

## ARE YOU CUT OUT FOR REPAIR?

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10 questions to ask yourself before hanging out your jewelry repair shingle.

by

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If you do jewelry work, sooner or later someone will ask you to fix a chain, size a ring, set a stone or tighten one. They'll recommend you to a friend of theirs and before you know it, you're in the repair business. Perhaps you've wondered if repair work might support your jewelry making. And if you think it sounds interesting, now is certainly the time to start, says Alan Revere, founder of the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts in San Francisco. "Historically, when gold goes up, repairs go up," he says.

But before you dive in, are you cut out for repair?

### **1. Can you take risk and responsibility?**

Doing repairs requires accepting responsibility for other people's treasures, says Revere. "You have to get yourself in the mindset that this is really important. When it's someone else's pride and joy and maybe a family heirloom, you can't make mistakes."

Working with jewelry is very different from working with your hands in another field, says David Geller, director of Jeweler Profit in Atlanta, Georgia. While there isn't much sentiment attached to a broken chair, he says, "It's different fixing something that is worn close to a woman's body. The closer it gets to a person's body, the more it is treasured and the longer it is expected to last."

That "treasured" status and the fact that jewelry usually has an intrinsic value to it means there are legal issues to consider when repairing it. What happens if the piece is

lost or damaged? If you're going to send some of the work out—for stone cutting, enameling, specialty setting—you should be aware of the term “bailment,” says Revere. Essentially it means that someone is leaving something with you for safekeeping. But it's most important when you pass a customer's jewelry on to someone else to do all or part of the repair. Depending on the state, the law may require you to let the owner of the piece know that it will be leaving your hands.

A document of bailment also clarifies who is responsible if loss or damage occurs while the jewelry is out of your hands. Many years ago, Geller sent a customer's diamond to a cutter for refashioning. The stone broke. That's when Geller found out that diamond cutters don't guarantee against breakage. He had to replace the stone out of his own pocket.

## **2. How are your skills?**

Taking on repairs requires an honest appraisal of your skills. “Make sure you have the skills you need to do the repair before you accept the repair,” says Revere. If you botch a repair job, you certainly won't win that client for a custom design piece—and you'll lose the potential customers that the unhappy client talks to. Not only should you have repair skills, you must have them to a more-than-ordinary degree. “If you're making your own jewelry, you don't have to be as talented,” says Geller. “You have to be more talented to take care of someone's treasures.”

Three common types of repair make up about 80 percent of a jewelry repair business, says Revere: ring sizing, chain repair and prong repair. That means you need all the basic jewelry-making skills: sawing, filing, polishing, using a torch. “You have to know how to use a torch without melting the metal or using excessive heat,” says Geller. And you have to know how to use heat quickly and accurately. If you are replacing two

prongs, he says, “When you weld the new prongs in, you have to be sure you don’t melt the other two prongs that are still there.”

Experienced jewelers only rarely have to remove stones before sizing if they take proper precautions to protect the stone from heat, says Revere. Geller has his “flag” rule of thumb: “If the stone is the color of the American flag—red, white or blue—you can solder with the stones in place. Anything else has to be removed.” Even that rule comes with caveats, says Geller. Only faceted sapphires and rubies, which are generally of good quality, can be left in place; cabbed corundums often contain inclusions that can expand at different rates from the host material and break it. Because there are times you’ll have to remove or set a stone, setting skills are also required for jewelry repair persons.

Removing stones and resetting them increase the risk of chipping or breaking them. This is especially true of stones with points—marquises, pears, princess cuts—says Geller. Although it’s possible to situate prongs so they hold pears or marquises on the rounded shoulders, that’s not possible for princess cuts. If you can’t avoid pushing a prong over a point, you must cut a pocket into the seat into which the point can fit, preventing putting pressure on the delicate point of the stone.

(And, of course, the risk of chipping a stone during resetting doesn’t include the extra time you may spend looking for dropped stones or money spent replacing a lost one. It’s a rare jeweler who hasn’t spent time on hands and knees searching for a missing stone.)

Setting is one of the more difficult repair skills to learn, and much of it can’t be self taught, says Geller. “You have to have one of three things to learn: A master sitting next to you teaching you; go to a school; or get some really excellent video tapes.” He recommends tapes and classes offered by the New Approach School in Virginia and the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts in San Francisco.

Anyone interested in repair, says Revere, should also invest in the *Professional Guide to Fine Jewelry Craftsmanship* put out by Jewelers of America. The book outlines most common jewelry operations and sets quality standards for them. For example, when setting a stone, the guide specifies how much metal should remain in the prong at the girdle of the stone and how much of the prong could cover the stone.

