

# Specialty fabrics Review

AUGUST 2013

Industry experts since 1915



## STAND OUT

*Dave Elliot takes it slow,  
steady, and strict*

**ACTION PLAN**  
Disaster relief

**THE SOFTER SIDE**  
Commercial  
interiors

IFAI Specialty  
Fabrics Expo 2013

**Exhibitor**  
Product Preview







Dave's intensity and dedication to perfection give you confidence that products coming out of his workshop are held to the highest standards. ~st



# STAND OUT

**DAVE ELLIOT DISTINGUISHES HIS BUSINESS FROM THE COMPETITION BY SLOWING DOWN AND KEEPING STRICT STANDARDS.**



**T**he past years' economic challenges have not been a problem for my business—in fact, I think they've made my business even stronger because I've separated my business from the competition," says Dave Elliot, owner of David's Custom Trimmers, Brisbane, Australia. "We offer products other similar businesses don't offer in terms of strength and neatness, and also in terms of innovation."

## IN PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Elliot's business is now entirely focused on the marine canvas and upholstery markets, but his entrance into the specialty fabrics world came when, in tenth grade, he began working as an apprentice for an automotive upholsterer. By the third year of his apprenticeship, the owner opened a second workshop and left Elliot in charge of the original location. One week out of the apprenticeship he left to start his own business. "I was highly motivated to have my own place," Elliot says. "I have always been a perfectionist and wanted to run things my own way."

**Dave Elliot, owner**  
David's Custom Trimmers  
Brisbane, Australia

www.davestrimmers.com

IFAI member since: 2008

Most valued benefit: Sharing  
ideas with other fabricators



“If I've done my job properly you will see the whole boat as a finished project, not as covers and canvas work that look like add-ons.”



Elliot was fortunate to launch David's Custom Trimmers—at that time an automotive upholstery shop—with two steady clients that had ongoing upholstery needs. As a part of his apprenticeship program, he had attended three six-week blocks of classroom education through Brisbane North Institute of TAFE (Technical and Further Education) college. When he graduated, one of his professors provided him with the starter clients for his new business—Jaguar and BMW car clubs that the professor used to do work for. “Within the first year of my business I only had one quiet week,” Elliot says. “And that's the only quiet period I've had in 34 years of business.”

## NEATNESS COUNTS

As a part of Elliot's coach and motor body trimming apprenticeship, he learned to use gluing systems during the manufacturing process. When he began taking on marine canvas and interiors work in addition to automotive upholstery he experimented with applying gluing techniques to that process as well. The glues Elliot refers to include contact cement, double-sided tape, super glue-based glues, hot melt glues and PVC glues. “Some glues are used to increase strength of the product and others are only used to hold materials in place while you sew,” Elliot says. “When everything is held in place before you sit down to sew, you get neatness.” Ten years into the business, Elliot discontinued the automotive portion of the business to work exclusively on marine canvas and upholstery.

Examining other fabricators' work is another strategy Elliot uses to improve and develop products. “My goal was (and is) to be one of the best at what I do, so I look at products manufactured by others, analyze them and find better ways of producing them,” Elliot says. “In particular, I look at the failure points and step by step try to eliminate them.”

For Elliot, analyzing other fabricators' work has included walking around the marinas in winds exceeding 25 knots and watching how boat covers were performing under those windy conditions. “We had one of the biggest storms ever here in January [2013]. We had about 36 hours of up to 76-knot winds in the marina,” Elliot says. “I wasn't allowed to walk through—though I tried—but out of all my covers down there I only had one cover fail, and it was five years old. I've spent the last several months repairing other people's work, and analyzing where they went wrong.”

## INNOVATION AND EVOLUTION

Product innovation is often the result of customer demand, and when Elliot develops and/or improves a product it can serve as a new revenue stream, as well as advertising for the company. “I started providing accessories—things like hand-sewn leather on steering wheels, steering wheel covers, fender covers—because customers asked me to,” he says. “The products evolve over time.”

One recent new product for Elliot was the result of the marina being updated and rebuilt. The marina in which Elliot's shop is located is in the process of converting its timber-based marinas to sleeker plastic-based concrete tops. One of his customers requested that he alter the design for the old fenders to fit the new marina, a design that requires a specific bolt-on system. Elliot and one of his employees worked on perfecting the design, and have

built about 1,000 yards of the fenders so far. “The marina probably still has another six months until it’s finished, so I anticipate continued demand,” he says. “And the ability to get my company’s name on the fenders around the marina helps get the message out about the package I’m delivering to customers. They can say to their friends: ‘He doesn’t only do canvas work. He’ll do the bumpers for your boats as well.’”

To increase profit, Elliot and his crew build their own bolts for the fender systems. “The jetty specialists wanted me to buy their bolts at \$3 each—and I can make my own at \$1 each,” he says. “When you’re talking 1,000 yards of fenders, there are probably 3,000 bolts. That’s an extra \$6,000 in my pocket.”

## PARTS OF A WHOLE

Elliot points out that the more control you have over the various components used to produce an end product, the better that product will be. Elliot’s shop has always done its own aluminum framework, began doing stainless steel frames about six years ago, and added the ability to do welding within the last three years. “A lot of canvas people don’t have the ability to manufacture their own framework—and if you can’t get the frame right, you can’t get the cover right,” Elliot says. “If I’ve done my job properly you will see the whole boat as a finished project, not as covers and canvas work that look like add-ons. If I’ve designed it properly it becomes a part of the boat.

“The goal is always perfection.”

## SNAPSHOT | DETAILED DESIGN



Providing a new cover for this 86-foot traditional racing yacht meant changing or improving virtually every detail of the original, according to Dave Elliot of David’s Custom Trimmers. The intent was to cover and protect all of the varnish work from the elements, while providing easy access—because the original cover took hours to fit and remove. The new design includes zip-out panels, and every hole for each stanchion has a shaped cone around it for protection, each with a zip-and-flap system to help protect the boat and zippers from the sun.

The cover includes carpet around the entire bottom perimeter so that when the cover is in contact with the yacht, it doesn’t wear on the timber work. “One of the most time-consuming tasks in fitting the old cover was the complex rope system around the bottom of the cover,” Elliot says. “So we redesigned it using webbing and hooks so it could be attached and tensioned more quickly and easily.” In the end, all of the extra details requested by the customer added 120 hours to the project.

You’ve said that perfection is your goal. How do you train your employees to adopt that same goal?

It takes longer to produce perfection. One of the first things I say to my employees is to slow down. I don’t want things rushed. I want them done properly—once. One of my mother’s classic philosophies was: Speed will come with time. It’s similar to what is taught in martial arts. Once you’ve done a move a thousand times, it will come naturally and you won’t have to think about what you’re doing. But that takes time.

I’m also involved in every aspect of design and production. When I’m not working on the bench, I’m walking between every job and looking at every detail and asking the staff to spread the job out on the bench so we can take a look at it. I’m constantly analyzing the work to make sure that what leaves this workshop won’t come back with something wrong with it.