

THE BIG STORY

41

SUREFIRE WAYS
TO MAKE YOUR
BRIDAL BUSINESS
STAND OUT

Turn your store into a palace of love.

THE BIG STORY BY
EILEEN McCLELLAND

EXPERIENCE.

That's the retail byword of the past few years. In no area of your business is experience more important than in the bridal category. Appropriately, jewelry retailers are diving in to creating memorable experiences for clients like never before, helping them to plan proposals, prepare for their weddings and create the most personal of engagement rings.

But first, go back to the basics. Determine how much opportunity there is in your market and what your market share of that wedding business is now and could be in the future. During a recent Stuller Bridge conference, Alex Graham, director of bridal for the company, asked retail attendees how many weddings take place every year in their markets. While some answers were spot-on, others missed the mark by a mile.

Weddings and engagements represent untapped potential for many U.S. jewelers. Consider this: there are 2.2 million weddings in the U.S. every year and 1.9 million engagement rings sold. Other facts to consider: men and women are marrying later, at an average age of 29.8 and 27.8 respectively. At this age, they're likely to be discerning, to have thought about what they want, and are increasingly likely to want to customize their rings in some way. "The younger folks have their minds made up when they come into the store," agrees John Cauley of John Cauley Jewelers in Mobile, AL. "If they have a design in mind, they don't deviate very much."

There's much at stake. Estimates of the average engagement ring spend varies, but according to a Brides Magazine study, it was \$7,829 in 2018, up rather dramatically from the \$5,023 average spend in 2017. And although diamonds offer increasingly narrow margins, there is money to be made in custom mountings, alternative materials and vintage collections offered in a service-rich environment.

Here are 41 things with which to experiment to make sure your clients have the best experience possible, and that that experience translates to business success.

YOUR ENVIRONMENT FOR CONVERSATION

1 While some bridal customers likely prefer privacy, younger customers who like to share everything may find confidence from being in a group, says Ken Nische, chairman of JGA, a company that specializes in branded environments and consumer strategy. At James Allen's brick and mortar showrooms, for example, customers try on alloy samples at tables built for 16 people. The salesperson takes a back seat and lets the customers engage with one another, seek out peers' opinions and compare what they like.

YOUR WINDOWS

2 At least half of the year, Betsy Barron of Love & Luxe in San Francisco partners with a friend and local designer, who places her couture handmade wedding dresses in the store's window, a signal to passersby that Love & Luxe specializes in bespoke handmade bridal jewelry.

YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

3 Listen carefully when a customer has what seems like an over-the-top idea, says Douglas Elliott, designer

for Marisa Perry in New York. For example, he says, he recently made a ring for a client inspired by HBO's *Game Of Thrones*. The client wanted a twisted band that incorporated a dragon into the design, while his bride-to-be loved the halo look. Elliott combined those two disparate ideas for a stunningly cohesive design, making everyone happy.



YOUR PET

4 Consider adding a canine greeter to break the ice. Adorable Ruby, a Frenchton, is a regular at Jacob Raymond Custom Jewelry in Greensboro, NC, as well as being a social-media celeb. "Many people recognize her from our social media and actually come in to see her," says owner Jacob Wosinski. "You couldn't ask for a better shop dog."

YOUR CASE SPACE

5 When deciding how much case space to give bridal, consider how important bridal sales from stock are, says merchandising expert Larry Johnson. Stores doing more custom bridal can devote less space. "I rarely see only one 6-foot case in a store unless they are under \$500,000 in annual sales. I think a store doing \$750,000 to \$1 million would have two or three cases. Stores doing \$1 million-plus are doing between two and six bridal cases, not including cases for wedding bands. Set aside a portion of each style case for ready-to-go-out-the-door rings for those customers getting engaged at 4 this afternoon. Avoid overloading your cases with alloy samples lest you immobilize your customer with too many choices."

