

Professional Excellence in Jewelry Making &amp; Design

# MJSA CUSTOM JEWELER

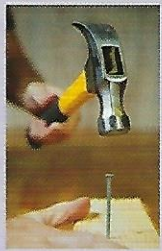
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INSIGHTS INTO DESIGNING AND MARKETING CUSTOMIZED JEWELRY

## TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

**Q:** What changes have you made to your store's layout or design that resulted in improved sales or efficiency?

**Lisa Krikawa (Krikawa Jewelry Designs, Tucson):** The best improvement I have made to the showroom recently was to add a pony wall to privatize the design center. This way, the space is not closed off completely, but there is a sense of privacy and intimacy with the customer, and new



customers walking in cannot see the seated customers. I also added a reception desk and a showroom ambassador position. As we are a 100 percent custom shop, it doesn't serve us to have a

full-time salesperson just waiting for foot traffic. The ambassador spends some of her time at the reception desk helping customers with drop-offs, pick-ups, repairs, setting appointments, schmoozing, and jewelry cleaning. The rest of her time is spent on social media. We made these changes last December, and what a difference it has made to the showroom experience! The flow of customers in

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# SELLING ME SOFTLY

## What your store's layout and design can do for you

BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON

The epiphany came to Greg Stopka by way of an outside observer. The owner of JewelSmiths in Pleasant Hill and San Ramon, California, Stopka had been working with a customer in a typically excited fashion when the customer stopped the conversation to pose a simple question: Why didn't JewelSmiths reflect Stopka's love of design?

"Why don't you have pictures?" he asked, adding that the store—with its jeweler's benches, spare décor, and visible CAD/CAM equipment—looked like "more of a repair center."

"That's when I realized I needed to communicate what I wanted to do most, which was design," says Stopka. So he worked with an interior designer to sharpen the design focus of his 600-square-foot store. He began with three public spaces: The showroom/display, custom design, and seating/waiting areas. He chose a new color scheme: A

*continued on page 8*

# SELLING ME SOFTLY

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from page 1*

neutral color on the walls read as welcoming, contemporary, and sophisticated; a muted green stripe on the molding echoed the counter surfaces and the green in the slate floor tiling. He created the feeling of an art gallery with framed images of his design work, professional flower arrangements, and bronze sculptures in both showroom and shop. Meanwhile, leather chairs in the seating area and gold in his signage communicated “luxury” (see photo on page 1).

Stopka also created a fourth public space by bringing his shop into the store visually: He put in a glass display wall that framed the bench and allowed customers to see an integral part of the design process—craftspeople at work.

The redesign paid off. Stopka made these changes about 19 years ago, and “that’s when we started taking off in the design area,” he says. His design work increased from 15 to 65 percent of his business—and his profits increased too.

Such sales success is no surprise to interior experts who specialize in jewelry layouts. Ruth Mellergaard, a partner with the interior design firm Grid/3 in New York City, says an effective store layout can bump sales, on average, between 25 and 35 percent. That’s echoed by David Hollingshead, director of the Interiors program at Stuller Inc. in Lafayette, Louisiana; he puts the increase squarely at 30 percent. Add the firsthand accounts of other

custom jewelers with whom we spoke, all of whom have seen the positive effect that changes in store layout can have, and it becomes clear: A good store layout and design can do a lot more than just give customers a pleasant place to see your work.

## Creating a First Impression

Potential customers for your custom jewelry want to know that you can deliver what you promise in terms of craftsmanship and design, and that they can entrust their dreams and heirloom jewelry to you. Trust is key, and your interior design choices can begin building that trust as soon as a customer walks through your door.

Goldworks in Fort Collins, Colorado, has been in its current location for only a couple of years, yet its appearance suggests longevity. Some features came with the space—the brick pillars inside the store as well as an old iron safe. Owners Tom and Sandy Linenberger kept the safe because it created a feeling of solidity and, they hoped, would be memorable to potential clients. They added one-of-a-kind, high-quality, custom-built cases—“a perfect fit with my custom one-of-a-kind jewelry,” says Tom Linenberger.

And ambience matters. Cases, flooring, wall coverings, and seating can all reinforce the image and impression of the store that you’d like your customers to take away. Hollingshead says that wood gives a more homey feel. Carpeting comes across as softer and warmer. And stone and hard surfaces can communicate a more urban and sophisticated style (although he recommends balancing those hard surfaces with soft ones to absorb sound).

Perhaps most important, a first impression can tell your clients that your focus is on custom jewelry. That helps to set you apart from other jewelers and draw potential clients. It can also reinforce customer perception of your artistic ability and skills.