### **3. What about specializing?**

Suppose you only have a couple skills but are interested in the extra income repair can generate. Should you consider specializing?

There is an argument to be made for specializing. Revere tells of a jeweler who did only two types of repair: ring sizing and prong retipping. He became very fast at doing those two repairs. He recycled the metal taken out of ring sizings and prong replacement back into sizing and prongs and so bought little metal. He made a good profit and a good income, says Revere.

Geller has another view. "Take in stuff you might not be able to do and take it to a trade shop. Make less money and take it to someone and have them do it. Money's money." If a lady comes to you with seven rings and has to take two of them somewhere else, he observes, she may not come back—or even leave the other five.

"My suggestion to anyone who wants to go into the repair business is to go to one of the better jewelry schools in the country," says Geller. "They offer one-week classes in repair and different aspects of repair work. Get three or four one-week classes under your belt and you can fix a lot of things that come to you."

### **4. Do you have good to excellent communication skills?**

You do repair, you have to talk to people. And because they are leaving a treasured item with you, grunts interspersed with an occasional "yeah" or "no problem," aren't enough. You have to inspire confidence. Talk to the customer about what work

you're going to do, what other work, if any, needs to be done, what risks are inherent in the work, what you can guarantee and what you can't, how long the work will take, whether or not you're going to send the jewelry out for all or part of the repair.

Remember that the customer is entrusting something of great personal value to a stranger who will do work on it that she doesn't understand. Be sure to explain that the jewelry will look different when it is given back—even if the only change in appearance will be an absence of the dirt and damage of hard wear. Usually this is a happy surprise but not always. Geller once sized a man's ring and, during cleaning, polished away all the scratches on the ring. The customer thought the ring had been switched with someone else's because he didn't recognize it without the damage. Even a simple sentence such as "You won't recognize it when I'm done because it will be so beautiful," might serve to put the customer on notice to expect a change in appearance, he says.

### **5. Are you observant?**

The first thing you do when taking in a piece for repair is examine the jewelry. Although this should be obvious, what might be less obvious is the care and detail with which this examination should be made. What is the metal, or metals, in the piece according to the mark? What sizes and colors are the stones? What existing damage is present, not only the damage you are going to repair but other damage the customer may not be aware of? What previous repairs have been done to the piece? How were they done?

"If you see something that is going to be a problem, you have to bring it to the customer's attention," says Revere. It does little for your reputation or the client's confidence in you if you have to call them back to explain there might be a problem you missed. You have to make the customer aware that there are prongs loose, stones chipped or broken. "Whatever problems there are, when you take the piece in for repair,

they become your problems,” says Revere. If you take in a ring for sizing and a stone is loose, and you don’t tell the customer and don’t tighten the stone, she may want to know a) why you didn’t tell her; b) why you didn’t just tighten the stone; or c) how she can be sure the loose stone wasn’t caused by the ring sizing.

## **6. Are you meticulous?**

Repair work means creating a paper trail. Neither your memory or your customer’s is sufficient.

Write down all your observations, your customer’s claims for the piece, any testing you did, a detailed written description of the piece, and make a sketch. “The job envelope is a legal document that is extremely important,” says Revere. That means you have to be careful about what you put in writing. “Don’t write down anything you can’t directly observe,” he says.

If the customer says a ring is 18k set with an emerald, unless you test the metal and have the skills to identify the stone, only describe the piece as “yellow metal set with a green stone of such and such measurements.” If the customer balks—and she often will—write down “customer describes ring as 18k gold set with a one-carat emerald.”

There are three reasons for this. First, metals can be unmarked or mismarked, and the customer may honestly not know what the stone is. She may have been told it is an emerald, or she may simply assume it’s an emerald. Customers frequently misidentify stones in jewelry they inherit. They believe that, because a stone is in a grandmother’s or mother’s or aunt’s ring, it must be a natural ruby, sapphire, diamond or emerald. But these stones have been imitated in a variety of materials for centuries; and sapphires and rubies have been by made synthetically since the 1800s.

Secondly, the stone may have been an emerald at one time, but may have been replaced by someone else at some time—by the original owner, a relative or even an

unscrupulous jeweler. The person leaving the piece with you may be unaware of the replacement.

And third, the woman may be a con artist trying to get you to commit to something she knows the ring isn't. You'll only find out when she picks the ring up and accuses you of switching the stone.

### **7. Are you methodical?**

Use repair work to improve your skills, says Revere. Every repair, he says, should be "a chance to do something better, more efficiently, with less waste of time or metal." Not only will you come to make more money on the repairs, you'll enjoy more skill in your other jewelry work as well.