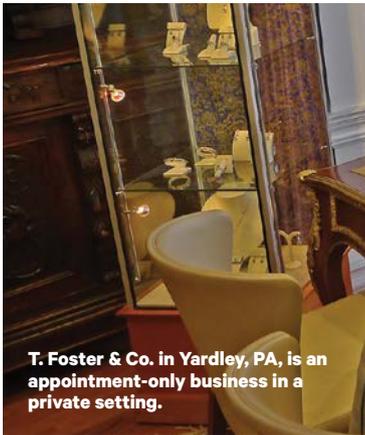


YOUR RADIO PRESENCE

6 Ramsey's Diamond Jewelers' radio commercials are iconic in New Orleans. Airing intensive radio schedules on virtually every radio station in the city every week for the past 25 years, Robert and Lori Ramsey have become known for their sibling banter that they compare to Charlie Brown and Lucy sparring in the Peanuts comic strip. Inspired by Tony the Tiger's "Kellogg's Frosted Flakes are Grrrrreat!" the signature radio tag line, "Rrrramseys Diamond Jewelers," has become iconic, too. What can you do to bring your business top of mind?

YOUR PRIVACY

7 At appointment-based T. Foster & Co. in Yardley, PA, two private showrooms are designed to create a special-occasion feeling with parquet floors, coffered ceilings, luxurious furniture and drapes, creating the private, personal setting that Tim and Suzanne Foster's clients crave. "Privacy is a must," says sales consultant Shane Decker. "Have your bridal department as far away from other areas as possible (right rear corner if your store will allow it)."



T. Foster & Co. in Yardley, PA, is an appointment-only business in a private setting.

YOUR GOOGLE LISTING

8 A first impression online is critical. To gain control over your content and the ability to interact with reviewers, search for your business on Google. Check your name, address and local phone number, URL, store hours and photos. Fill out every single field on this form with as much detail as you can. Verify location with a phone number or postcard verification.

YOUR TIMING

9 When Cut Fine Jewelers sells an engagement ring, the couple is highly likely to return for the bands. "When we sell someone a piece of jewelry it's not, 'Here's your piece of jewelry, thanks, and bye,'" owner Matthew Patton says. "We're going to stay in communication with our clients." On the other hand, Patton has learned not to push the band sale at the same time as the engagement-ring purchase, because usually the buyer wants to put as

much money as possible into the engagement ring. Bringing up the wedding bands too early tends to confuse the guy and leaves him second-guessing the price of the engagement ring.

YOUR YOUTUBE CHANNEL

10 Marisa Perry in New York recently introduced a bi-weekly series of videos on YouTube. The focus is on how consumers can avoid pitfalls when choosing their diamonds and looking for settings, and is designed for shoppers in all stages of the shopping process.

YOUR PLAYFUL SIDE

11 Have something in an open case that bridal shoppers can try on unsupervised. Stuller's new magnetic bridal collection display, for example, allows shoppers to easily switch center stones on semi-mounts to create new looks with no risk to live goods.



12. YOUR PHOTO SHOOTS. Jessica Rossomme of Mucklow's Fine Jewelry in Peachtree City, GA, orchestrated a collaborative photo shoot with photographer Mae Grace, LLC, and a recently engaged couple. The combined efforts of photographer, makeup artist, bridal shop, florist, models and location made for a much larger impact than anything Mucklow's could have done solo. "We posted on Facebook and Instagram," Rossomme says. "We've printed them and have them on display in the frames that we sell throughout the store. The photographer and makeup artist submitted it to a digital wedding magazine that picked it up and then posted it to their website."

13. YOUR GREETING. At Ramsey's Jewelers' new 8,400 square-foot location in New Orleans, each visitor is greeted by a guest coordinator at a hospitality center near the front door, who will offer a refreshment and a freshly baked cookie. The coordinator learns what has brought the guest into the store and pairs them with the sales consultant who is the best fit. Whether or not you have an official greeting station, make sure each customer is welcomed.



