

MJSA CUSTOM JEWELER

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INSIGHTS INTO DESIGNING AND MARKETING CUSTOMIZED JEWELRY

TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

Q: Since social media is ever changing, do you have any tips about what works now—and what doesn't—when you use social channels to promote your custom business?

Elina Bromberg (BG Art Jewelry Atelier, New York City): It's very hard to estimate ROI with social media, but it is very important to us anyway—we specialize in high-end, custom-made, artistic, and one-of-a-kind pieces; with social media, we can connect with an end consumer, and there are other benefits.



After we introduced the Brooklyn Collection to our fans on Facebook, we did sell a few pieces. We are in negotiations now with a client who first saw a picture of our diamond Aurelia necklace on Facebook. We also get feedback on

new designs in the form of Facebook "likes."

I really love Instagram. It's visual and interactive; and creative images can attract the attention of stores that you would like to have showcase your pieces. High-quality video is very important if you need to show the craftsmanship, unusual design, and quality of finish. And e-mail marketing—if it is constant—works. You have to remind people and keep them updated about your new designs. ♦

Tips from Lee Kromholz are available online at MJSA.org.

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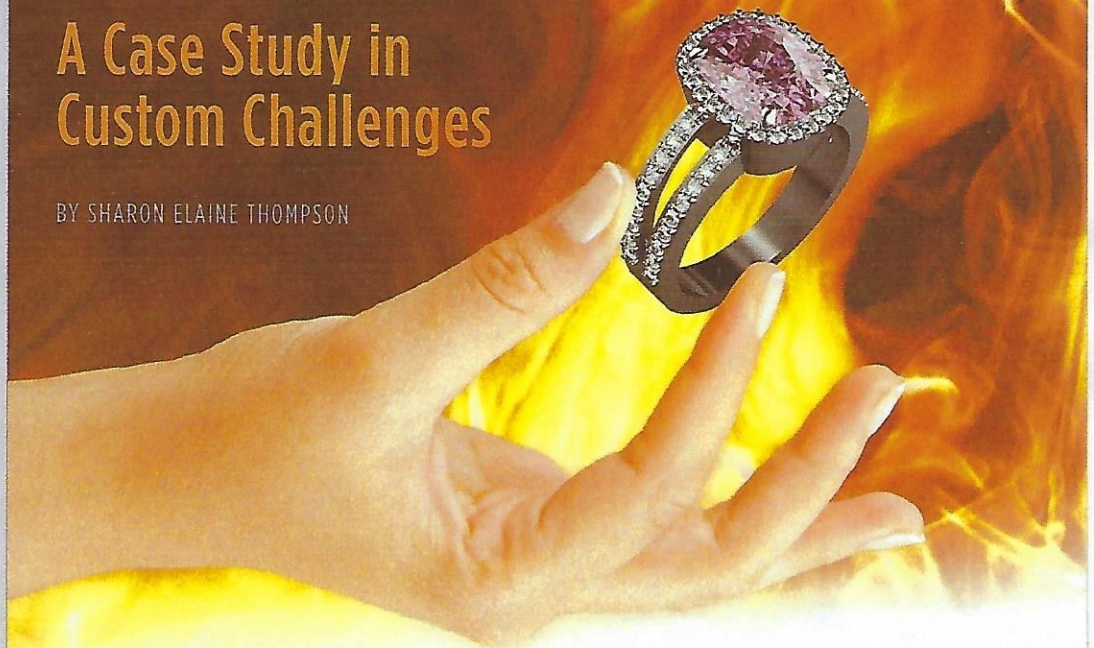
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HANDLING THE HOT ONES

A Case Study in Custom Challenges

BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON



Chad Verhoff thought he'd gotten a really great project.

The owner of Noble Jewelers in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, Verhoff served a wide-ranging clientele, but the couple who came to see him offered a new opportunity: They were very well known in the area, and their visibility meant that Verhoff could showcase his work to other affluent, local jewelry buyers. Plus, they had brought in a beautiful, natural, and untreated pink sapphire of about 4.5 carats—a great start to any high-profile project. And, as if all that wasn't enough, the price of the project was irrelevant.

What could go wrong?

As any experienced custom jeweler will attest, plenty. And that's exactly what happened in this case: A promising start led to a project marred by indecision, questionable taste, potential intellectual property infringement, and, to top it all off, a payment dispute. Some of these challenges Verhoff was able to overcome; others he had to live with as "lessons learned." Combined, they offer a case study in how a hot custom project with great potential can end up leaving you burned. As you read through this story, think how you would have handled the challenges Verhoff faced—then read the advice offered by other custom jewelers. While 20/20 hindsight can't change the past, it can help you to avoid getting burned in the future.

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Handling THE HOT ONES

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The Job Begins...

The job started off well enough. Verhoff's clients wanted the sapphire to be showcased in an 18k white gold ring, which would be worn by the wife—a tall woman with very long fingers who was well able to wear a large, heavy piece of jewelry and knew that's what she wanted.

Then the challenges set in...

The Design Challenge. Determined to make his high-profile couple happy, Verhoff set off on what ended up being an extended search for design ideas to help define the client's concept. He showed her online and trade magazine images, but she didn't see anything that she liked. Verhoff then suggested the client look for images of jewelry she didn't like. At least that way, he thought, he'd know "exactly what to stay away from."

Counterintuitively, this turned out to be a more productive approach: The client actually found a design she liked (good). Unfortunately, it was created by another designer (bad), and she wanted her ring to be identical (very bad).

Verhoff gently explained that they would have to modify the design and put their own spin on it to avoid intellectual property infringement (something he's had to explain to other customers as well). The client was adamant: She wanted the ring she wanted, period. But Verhoff persevered. "You don't want to take a bullish approach," he says. "You have to step on the other side of the counter and figure out what the customer will relate to, what you can say so they'll understand what you're talking about."

