

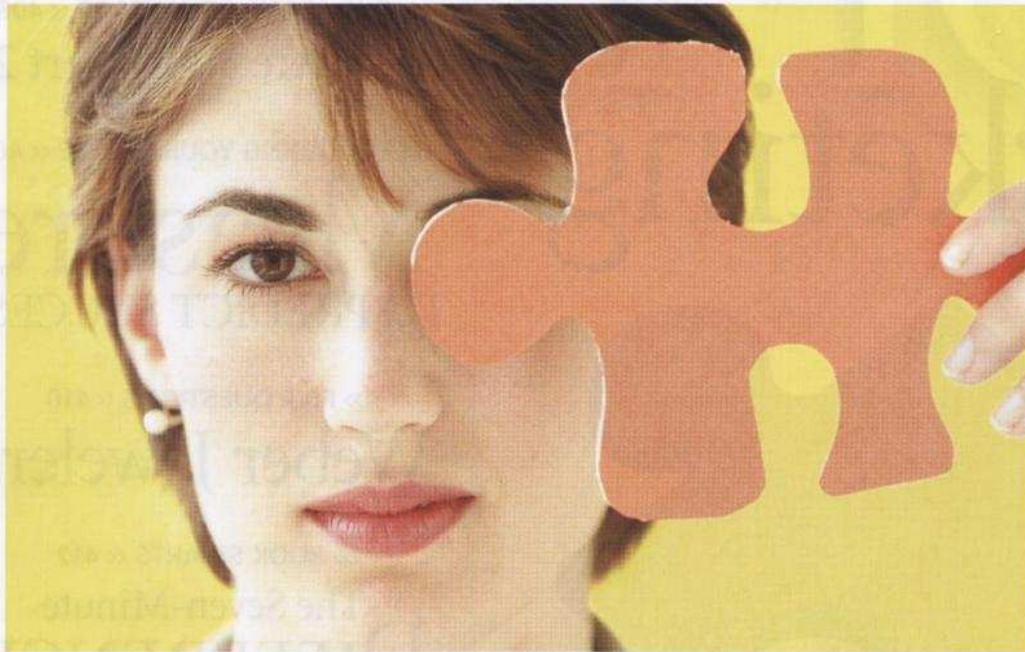
10 PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SALES AND MANAGEMENT

Soft Marketing

Four retailers share their ideas for connecting with customers without resorting to the hard sell.



Marketing events and activities that focus on education or enjoyment in a relaxed atmosphere not only lead to sales but also build lasting relationships with customers. The four retailers discussed below have created soft marketing programs that break down barriers between jewelers and customers, raise community awareness of their businesses, and build long-term relationships. Variations of these ideas may work for you.



THE PEARL SOCIETY In 1990, the husband of a long-standing customer went to the Eve J. Alfillé Gallery & Studio in Evanston, Ill., looking for a gift for his wife. Owner Eve Alfillé knew the woman wanted a strand of Biwa pearls, so she showed him one and carefully explained its value. "I don't know anything about pearls," he replied and put it down. Despite Alfillé's best efforts, the husband insisted on buying a 3.00 ct. diamond for his wife, which she didn't want and never wore.

Alfillé knew the sale was lost when he admitted not knowing anything about pearls. "But why did he think he knew something about diamonds?" asks Alfillé. "We know why. De Beers and N.W. Ayer have done a good job. They gave him confidence." She reasoned that if her customers had the same confidence in their pearl knowledge, they'd buy pearls.



Low-key events can fill in the missing piece of the marketing puzzle.



BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON

So Alfillé started The Pearl Society. For its meetings, she invites expert speakers to her 1,800-square-foot gallery to present information to people interested in pearls, from customers who have made significant pearl purchases to collectors, scientists, appraisers, and even other retailers. Her speakers have included professors of history, archeology, and poetry; the chief pearl buyer for Tiffany & Co.; gemologist and author Fred Ward; John, Gina, and Renée Latendresse, of the American Pearl Co. in Tennessee; and diver and dinosaur hunter Sue Hendrickson. The mailing list for the society's quarterly bulletin has grown to 600. Meetings are held Sunday afternoons when the gallery is normally closed and draw 30 to 50 members and their friends.