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Alex Graham

YOUR INVENTORY MIX

14 Alex Graham, director of bridal for Stuller, says Stuller's retail clients are selling asymmetrical designs, fancy shape stones and unconventional halos (fashioned from marquise accents, for example), as well as rings with scattered accent stones, unique stone directions (east to west pears, for example), special finishes and stacking bridal looks.

YOUR FLOOR PLAN

15 Do customers seem confused? At Kelly Mitchell in Dallas, cases and displays are inspired by life events. She set up collections around the store: Engagement

& Anniversary, Black Tie, Art & Investment, Everyday Wear and others.

YOUR LAGNIAPPE

16 Give 'em a little something extra. Whenever Day's Jewelers, with stores in Maine and New Hampshire, sells a diamond engagement ring, the engaged couple receives a bridal box — a special gift-wrapped box that includes a bottle of champagne, jewelry gift, special promotions for wedding rings and bridal attendant gifts, toasting flutes and a certificate for a free engraved cake knife. Day's has partnered with a local photographer, formalwear provider, and other bridal-related businesses; each includes a special gift or coupon in the box.

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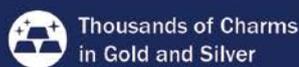
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WHAT RETAILERS ARE SAYING:

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41 Surefire Ways to Make Your Bridal Business Stand Out

YOUR CELEBRATION

17 The newly engaged at Fakier Jewelers in Houma, LA, are invited to attach engraved locks to a gate that encircles a pergola in back of the store and hurl the keys into the bayou to signify their commitment. The idea was inspired by the tradition in Italy and France of attaching locks to bridges as a symbol of love.

YOUR SHOP

18 Invite your customers backstage to see what's involved in making their rings, or host a wedding band workshop to allow them hands-on experience. If that's not feasible, let your guests watch the action through a window or on a video screen. Jacob Raymond Custom Jewelry in Greensboro, NC, takes the immersive experience a step further, situating the shop directly behind a display case with seating.

YOUR WEDDING BAND SALES

19 Day's Jewelers, a family-owned company with locations in New Hampshire and Maine, regularly transforms all of its showrooms into a wedding-band intensive experience that attracts both recently engaged clients as well as new customers. Key vendors bring trunks full of wedding bands for a mammoth selection. "During the events, it feels like all we carry is wedding bands!" says owner Kathy Corey.

YOUR FLEX SPACE

20 Branham's Jewelers' Treasured Memories room serves as a bridal party dressing room equipped with mirrors and makeup stations. The bridal party can descend an elegant staircase or gather near the fireplace for photos. The experience is free to customers of Branham's.



At Fakier Jewelers, newly engaged couples attach engraved locks to a gate behind the store.





21. YOUR QUALITY. Jude Dutille of Dutille's Jewelry Design Studio in Lebanon, NH, says today's customers notice craftsmanship. "The desire for platinum hand-fabricated rings with precision-cut diamonds has increased exponentially," says Dutille. The store has invested in new forming tools and streamlined the processes of designing and manufacturing. "These rings require expert workmanship, taking an average of 12 to 14 hours to produce," he says.



22. YOUR SEATING. Booth seating is a trend in jewelry store interiors and is integral to the design of Ramsey's Diamond Jewelers in New Orleans. Individual booths provide a comfortable, intimate way of choosing a ring while creating a more effective selling environment. Another example: Jim and Daren Brusilovsky, owner of Marks Jewelers in Montgomeryville, PA, and a 2018 Cool Store, created what they call the Diamond Diner for their store that opened in 2016.

YOUR SALES APPROACH

23 Evan Patton at Cut Fine Jewelry in Baton Rouge has what sales consultant Shane Decker would call a missile selling style that works well with the indecisive. "A guy said, I have \$7,000 for an engagement ring. What would you buy?" Evan says. "I told him, 'This is what you need - I'm not going to give you something ugly.' And she loved it!" Other engagement ring shoppers just crave reassurance. "They need to be told, it's OK to get engaged. It's OK to spend the money," Evan says.

