and humidity. Yet each panel in a set may do so slightly differently, which is another reason why lining up two parts of that 12 point 'e' across different panels over 2 metres high may prove a little awkward. It is interesting that after we have laminated a panel, it is usually a few mm longer than when we printed it, a result of going through rollers at over 50psi. And the quality of the join is as good as the cutting. We use a professional 3 metre cutter, but its accuracy cannot be better than the thickness of the blade edge. Still, the point is that we are not indifferent to these issues and aim to provide you with the best quality every time. We like to think we succeed.

What More to Say?

Well, our emphasis on quality applies to pre-sales and after-sales service. We very rarely have to do anything with regard to after-sales because of the high standard of equipment we supply, but if there is a problem, we will sort it out quickly.

We are always happy to offer free advice on any issues regarding display stands and any accessories – lights, literature stands, illuminated panels etc. We can also do our best to advise whether you have just found a bargain as we know what the major makes of stands cost the supplier and where typical production costs lie. That service may not bring us a sale if you have found a genuinely good offer, but it keeps us abreast of what's happening in our market. It could also save you a purchase you might regret, if the bargain is definitely from the basement!

Just call 01455 852522 or email info@dragonflypg.co.uk.

We hope you found this guide helpful.



Our emphasis is on quality, but that does not mean that we cannot cater for low budgets. There are well-made low cost stands available. It's a matter of knowing which ones they are.