

Business blooms for 'Block' regulars

A savvy Melbourne design company has become an online shopping destination.

When *The Block* returned to television in 2010, it was widely blamed for inciting a home renovation frenzy across Australia.

In 2022, Damian Corney is happy to take that back-handed compliment to the world.

"It's very surprising how many people beyond Australia watch *The Block*," says Corney of the Nine Network show, which drafts some of the nation's best designers – including Corney's team at Grafico – to make magic in wrecks and ruins.

"We've had inquiries from block fans in South Africa, Netherlands, the UK and NZ who said, 'I love *The Block* and I want the wallpaper from *The Block*,'" Corney says.

"Literally, people are ordering online from all over the world now. It's very exciting watching our brand grow."

It has been a striking turnaround for Grafico, a Melbourne maker of custom-print wallpapers, tiles and displays, a sponsor of *The Block* since 2019 and an Australian Made partner since 2020. Born in Corney's home in 2004 while he was studying graphic design at Monash University, the firm had made its name creating stylish corporate signage and vehicle wraps.

COVID-19 killed much of that corporate work. But with all the bums it placed on sofas, it started something grander.

The company's online business has increased substantially in two years, with a surge in the number of decorators seeking wallpapers and mosaics.

In 2021 came Grafico's biggest commercial project yet – Louis Vuitton's art installation honouring its late creative director, Virgil Abloh. In LV's Sydney residency, ombre wallpapers, prismatic rainbow and stained-glass effects and a nine-metre statue of Abloh made for a spectacular farewell to a worldwide design icon.

"It was definitely the most challenging job I've ever worked on, but one of the most rewarding," Corney says.

"I was literally on Zoom late at night, working with Paris and Hong Kong. Then our team printed 1.1 kilometres of graphics, which had to be freighted to



Grafico founder and CEO Damian Corney (above) says the pandemic brought a jump in demand for the company's wallpapers.

Sydney just as Omicron came along bringing general chaos. Still, it was absolutely awesome to come out of COVID and be asked to do such a significant project."

Another Zoom-led project was that for French leather goods company Faure Le Page, whose brief to Grafico included the vinyl-wrap of a Lamborghini.

Life certainly didn't look so thrilling in March 2020.

"We lost three to six months' work in two weeks," Corney recalls.

"I went from 'oh my god', head in palm, crying at my desk to, within a

week, saying, 'Right, we have to change and come up with new things'. We had never worked harder than we did in that period. Out of adversity came creativity, and we really diversified our business.

"One new product was a kids' colouring-in whiteboard print that can be wiped off and reused. My daughter was four at the time, and it was designed for her. Other parents asked for it and it became a hit. It's a small product, but it came out of COVID and succeeded."

Meanwhile, the Grafico team joined *The Block* 2020, perched amid the building site designing beautiful wallpapers on their laptops.

Once *The Block* went to air in August, Grafico was ready with its online store.

"People were looking at their blank walls and saying, 'I really should do something new'," Corney says.

What's trending right now?

"Interesting tropical prints and designs that celebrate Australian flora and fauna. Customers also ask for mosaics, and about six years ago we became the exclusive Australian distributor for an Italian factory that makes lightweight resin tiles.

"We're doing really interesting work, especially up north where we do a lot of swimming pool walls and shopping centre bathrooms. We've even done various AFL clubs to showcase football history. It is all

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custom-printed; we literally design anything your heart desires."

Being fixed to a Mac screen is Corney's natural state. "As a child, I was happy to sit in a corner and draw for half the day," he says.

Though Grafico now has support staff in several Australian cities, Melbourne is home for this family business; Corney's wife, Adele, is office manager and the couple's two young daughters like to "assess" the products when not actually inspiring them.

"The COVID lockdowns were sad in terms of people leaving the city, and I won't lie – I think we've all fallen a bit out of love with Melbourne in the past two years," Corney says.

"But we're determined to watch Melbourne come back to its former glory, and North Melbourne is the base for our journey. There have been hard times, good times, challenging times, but we always look ahead and 'Grafico' lots of things along the way."

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