YOUR REVIEWS

24 Harness the power of client reviews by subscribing to a service, such as Podium, that can simplify the process for your customers with a clickable text message that connects them instantly to Google and can be forwarded to your Facebook page. It also helps facilitate communication with clients, enabling business owners to respond to messages across multiple channels.

YOUR DIAMOND CUT

25 Search out superior cut diamonds, possibly giving thought to your own store brand. "If you know how to sell cut, you can get a superior price and compete against the Internet," says David Brown of the Edge Retail Academy. That is the strategy behind Cut Fine in Baton Rouge, LA, founded by Matthew and Evan Patton in 2012. Their goal is to sell the most well-cut diamonds they can find and showcase them in the highest quality settings they can buy or manufacture.

Family-Friendly And So Much More



After owning Hollingsworth Jewelers Gallery in Petaluma, CA for nine years we received a call from Penny Palmer asking if we wanted to join Independent Jewelers Organization. She explained what IJO is, the benefits of membership, and that IJO

members are like a big family. The mention of family is what sold us! It's hard to explain what that means without experiencing it for yourself, but there is a level of trust and a sense of community that comes with membership. The IJO staff and the IJO partners are genuine in their commitment to our success. When working in the buying room with the jewelry vendors we are treated with respect no matter the size of our business, just because we are members.

We have steadily grown our business since 2004 but based on the educational programs and professional advice we have received since joining in 2013, our business has grown faster than ever before. The knowledge we have gained has helped us face the challenges of running a family business and has boosted our confidence in our business practices. We are able to stay current with the jewelry industry trends in technology, marketing and product developments through the conference seminars. The perks we receive, be it travel, hotel stays, vendor reimbursement checks, SWAG gifts, and much more are the added bonus! We have benefited from our membership with IJO in so many ways and would recommend membership to anyone who would love to be a part of a family-friendly business community.

Mike and Tammy Hollingsworth
Hollingsworth Jewelers Gallery, Petaluma, CA



For information on IJO membership call Penny Palmer at 800-624-9252.
penny@ijo.com

YOUR CLIENTELING

26 Wondering how to tell if your sales staff is following up without peering over their shoulders? Clientbook Retail is a mobile CRM and messaging solution built to make clienteling easier for busy sales associates. Results are measurable, which enables store managers to hold sales associates accountable for efforts at building relationships, vital in the bridal business.

YOUR PROPOSAL PLANNING

27 Chelsea Mead of Honey Designs Jewelry in Cincinnati not only posts engagement stories on her blog, she also crafts customized proposals for her clients that can include champagne or deserts, a local date night gift package, proposal coaching and curation, photo and video coverage of the proposal, a custom bouquet and party bus or limo transportation. Proposal packages range from the \$1,500 to \$3,000 and also include three 60-minute design sessions and a one-of-a-

kind custom-designed ring, not including the center stones. She's been expanding her reach to include destination engagements and has also become an ordained minister in order to officiate at clients' weddings.

YOUR GENDER NOTIONS

28 Jamie Hollier of Balefire Goods in Arvada, CO, presents all jewelry as unisex on her website. "We have found that the idea of certain jewelry being for a man or a woman doesn't fit with many of our customers," she says. "We believe everyone should be able to wear jewelry that brings them joy, regardless of how others may label it."

YOUR TREND ANALYSIS

29 If women are bringing in Pinterest pictures to show you what they want, consider what these images say about trends in your locale. Observing the trends your customers want can help you bring fresh, exciting new pieces into your cases, says Alex Graham, Stuller's bridal director.

YOUR METAL

30 John Cauley of John Cauley Jewelers in Mobile, AL, has been excited to see many requests for yellow gold engagement rings. "I'm working hard to keep up with the younger market by creating non-traditional engagement rings per their request. I'm suddenly making about half of all engagement rings in yellow."