You must be methodical to track the repairs—what needs to be ordered for each job, from which supplier, when it was ordered, when the job is due to be finished, and, last but certainly not least, which job goes into which envelope. There is sophisticated software that can help you keep track of the jobs, but a well-thought-out, consistently used, manual system is just as effective. A collection of colored dots from a stationery store can tell you what day a job is due. A thorough description of the piece and a sketch ensures that, when you pull the job out of the ultrasonic where it's hanging with several other jobs, you put the right job in the right envelope.

Revere recommends that you also write out a very thorough description of the job to be done. For example, even for something as simple as a request to "stretch ring up a half size," should include the starting size and the size you want the finished ring to be. Then, if you forget to check the starting size, or if you're called away in the middle of the job, there will be no guesses or embarrassing calls to the client.

It doesn't hurt, once all is ready for delivery, to once more go over each job, and the description of what was to be done, before you hand it to the customer. It's not a good

idea to size, clean and polish a ring, and forget to retip the prongs, oxidize the pattern, or retexture the surface. This is the last opportunity you have to check the quality of the work as well: are the stone seats burr-free, file marks polished out, and cleaning compound removed?.

### **8. Are you a pessimist?**

In repair work, being a pessimist can save your bacon. Many repair jobs look simple on the surface.

In our small, family-run, do-it-all shop, we once had a customer ask for a rush sizing on a silver and turquoise ring. Against his better judgment, my father told her she could pick it up in a couple hours. It was the kind of sizing my brother John, a wizard with a torch, had done many times: Submerge the stone in water to protect it from the heat and quickly size with easy solder.

However, this ring, which must have been soldered with VERY easy solder, started to come apart. That wasn't the worst. When John, who now had to rebuild an inexpensive ring, removed the turquoise from the bezel, sawdust fell out from behind the paper-thin stone. What should have been a quick repair job turned into a race against the clock to essentially manufacture a new ring before the customer returned.

You are much better off to imitate Winnie the Pooh's eternally dejected friend Eeyore: Always look for the worst possibilities posed by every repair job. If you do, and you let the customer know the inherent risks, if something goes wrong, no one is surprised. If everything goes well, everyone is happy.

### **9. What about insurance?**

No, your homeowner's insurance will **not** cover the jewelry repair business you run out of your basement or garage shop. And don't even think about lying about it. If you make a claim, and the insurer finds you've fibbed, not only will they not honor your claim,



they may well cancel your homeowner's policy. Jeweler's Mutual and a few other companies will insure your repair business. If you're serious about repair, get the insurance. (See "Gotcha Covered," *Lapidary Journal*, December 2004.)

### **10. Can I make money doing repair?**

Despite the risks and the potential for headaches, repair work can be financially rewarding. But it doesn't just happen.

Many jewelers charge far too little for repair, says Geller. "The typical retail store should charge \$120 to \$150 an hour for the craftsman's time. If you're working out of your house, \$85 an hour is good money," he says. "I've seen people charge \$25 to \$45 an hour. If you factor in not only the time to do the work but all the supplies and the time to wait on the customer—you may spend a half hour with the customer—you make no money. You have to be unafraid to charge accordingly."

Geller speaks from experience. By devising a pricing system—which he calls his Blue Book—to help his five employees price repairs, he converted his money-losing repair department into one that was earning three-quarters of the store's 1.8 million dollar income. "If there is no financial satisfaction," says Geller, "you get burned out real fast."

And repairs can not only be profitable in and of themselves. Many jewelers have told Revere stories about the almost meaningless repairs they've taken in, repairs that were almost not worth doing. But when the customer came back to pick the work up, she placed a large, several thousand-dollar order. "Customers use the repair to check out the store, the atmosphere, how they deal with the jeweler," he says.

Repairs can be rewarding not only financially, but personally. "It's a wonderful field to work in because people really appreciate it," says Revere. "If no one else can fix a piece and you can, you've made someone not only happy, but you've renewed their happiness. It's a very powerful reward."

Contact the New Approach School, 3500 Virginia Beach Blvd, Suite 503, Virginia Beach, Virginia, 23452, 800 529 4763 ([www.newapproachschoo.com](http://www.newapproachschoo.com)) for classes or videotapes on repair. Contact the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts, 760 Market Street, Suite 900, San Francisco, California 94102, 415 391 4179 ([www.revereacademy.com](http://www.revereacademy.com)) for classes and videotapes on repair as well as for Alan Revere's books: *101 Bench Tips for Jewelers*, *Professional Goldsmithing*, *Ring Repair* and *The Art of Jewelry Making*. For *Geller's Blue Book*, David Geller's guide to pricing repairs, see his website, [www.jewelerprofit.net](http://www.jewelerprofit.net) or call 404 255 9565.