A \$25 annual membership fee helps defray the cost of postage for the society's quarterly bulletin and refreshments of wine and hors d'oeuvres. Alfillé underwrites the remaining costs, a deductible marketing expense. All speakers are videotaped, and members can borrow the tapes.

"The Pearl Society [encouraged] the demand [for pearls] and identified a group of people who wanted to be collectors," says Alfillé. "We all wanted to acquire the new pearls." The society has been so successful, that in the greater Chicago area, Alfillé has become known as "the pearl lady."

GEM CAMP In the early 1990s, John Nash, owner of Nash Jewellers, a four-generation firm in London, Ontario,

developed a Gem Camp program for school children as part of a larger marketing campaign focusing on education. Nash, who taught for 12 years before entering the family business, didn't plan for the program to be commercial, but Gem Camp students have grown up to become loyal customers.

The camps can handle up to 30 students split into two groups. In themed presentations geared for the age group (most often between ages 8 and 12), students learn about gemstone formation, lore, and phenomena (a popular topic); the art and industrial uses of gemstones; synthetics and enhancements; and diamonds, particularly Canadian diamonds. Last October, a presentation by a Canadian diamond cutter earned Nash a full-page story in *The London Free Press*.

Gem Camp, which requires two staff members, each a Graduate Gemologist, is held no more than once a month. Conducting camps at schools involves transporting equipment, but holding them at the store requires bus transportation, which public schools can't always afford. The ideal situation, says Nash, is to offer the camps on Saturdays or in the evenings when parents can bring the students to Nash's downtown store's second-floor classroom. "The nice thing about doing the camps downtown is that the parents bring the students and sometimes the parents stay," says Nash. "But even if they don't, they have to walk through the store and upstairs when they drop the kids off and when they pick the kids up. It's a very soft sell."

MEN'S NIGHT Jewelry stores typically use men's nights during the holiday season to attract men to buy gifts. Instead of focusing on sales, however, Tivol, Kansas City, Mo., uses its men's night to build relationships with male customers and break down their resistance to shopping at a jewelry store. Tivol creates a relaxed party atmosphere in which men can meet sales staff without sales pressure. As a result, men have bought not only gifts for the women in their lives but also jewelry for themselves. But the greatest success has been creating connections between Tivol and potential male customers.

Many men's nights are advertised to the public, but Tivol's is not, explains director of marketing Sarah DuRall. The store invites only customers who have shopped with Tivol in the previous three years. About 300 customers and their friends show up at the event, which runs from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., after the store's regular hours.

"We have cars, cigars, great food, and incredible drinks in a relaxing atmosphere," says DuRall. Tivol sets up a tent in its parking lot to corral most of the event. Men can have a computerized analysis of their golf swing, sponsored by X-Factor Golf Fitness. There is a dart-throwing contest for cigars, sponsored by a local smoke shop, Diebel's Sportsman's Gallery. Catered food and the bar are also in the tent. To bring men inside, the store features Harley-Davidson motorcycles brought over by Gail's Harley-Davidson, a local dealership. Last year, Tivol invited a sales rep from TAG Heuer with a trunk show.

"The men love it," says DuRall. "We have received nothing but positive feedback in the years we've done this. Some of our customers expect it." Last year DuRall overheard someone who had never been in the store talking about the event. "He was saying, 'You know, I never really imagined coming to Tivol, and I never imagined coming to Tivol and having an experience like this.' It's so relaxing and fun and laid back. It's a great event to break down the intimidation barrier."

Tivol hasn't tracked the number of new customers the event generates but has no doubts about its value. "It is definitely worth the cost, if for no other reason than the good will it generates among our customers and their friends," says DuRall. "Even our staff enjoys it."

EXTREME MAKEOVER As a variation on the typical women's night, Cathy Calhoun, owner of Calhoun Jewelers in Royersford, Pa., held her first "Extreme Makeover" night three years ago. It quickly became a must-do October event for her special customers. It was so successful, she added a second one in February, before Valentine's Day. The events are held from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. on a midweek evening.

Calhoun invites two makeup artists, two hair stylists, and a photographer and her assistant. Although the stylists don't do any cutting or washing, "you'd be surprised to see what they can do with spray and a curling iron," says Calhoun. The women borrow one of Calhoun's furs (the most