

cover



GETTING PERSONAL

Customized jewelry and personalized pieces have become the norm, but accommodating customers has created new creative and technological challenges.

By Lara EwEn

CUSTOMIZATION has been a part of the jewelry industry for decades, but until recently, most of the finer points of the custom designs were reserved for the most high-end work. Over the past decade, and particularly over the past few years, as customization has found its way into virtually every aspect of modern life, customers have increasingly sought to bring their own touches to the pieces they buy, especially when it comes to bridal purchases. That's proven to be both a challenge and an opportunity for retailers.

What Does "Custom" Mean?

Before beginning any conversation about custom, not only jewelers, but manufacturers and consumers need

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to be on the same page when it comes to defining what, exactly, "custom" means. "The jewelry industry is still confused about just what custom is and what it entails," says Gary Dawson, a Eugene, Oregon-based jeweler who designs custom handcrafted fine jewelry under the Gary Dawson Designs brand. "Yes, assembling commercial components or slightly modifying a basic design can be a form of customization, but to me, that's not the spirit of custom work. I see it as something that is specifically tailored to a client's desires. I think custom work takes on a more talismanic role for the people who have things made for them, and the industry at large will need to embrace that idea more fully, and figure out how to enable that experience for its clients."

For many retailers, customization on that level may not be practical. “I don’t think the goal for retailers is to offer infinite customization,” says Kathryn Money, vice president of strategy & merchandising for Brilliant Earth, an ethically sourced diamond bridal jewelry retailer that first opened online and has now expanded into six brick-and-mortar stores nationwide, with a seventh location planned for summer 2017. “It’s about offering selections that customers will gravitate toward that still reflect the brand. But you don’t want it to become overwhelming. You want to be able to guide the customer in a way that makes it a seamless and enjoyable process.” Rather than an industry focused exclusively on one-offs, Money says the current trend is a little less demanding. “It’s about personalization rather than infinite customization,” she says.

While most store owners agree that designing entirely from scratch is rare, today’s customer still wants to add her own touches. “Generally, we don’t do custom rings, but we customize rings,” says Tara Silberberg, owner of The Clay Pot, with two stores in New York City. “People want their rings to look special. They want what they want, and they want it to seem like it’s the only one of its kind. And they get to be part of the process and it gives them a feeling of control. These days, we hardly ever sell things right out of the case.”

How Has “Custom” Changed?

The idea of custom and personalized pieces isn’t new, but it’s taken on an increased importance in the consumer mind-set over the past few years — due in part to the demands of a generation of consumers who are used to getting exactly what they want. “I had customers asking to do custom pieces ten and 20 years ago when I was at Tiffany & Co., but it’s become more prominent in the past three to five years,” says Amy Geer, currently a California-based independent retail consultant, recently with retail consulting company RetailNext. “Today, people want to personalize everything from their homes to their cars, and of course, also jewelry. That’s especially true with engagement and high-end fine jewelry.” Geer, who worked as a director and sales manager for Tiffany & Co. for 13 years, says that the desire for custom rises from a culture that values having something that no one else has. “People want to do custom in a lot of aspects of their lives,” she says. “It makes them feel more exclusive and special.”

The trend is particularly important to younger customers. “Millennial customers are not shoppers in

the traditional sense,” says Silberberg. “They’re much more educated. They’re on Instagram and online, and they’re interested in telling a story and making that story public. And so they want custom because it’s tied to a story.”

Custom work is also more accessible to both consumers and retailers because of technological advances that have brought custom into the mainstream. “Customization has been around for a long time, but now technology has made it more feasible,” says Money. “It’s helped customers visualize a product with enhanced imagery and tools that help them get what they want.”

The ability to see an almost infinite array of options online has also pushed the trend forward. “I’ve seen a shift back to custom work in the past couple of years, in part because of the internet,” says Richard Lee Mathis, owner of Symmetry Jewelers in New Orleans,

Louisiana. “I’m not saying customers want custom just because of the internet, but they’re seeing a lot more artist pieces on the internet. And we can tell them to go online and do some research and come in with some styles they like, and save themselves some time, which also saves me some time.”