Exhibiting your ability with CAD on large screens or monitors is a great way to snag people’s attention. Linenberger



The Linenbergers, owners of Goldworks, chose custom-made oak cases to contrast with laminate showcases used in other area jewelry stores. They also liked the look of the oak against the antique safe, which is the focal point of the store. Goldworks is in an older part of town, says Tom Linenberger, and the décor fit in with the local ambience.



At Trios Studio, owners Mary Wong, Deborah Spencer, and Kathe Mai emphasize the art of what they do by displaying wall-mounted images of their jewelry that have been digitally enhanced to look like paintings.

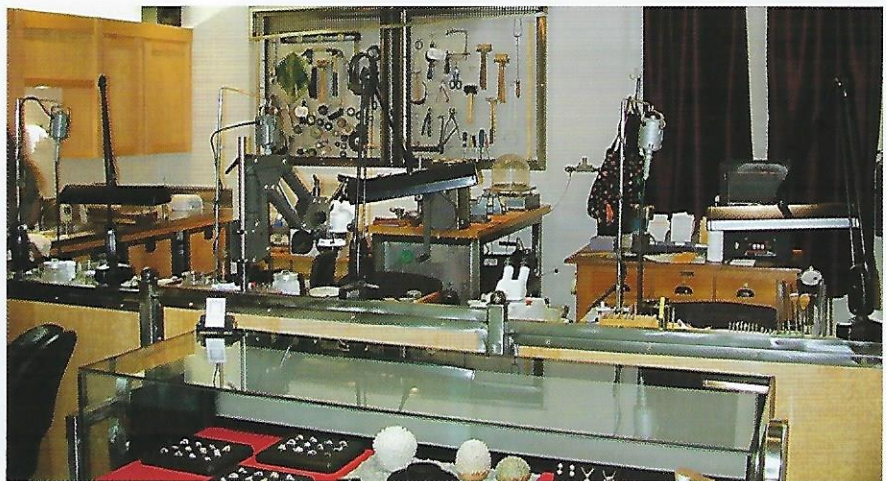
positions a 60-inch screen featuring a slide show of his process and his work in the sight line of the tavern across the street. Gary Swank of Gary Swank Jewelers in Portland, Oregon, puts his screen near his primary design area, where it is clearly visible to anyone walking by outside.

Nothing creates excitement like fire, though. Casting in the showroom may seem risky, but keeping the fire where customers—and potential customers walking by your window—might be attracted by the flames can produce the kind of first impression and buzz that leads to great word-of-mouth advertising and new customers.

Linenberger decided to take the risk and put the casting area just inside the front window because Goldworks sits next to a restaurant/bar patio where potential customers can clearly see the flames. People routinely come into the store when they see the casting torch ignite.

## Directing Traffic

Once your customer is in the store, physical layout can literally direct traffic. Many jewelers who specialize



When a customer steps into Gary Swank Jewelers, they get the message that here craft is art. Tools are stored and displayed like art in a framed case on the back wall. There are only two cases that hold ready-made jewelry. (Designed and welded by Swank, the steel cases blend well with the store's urban-industrial look of cement and exposed lighting and ventilation.) Behind the center case is a bench-high barrier in front of the working shop area.

in custom work have very small stores that limit the space available for sample or prototype cases. But if space allows, arranging front-loading cases back to back encourages people to move around the cases slowly to see everything. It also takes the counter out of the equation except for completing sales, wrapping, and repair intake.

“Younger customers don't like [when] the sales associate is on the opposite side of the counter,” says Hollingshead. “They like the shoulder-to-shoulder selling experience. It's more personal. There's a perceived trust because you're standing next to each other.”

At Trios Studio in Lake Oswego, Oregon, owners Mary Wong, Deborah Spencer, and Kathe Mai took another approach: The owners created an “island” with six cases of varying heights. This large island gently guides customers to the left and right, and the designers can easily step out from behind the cases to talk to customers or to open the large standing cases against the wall.

When they were redesigning Goldworks, the Linenbergers removed a few walls and were left with a wide but shallow store. Rather than have customers rattle

around like marbles in a box, they took specific steps such as putting a half wall opposite the front door that creates a channel for customers, directing their path and attention to storefront cases and a lost-wax casting station. Linenberger does his casting on the showroom floor. If there is a cast going on, it ensures that incoming customers come to a full stop, their attention engaged. “I wanted the client to feel they are a part of the store and welcome to be a part of what we do,” says Linenberger.

With a traditional U-shaped case layout, potential customers assume they can see everything from the door or front window, while existing customers coming in to pick up or drop something off can walk past the cases without noticing a thing. However, Linenberger designs a serpentine path that slows and engages the customers, improving the chances that they'll buy from a case or begin to consider a custom design.

