

Selling Me Softly: What your store's layout and design can do for you

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Your store layout and design can get customers involved with your product, ensure they see everything you have to offer, and ease them into a purchasing decision.

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 created three public spaces—the showroom/display, custom design, and seating/waiting areas. He chose a new color scheme: A warm 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. Leather chairs in the seating area and gold in his signage, meanwhile, communicated "luxury."

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 12 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, for instance, 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 to 35 percent. That's echoed by David Hollingshead, director of the Interiors program at Stuller Inc. in Lafayette, Louisiana, who puts the increase squarely at 30 percent. Add in the first-hand 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.

The 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 Linenberger. They chose oak to contrast with other jewelry stores that were using laminate showcases, but Linenberger also liked the look of the oak against the antique safe. Goldworks is in an older part of town, he says, and the décor fit in with the area’s ambience.

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. For example:

- At Trios Studio, in Lake Oswego, Oregon, 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
- Gary Swank of Gary Swank Jewelers in Portland, Oregon, showcases his craft by hanging tools on the back wall inside a picture frame. He features his mill in its own space, like a sculpture (and a bronze sculpture sitting on the safe behind the mill reinforces that perception). Swank also welded his own steel case frames that blend well with the store’s urban industrial look of cement and exposed lighting and ventilation. The message of this space is that, here, craft is art.
- Stopka creates the feeling of an art gallery with framed images of his design work, professional flower arrangements, and bronze sculpture in both showroom and shop. And “changing the images every six months,” he says, “gives the customer the feeling there is new inventory. We want to make sure they understand we’re always evolving, that new designs are always coming out.”

Exhibiting your ability with CAD on large screens or monitors is a great way to snag people’s attention. Linenberger positions a 60” screen featuring a slide show of his process and his work in the sight line of the bar across the way. Swank puts his screen near his primary design area, where it is clearly visible to anyone walking by outside.

Nothing creates excitement like fire. While casting in the showroom may seem risky, keeping the fire where customers—and potential customers walking by your window—

might be attracted by the flames can produce the kind of 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. Linenberger specializes in repurposing customers' old jewelry, reusing both stones and metals, so he often makes a ceremony of the process. He allows customers to pour their gold jewelry into the crucible, watch the casting, and then quench the flask. "The look on their faces is unbelievable. We get hugs and kisses all the time," he says. "This has been huge for us."

Direct Traffic

Getting out on the floor to stand with your customer is another good way to build trust. You can do that in any setting, of course, but the layout of the store can help.

"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."

Physical layout can literally direct traffic. Many jewelers who specialize in custom work have very small spaces, which 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.

(One tip: Forget the seated cases. "Our market research shows that younger customers don't like a seated case," says Hollingshead. "They feel like they're being sold to, that they're being trapped." But counters at bar height with barstool seating tempts customers to edge slowly into a seat as they become more comfortable. "It's not as intimidating," says Hollingshead.)

Trios Studio took another approach: The owners created an "island" in the center of the floor made of two semi-circles, each approximately eight feet long; they gently guide customers to the left and right. 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 long, shallow store. Rather than have customers rattle around like marbles in a box, they took some specific steps to direct customer path and attention:

- Customers enter at one end of the long, window-filled front and are slowed by a half-wall of glass and brick (which allows light into the store but gives privacy to the design desk behind it). Above the wall hang several light-weight banners rippling in the air currents and directing the eye to the digital images of Linenberger's work that is printed on them.
- The half-wall forces customers to move to the left, alongside the cases in the window, which are backed with glass and give them a second chance to see jewelry they might have overlooked when passing the store front.

- As they begin to turn right into the main space, they can see a lost-wax casting station immediately behind the cases to their left.
- Linenberger does his casting on the showroom floor. When there is a cast going on, it ensures 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; existing customers coming in to pick up or drop something off can walk right past the cases without noticing a thing. However, by designing a serpentine path Linenberger slows and engages the customer, improving the chances that they’ll buy from the case, or begin to consider a custom design.

As Linenberger has done, consider using your layout to gently guide customers to pause and look. Vary the case arrangement so that customers need to zigzag to move through them; this will slow people down, increasing the chance that they’ll stop and take a look. Also, varying case heights and sizes can capture a customer’s attention. Include a mix—for example, longer ones 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, which means it has to be flattering to skin tones. Remember, a cool or cold light is not flattering to most tones; use warmer temperature lights for that.

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 can last from 10 to 16 times longer. Savings in cost and electricity can pay for the added costs in relatively short order.)

Bring Out Your Bench

The shop—the beating heart of your business—has great potential to be a powerful public space—which is 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 confidence 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.

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 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.