

# Sharon Elaine Thompson

---

## What Do Women Want?

First published in *JCK*, July 2007

Women wear most of the jewelry sold and an enormous number of them buy for themselves. Before you begin designing, think about what they want.

Surveys of jewelry consumers reveal that more than 80 percent of jewelry purchasers are women; 70 percent of those buy jewelry for themselves. Cathy Calhoun, owner of Calhoun Jewelers in Royersford, Pennsylvania, had a client come in to re-style existing jewelry, and bought another 10 pieces for herself! Because surveys don't tell the whole story, we talked to jewelers across the country about what women actually buy. In a completely uncontrolled and unscientific straw poll, I also asked women friends and family members around the country for their preferences.

So what types of jewelry do women buy for themselves?

"Big!" says Judith Arnell, owner of Judith Arnell Jewelers in Portland, Oregon. "Something with a lot of 'bling'. Women will sacrifice the quality of the stone for size, even if it's only a third of a carat more." If they can't afford a big diamond, women choose pieces with multiple diamonds to give the illusion of a bigger stone

"Earrings are a staple," says Calhoun—things like small diamond hoops and "three-prong stud earrings. I sell them as soon as [women] put them on."

For Eve Alfillé, owner of Eve J. Alfillé Gallery & Studio in Evanston, Illinois, bracelets are close behind earrings and rings. Alfillé often suggests bracelets initially, but once hooked, women often buy more than one. "We are talking about serious bracelets," says Alfillé, "from \$2000 to \$3000." (In my straw poll, bracelets were actually ahead of earrings and all other types of jewelry. "I love bracelets and rings," wrote one respondent, "probably because I can see them!")

Women don't tend to buy classic styles. They buy "fashion jewelry...the things that go in and out of style," says Jan Ferguson, one of five women co-owners of Ford, Gittings and Kane, in Rome, Georgia. "Men are afraid of that." Tracy Reinhart, of Rummele's in Green Bay and Appleton Wisconsin, agrees that "women want fashion-forward, contemporary designs." (Most of my respondents, of all ages, said they preferred "arty" or "one-of-a-kind" pieces.)

But Becky Beauchine Kulka, owner of Becky Beauchine Kulka Fine Jewelry in Okemos, Michigan, observes that women in her area won't spend a lot of money on "really high fashion or diamond pieces [they] can pick up as a knock off."

Women want versatility in their jewelry, says Liz Chatelain, co-CEO of MVI Marketing in Paso Robles, California. They stud earrings with jackets that can be worn as drops. They want rings they can wear with or without a wrap of diamonds. "Anything that gives her the feeling of a change from day to night, or that she can color co-ordinate with an outfit," says Chatelain.

Although there's almost nothing "taboo" for a woman to buy herself, says Beauchine Kulka, women often leave the watch buying to their men. "Very rarely does a woman buy a watch for herself."

Women may even buy themselves expensive jewelry for occasions traditionally reserved for receiving gifts from others. "I had a good customer buy a huge diamond

bracelet for herself for about \$6500," says Calhoun. "She said, 'This is for me for Mother's Day.'"

That said, for most women, "diamonds seem to be that mystical gift women want to receive from a man," says Ferguson, "especially in the south. "And it would be the rare woman who would buy her own engagement ring. However, even though women want their fiancés to make the purchase, they want a say in the selection.

Other than large or sentimental stones, women love buying diamonds. "Women want lots of little diamonds all over the ring," says Arnell. "They want minimal metal, and two or three rows of micro-pavé going down the sides." Retailers say square emerald cuts are enormously popular. "Circle pendants are still big," says Ferguson, and "diamond bracelets are a huge self-purchase gift." In fact, if a piece isn't set with diamonds, says Alfillé, women often bring it in to have the diamonds added.

That doesn't mean colored stones are left behind. MVI's client research, says Chatelain, shows "colored stones are much more attractive to women [than diamonds]." Given the choice and opportunity, she says, "I think women would buy many more colored stones." But there seems to be no clear trend on which colored stones sell best. Women seem to buy everything.

Anything blue-green sells well for Alfillé. "Mint tourmalines, paraiba of any origin, beryls, unheated aquamarines where the green hasn't been taken out. Even women who don't like the color green, like this color," she says.

Down the highway in Chicago, however, "pink is the most popular color," says Andrea Mattei, owner of Judith Ansteth Jewelers, stones such as "rubellite, rhodolite, pink sapphires."

For Reinhart, in Wisconsin, tanzanites have slowed down. "I can't tell you the last time I sold a tanzanite." But in Georgia, says Ferguson, "tanzanites have been big." Ferguson's customers also like large, brightly colored stones, such as citrines and peridot.

Large, inexpensive moonstones sell well for Alfillé as they can be worn with just about anything. Other colored stones mentioned by my respondents were labradorite, tourmaline, amber, carnelian, jade, topaz, garnet, lapis and opal.

Gemstone bead strands--tourmaline, peridot, topaz and iolite mixed with gold beads--are popular, says Reinhart. But, says Alfillé, "long strands of jade and lapis interspersed with symmetrically placed, plain, round gold beads are so '70s." She frequently restyles them for customers.

Pearls are ever popular. For Reinhart, it's fashion pearls that sell, "pearls in a pendant on a chain with diamonds or sapphires." For Ferguson it's larger, 10-11 mm pearls, often in choker length. And customers love Tahitian black pearls. "Tahitian black pearls are so sexy!" wrote one of my respondents.

When it comes to metal choice, "Gold is definitely coming back," says Reinhart, in Wisconsin. But in Portland, Oregon, says Arnell, "Women still want white and white and more white." Beauchine Kulka says metal choice depends on stones and design. Women want "primarily white metal with diamonds," but yellow gold sells better in more fashion-oriented styles.

And what do women *not* want?

"Herringbones are dead," says Reinhart. "No one would be seen wearing herringbone now," agrees Beauchine Kulka, or "anything like the old gold rope, anything with baguettes, anything out of the '70s or '80s."

"Waterfall rings," says Calhoun. "Women don't want anything that looks like an old-fashioned 'cocktail' ring."

“Marquises,” says Arnell. “I couldn’t sell a marquise in any color. Pear shape is next on the list and so is a clunky yellow mounting.”

“A plain gold wedding band,” says Ferguson. “I can’t tell you the last time I sold a plain band. Women like the wedding band to make a statement.”

“Mabe pearls,” says Alfillé. “The Mabe pearl earring is a clear indication the wearer is not in the fashion mainstream.” She adds that “dome rings, the ones with multitudinous small stones, look as though your mother-in-law should be wearing them, especially on her pinkie.”

When it comes to what women spend, women in their 20s and 30s view several hundred dollars as a lot. “It’s the market between 30 and 55 where the money is spent,” says Chatelain. “After 55, the amount of money spent on jewelry drops.”

“On things they can wear every day,” says Reinhart, women will “very comfortably spend up to \$1000.” For purchases above this amount, Beauchine Kulka says, most women will consult with their partner. Calhoun and Mattei say the cutoff seems to be between \$1500 and \$2000. But it can be “as much as \$8500,” says Calhoun.

“There is always an upper limit to what a married woman will buy for herself,” says Alfillé, “dictated by the psychological boundaries of the couple’s relationship more than by actual finances.” She sees less approval seeking when the women work for themselves.

In reality, however, there is no upper limit. Ferguson has seen some women spend as much as \$50,000 on themselves. Jewelry, she says, is “our tool or car or boat.” Hunting season, she says, is “our best selling season. Women will say ‘that doesn’t cost as much as what he’s spending on his hunting trip. I can do that’.”