This type of layout can gently guide customers to pause and look. Vary the case arrangement so that customers need to zig-zag to move through them; this slows people down, increasing the likelihood that they'll stop. Also, varying case heights and sizes can

# Keep It Clean

Although creating beautiful jewelry can be a messy, dirty, noisy, and often smelly business, more and more custom jewelers are opening their shops to public view. While fumes and airborne particles (such as polishing compound), are always a concern in a shop (as are extreme heat, fire, and noise), they become an even greater concern when there's a chance customers will be exposed to them.

Greg Stopka, owner of JewelSmiths in Pleasant Hill and San Ramon, California, put up a glass wall in front of the shop—as has been done at many jewelry stores that have revealed their shops—to keep the fumes, noise, and dust out of the store while visually bringing the shop into the showroom.

Although everyone's space requires unique solutions, investing in excellent ventilation is a must:



- At JewelSmiths, Stopka put in extra duct work in the shop to keep the air fresh.
- At Trios Studio, Wong, Spencer, and Mai found the custom-built ventilation hood over the kiln so effective that they no longer need to remove the wax drip-

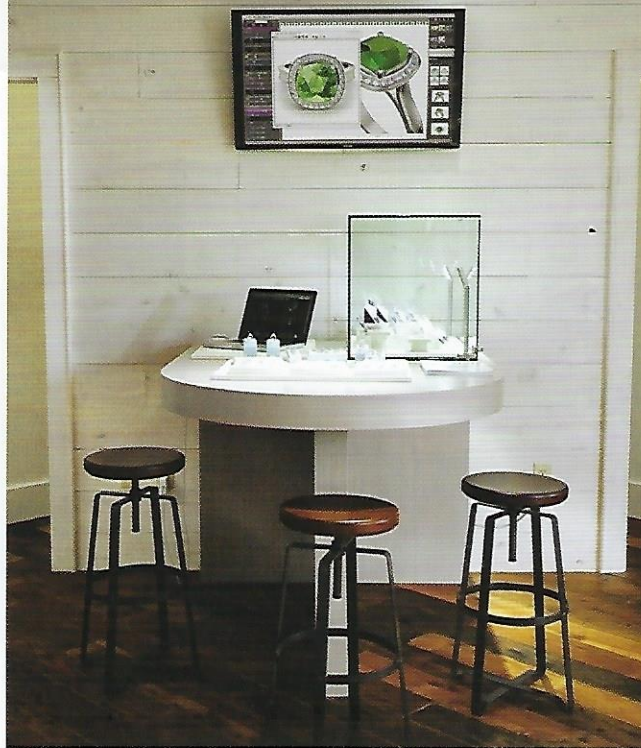
ping tray to reduce the odors—nothing reaches the showroom floor.

- To minimize burnout odors, those who cast on site typically burn out at night.

- At Goldworks, Linenberger casts on the showroom floor and uses a fume extractor locally to draw out kiln fumes as well as the silica particles that are a byproduct of quenching. Customers watch as owner Linenberger puts torch to metal as he prepares to cast (above). Because the casting process is right in front of windows facing onto a courtyard mall and popular restaurant and bar, curious passersby often come in to see what's going on when the torch lights up.

When you bring the shop to the front, says Stopka, it “should be incredibly clean and manicured.” At Gary Swank Jewelers, they clean the shop every Wednesday. Linenberger knew he could not keep his bench clean enough to have it on display. While other operations, such as casting, take place on the showroom floor, he leaves his bench and the polishing operation behind a wall of mirrored glass where the airborne polishing compound is contained with a 20-year-old Dust Machine by Handler.

Sound can be an issue too. Carpeting, acoustic ceiling tiles, and soundproofing on the walls can help, but mills, motorized hand tools, ultrasonics, steamers, and buffers are all noisy. Customers of these kinds of stores don't really seem to mind, though. Although Linenberger has apologized to customers for the sound of the two mills (deadened somewhat by carpeting in front of the cases) as well as for the smell of burning wax, most say “No problem.” “They think it's cool because they have a sense that this is where all the action is taking place.”



David Hollingshead, director of the Interiors program at Stuller Inc., says barstool seating at bar height tempts customers to edge slowly into a seat as they become more comfortable. “It's not as intimidating” as a seated case, says Hollingshead.

capture a customer's attention. Include a mix—for example, longer cases that are 40 inches high juxtaposed with glass cubes that hold only a few pieces and stand 60 inches high.

Lighting can also help to direct traffic. If you have live inventory in your cases, as Trios Studio does, it should take the spotlight, literally.

“The jewelry should be the brightest thing in the room,” says Hollingshead. “Turn everything else off. Don't use fluorescent, and don't highlight the carpet.” By making the light in and above the cases your only lighting, he says, “the jewelry will glow.”