Challenges and Opportunities

Technology alone, however, isn’t enough to create a custom piece. That’s why some businesses have struggled to meet the consumer demands for personalized jewelry. Dawson says that smaller businesses might be better suited to the task. “In general, it is probably easier for smaller, independent operations to adapt to the increasing demand for custom,” he says. “Many smaller operations are already doing some form of custom, even if it only involves assembling commercial findings in unique ways. By the very nature of their size, larger business organizations tend to be slower to change.”

Mathis says that part of the problem larger businesses have with custom work is that so much of the burden falls on the staff, and larger stores may not have the time to adequately train salespeople in the necessary skills. “Chain stores have more staff turnover than small stores,” he says. “When you’re talking about true custom work, you have to have a sales staff that’s trained to use CounterSketch or some of the other 3-D design programs; and with some of the bigger stores, it’s hard.” Mathis says that a poorly trained staff makes the prospect of doing any custom work particularly challenging. “It can be confusing for consumers if they

come into an average store, because they might be a little intimidated,” he says. “That’s what happens when you go into Jared’s. They advertise custom work, but it’s ‘pick out a gemstone and add a head.’ It’s not real manipulation of the design, and you’re still limited as to what you can get.”

Money says that the challenges of custom are industry-wide. “All retailers, regardless of their size, have to think about how to ensure customers’ needs are met. And if you think about manufacturers, now, instead of doing batch processes, they have to do one-offs. And then retailers have to be able to give customers products that feel like their own.” The problem for manufacturers may become more pronounced, too, as fewer customers want to purchase items straight out of the case. “It’s been tough for manufacturers,” says Mathis. “At the big shows, traffic is down, and

eventually I think there will be fewer shows.”

Jeweler's Take on Custom

Jewelers who specialize in custom suggest that retailers and manufacturers may need to partner in new ways to satisfy consumer demand. “I don’t see that most retailers have the creative capacity to consistently design and craft interesting custom jewelry,” says

Cynthia Renée, designer of custom fine jewelry at Chapel Hill, North Carolina-based Cynthia Renée. “It’s time-consuming, and

Custom-made earrings by Cynthia Renée

can be worn multiple ways. The earrings the salesperson needs highly refined people skills and creative skills, and then retailers have to manage manufacturing and other existing jewelry pieces that were adapted by the designer to fit the earring components.



were created using sapphires selected by the client. The diamonds were from jewelry passed down by the client’s mother. The earrings have three interchangeable pieces: The floral top, the curved centerpiece and the sapphire drops. The pieces can be worn in different combinations and with

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profitability.” However, Renée says, there are ways to offset some of these issues. “Designers can respond, and help the retail jeweler by offering customizable designs,” she says.

Silberberg also says that retailers need to weigh the cost of custom against the amount of time it takes to order the goods. “If you source and get product overseas, you really can’t do custom,” she says. “You need to source in the U.S., but then the prices are high, and you can’t triple them. If you compare imported jewelry prices to the prices from Stuller, Stuller can get custom to you right away, but it’s expensive. But they will give it to you any way you want. And nobody is waiting four months for a wedding ring.” She also stresses that inventory is more difficult to manage when filling custom orders. “It’s a tough balancing act between inventory and stocking,” she says. “You want to have new things, but if you’re custom-ordering everything, then everything becomes samples, and you’re not ordering new things.”

As the options to customize increase, retailers will need to learn how to help consumers navigate an increasingly complex array of choices. “Technology will play a big role, via more enhanced imagery and visualization tools,” says Money. “Offering infinite customization is a challenge,” she says. “You have to find the right balance. Brands have to

design a setting and style that a customer both can get excited about and still put their personal mark on.”

One thing is clear, however. Custom is the new normal and the industry is no longer driving the trend. “The days of retailers getting to decide what sells are over,” says Silberberg. “The customers are in charge now, and they have as much information as retailers do. The information age has created a whole generation of people who will not be educated by salespeople in stores, because they’re already informed. So we have to embrace it.” ♦