In this case, Verhoff used the woman's own profession—interior design—and compared the situation to someone making an exact copy of a room his client had designed. Finally, she understood, and she agreed to modifications. That challenge was resolved, but there were still others, including...

The Color Challenge. The beautiful, natural sapphire she already had wasn't enough: The client wanted additional stones, three rows of pink and blue sapphires pavé set down the broad shank (Fig. 1). And she wanted these new stones to be an exact match to her favorite outfit—a pair of hot pink Von Dutch jeans and a

blue tank top—even though she knew these wouldn't match the colors of her sapphire, which was more of a bubblegum pink.

"I wasn't even sure you could get [sapphires] that color," he says. So Verhoff took the only option he had: He went to the mall, bought the pink-and-blue outfit to send to his stone dealer, took two aspirin, and hoped for the best. Fortunately, his stone dealer found matching stones.

And Finally, the Sizing Challenge.

While the stones were being matched, Verhoff asked his client on which finger she would wear the ring. She said she wanted to wear it as an engagement ring on her left hand, and later planned to add new wedding bands on either side of it, each band to be set with 3 carats of stones. But her husband was adamant that she wear the new ring on her right hand, since her engagement ring was one he'd picked out for her while in Italy.

Unfortunately, the two finger sizes were noticeably different, and because of



BURN PROTECTION

Two custom designers give their advice about protecting yourself from the "hot jobs."

Lisa Krikawa (Krikawa Jewelry Designs, Tucson): Regarding the difficulty Chad had collecting the money in the end: I recommend that whether it is a simple repair or a complex redo, the client get a copy of a sales order to approve, before any work is done. Regardless of what amount of money is collected when the order is placed, we always want to make sure that there will be absolutely NO money surprises after the fact. If we go above and beyond for some reason, that's on us. Only if we take the opportunity to inform the client of any potential upcharges—in advance of doing the work—will we charge for it. The client has a chance to veto the changes. If changes and additional costs are approved, a new sales order is e-mailed before work begins. If recommendations or changes are declined, then work proceeds as previously itemized.

Gary Dawson (Gary Dawson Designs, Eugene, Oregon): One way I've saved tons of time when working with custom clients is to get them to give me some initial design parameters. Finding out what they definitely don't like is one good way to do that, and I've developed a quick method for that process without sending them out to view other design work. Simply ask clients to pick preferences between several extremes: "Do you like sharp geometrics or flowing curves?" for example, and/or "Do you prefer light and delicate or more heavy, bulky appearing designs?" Several questions into the process, you won't know exactly what the ring will look like, but you'll know that it should be more flowing in design and though large (in this case), have a more delicate look, etc.

Fig. 1



the natural and untreated center stone, the ring would not be easy to resize if she changed her mind later.

So, using blue tube wax, he carved three samples the same shape as the intended ring, but in different ring sizes. He hot-glued CZs into the waxes and told her, "Wear them and get used to them, and [then] decide which finger you want the ring on," effectively removing himself from the couple's disagreement. Eventually, the client decided to have the ring sized for her right-hand, middle finger.

With all challenges met and decisions made, Verhoff was at last able to work on the ring. Three months after the couple first entered his store, Verhoff finished...

The Job Ends...Almost

Preparing to deliver the ring, Verhoff breathed a sigh of relief—the project was done, the prospect of doing the additional wedding rings was on the table, and he was sure this ring would open doors he couldn't open any other way.

And then...

A month after delivery, Verhoff got a call from his client's husband: She was no longer happy with the ring.

Verhoff went to their house to discuss the problem. He was shocked when his client laid the ring on the table and told him, "Chad, I just don't love it anymore." He was even more stunned when, after he asked why, she told him she no longer

wore the pink and blue outfit. Verhoff explained that he would have to make the ring over again, starting from scratch. Her husband told him, "Make her happy."

So Verhoff gave them credit for the gold in the first ring and took back the sapphires. Eliminating those extra sapphires made it easier to design around the pink sapphire. He created a much lovelier, simpler design, which allowed the sapphire to take center stage. A split shank gave the client the ring width she wanted, without the bulk. Where the first ring had taken three months, this one was completed in two weeks.

And the client loved it. Her husband told Verhoff to call him to settle up.

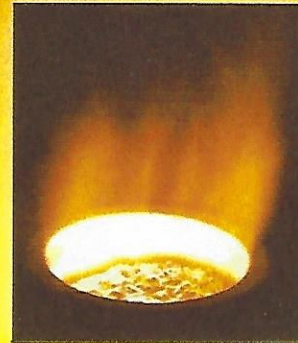
Normally, Verhoff asks for a 60 percent nonrefundable deposit. He didn't ask for one for the second ring, instead taking the husband at his word. So Verhoff got another shock when he called with a restyling fee—and the customer flatly refused to pay.

After some back and forth, the client still wouldn't pay. Knowing that the cost of legal action would be greater than the amount owed, Verhoff decided to drop the time-consuming matter. But that final experience, says Verhoff, taught him another valuable lesson: Look at every client in the same light. "I take my 60 percent deposit whether it's for my uncle or a man off the street." He requests full payment on delivery as well.

And in the end, Verhoff did get broad exposure from the ring. Since he made the piece, about two years ago, every ad he puts out—from the front page of his website to flyers to Instagram—carries the image of the final ring.

And the experience left him with something far greater than promotion. "I decided that I would let my obsession for my craft take my career where it was going," he says. "I no longer look for one job or person to catapult me into a certain circle...I don't wait for the \$12,000 client. I take the \$30 clients and do the right thing for them." ♦

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