Most design consultants recommend LED lighting. Place it inside and at the front edge of the case, says Mellergaard. “Nothing illuminates as well as LED. The jewelry just winks at you.” She recommends 4000K temperature LED—which is somewhat cool—inside the case, but a warmer light—such as a 3500K fluorescent—over the cases.

At Trios, Wong, Spencer, and Mai complement the LEDs inside some of the cases with a warm halogen suspended overhead. They feel it's a more flattering light for the high percentage of colored stones they use. And don't forget that the lighting also has to make the jewelry look good when your customer tries it on: A cool or cold light is not flattering to most skin tones, so use warmer temperature lights instead.

Mellergaard says there are extra benefits to using LEDs: They have a long lamp life—50,000 hours compared to halogen's 3,000—and produce less heat, so “you use less power (and less air-conditioning because there is less heat).”

(Note: LEDs cost about six times more than comparable halogen bulbs but since they can last from 10 to 16 times longer, savings in cost and electricity can pay for the added costs in relatively short order.)

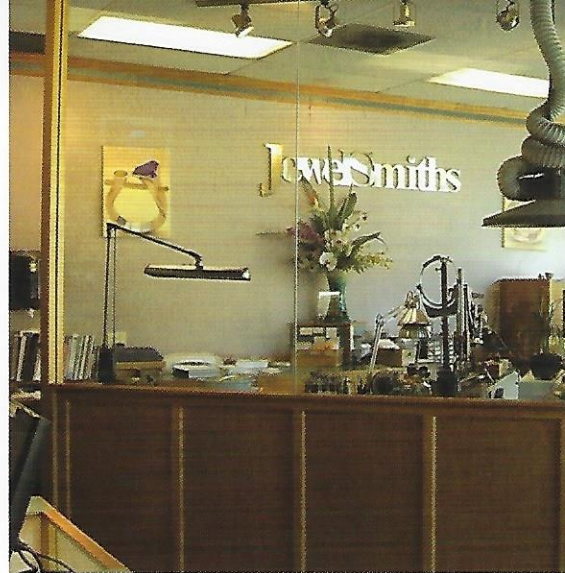
## Bringing Out Your Bench

The shop—the beating heart of your business—has great potential to be a powerful public space. That’s why more and more custom jewelers are choosing to bring part or all of the shop into the open.

Linenberger and others have found that showcasing part or all of your bench work area right on the showroom floor communicates to potential customers what you do and establishes instant trust. Having the jeweler’s bench and equipment on display tells the customer, I know what I’m doing, your jewelry and your ideas are safe with me, and I have nothing to hide. Nothing builds customer confi-

dence faster, and that can turn into sales.

Bringing the shop area onto the sales floor can work well for jewelers who have small shops and for whom custom design is the primary business. Jewelers who follow a more traditional model—with case-ready jewelry making up the greatest part of their sales (and custom work being a more occasional service)—may be less comfortable with the idea of a “live” bench area in the showroom. Happily, even if you can’t or don’t want to bring the shop to the front of the store, you can still showcase your bench. Many do this by installing a window into the bench area. It can also be accomplished virtually. Stuller helped one client bring the shop “into” the store by setting up video feeds of jewelers’ hands at work and channeling them to three large screens in the front of the store. A small window at the back of the store lets customers confirm that the feeds are coming from the store and not elsewhere.



The shop is on display as you enter JewelSmiths.

And don’t forget to showcase your design work as well. Ideally, when potential customers see the CAD design process in action, they’re hooked, imagining what could be done with that jewelry stashed at home in a drawer. “As the creative process is taking place,” says Hollingshead, “others in the store can watch. That helps advertise the customization service, create excitement, and drive



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At Trios Studio, working benches are hidden by a custom-made bar (top) that makes it difficult for anyone to snatch work from a bench and is also used for display. A window behind the benches allows jewelers working in the casting and buffing area to keep an eye on the floor. Right: A bench jeweler behind the bar.

sales.” This is particularly important for younger customers, he adds. “The under-35 customer hates the jewelry store that feels like a museum... Having the designing process on the floor creates that buzz” that these customers want. This is one reason Stopka continues to do repair work. Repair customers regularly turn into custom design customers when they see what can be done.

For the customer who wants a little privacy during the design process, jewelers

with limited space can bring their clients around to their side of the design desk or into an office in the back. But privacy is not usually an issue. In fact, says Linenberger, millennials who are used to Twitter, Facebook, and other social media, love the attention. “I’ve had my customers go outside and grab people walking in front of the store to ask them, ‘What do you think about this?’” he says. “Then we’ll have a crowd.”

And that’s a good store layout. ♦