YOUR FAVORITE STORIES

31 The crew at Gerald Peters of Staten Island, NY, love hearing the creative, romantic and sometimes funny proposal stories newly engaged clients share with them so much, they decided to create a Perfect Proposal blog series online to give those stories a wider audience. It's turned into the most popular feature of their website, geraldpetersinc.com, and the store's Facebook page, too, amassing tens of thousands of clicks for each story. The clients who share their stories appreciate it as well, because they can easily be shared with family and friends.

YOUR ATTIRE

32 Make sure your style of dress matches your selling style, says Ken Nisch, chairman of JGA, who spoke at the inaugural Jewelers of America National Convention in July. If you have a side-by-side selling style and want to create an empathic environment, casual dress is best. If the wardrobe doesn't match the vibe, shoppers will notice the disconnect.

YOUR OMNI-CHANNEL MARKETING

33 Kim Hatchell of Galloway & Mosley recognizes the importance of social media to promote ring sales. "We are revamping our website with Punchmark's new platform, which will put even more options online. You have to reach them in every area, not wait for them to come to you."

YOUR GREEN CRED

34 McCoy Jewelers in Dubuque, IA, employs solar power and casts from vendors who supply them with 100 percent recycled gold. They also recycle street buys into casting grain. "That's made a difference not just in our image, but in our bottom line," says Jonathan McCoy.

YOUR RIDE

35 Joe Thacker, owner of Thacker Jewelry in Lubbock, treats engagement-ring customers not only to a bottle of wine, but also to a ride, to or from their wedding, in a chauffeured vintage 1963 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud.



Chelsea Mead orchestrated this surprise proposal for her engagement-ring clients.





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YOUR SERVICE DEPARTMENT

36 Don't call it a repair department. Service applies to a whole menu of possibilities, including restyling an heirloom into a reimagined engagement ring.

YOUR WOW FACTOR

37 "I've been to too many stores where when I ask about men's bands, they pull a tray out from underneath the counter or take me to the farthest corner of the store," says Alex Graham, Stuller's bridal director. "We just don't have the space for it," they say, "I get it. But that's doing a disservice to your bridal story. Believe it or not, the man wants a wow experience, too. Especially as more and more couples are shopping together, they want to share the entire experience together."

YOUR HONEYMOON SAVVY

38 Evan Duke of Classic Creations in Diamonds & Gold in Venice, FL, is working on teaming with a travel agency to offer honeymoon packages.

YOUR DETECTIVE SKILLS

39 Dianna Rae High of Dianna Rae Jewelry in Lafayette, LA, will check out Pinterest if a proposal-minded man needs some clues. Some young women start pinning their dream rings on the platform after their first date, High says, and Louisiana couples prefer

some element of surprise around the proposal process, even if they have discussed design ideas. It's a very rare couple in her market who come in together to make the actual purchase, even if the women have done some pre-shopping of their own.

YOUR LOANER RINGS

40 Balefire Goods provides "loaner" rings that customers can use to pop the question, allowing for the surprise of that special moment, but also ensuring that everyone can take part in the design process for artisan and custom engagement rings. Loaner rings can be solitaire style or bands since there is increasingly more diversity in couples and how they get engaged.



YOUR ELBOW ROOM

41 After purchasing a second store, Chad Elliott Coogan, owner of Gems of La Costa in Carlsbad, CA, was struck by how small the bridal area was. Over the course of a year, he expanded the bridal footprint from less than 10 percent to 20 percent, gradually replacing the alloy samples that came with the purchase of the store to live engagement rings and diamond semi-mounts ready to set and deliver. "In a rolling year over year comparison, bridal sale are up 53 percent with gross profits in that category up 62 percent," he reports.

READ THE EXPANDED STORY WITH AN ADDITIONAL 15 TIPS ONLINE AT instoremag.com/bridalbusiness!

