

time to go solo

SPECIAL FEATURE

JEWELERS SHARE A VARIETY OF REASONS FOR DOING RETAIL ALONE

BY EILEEN McCLELLAND

It takes finesse to run a store solo — or nearly so — and avoid burnout.

But often, these entrepreneurial souls also find that having a true mom-and-pop store preserves their independence and sharpens their focus on what they love about the jewelry business. Mom-and-pops can thrive by responding to the changing tastes of their customers, offering a novel or exciting in-store experience and fostering a sense of neighborhood identity and camaraderie. A small footprint doesn't mean a limited imagination. And it means when change is called for, you can turn on a dime.

TAKE-AWAY recognize the power of organization

"The key is making everyone you're helping comfortable."
— **Greg Stopka**, *Jewel-Smiths, Pleasant Hill, CA*

Greg Stopka's career has been remarkable for its minimalism, both in inventory and in staff.

The key to making it work is organizing job flow in a business that is all about repairs, redesigns and custom work, with his only inventory being a smattering of alloy samples. The Edge software has kept him on track with its ability to report on jobs in progress. "We can kick out due dates that are upcoming and nothing falls through the cracks," Stopka says. "This kind of organization seems to work better with a smaller footprint." Google calendar keeps him on schedule for design appointments.

The size of his business operation has varied. "I was up to five stores at one time but that was years and years ago," Stopka says. "It required a lot of management skills. I like the footprint now, the smaller the better. There's more control and you can move on a dime. Less is more."

He also worked for years with little to no help. "When I started off it was just myself and my craftsman and you learn how to triage pretty fast when you have a bunch of balls in the air that you're juggling. I call it fast-track selling." The key is making everyone you're helping comfortable while trying to quickly help customers who don't need a lot of your time.

In recent years, he's found a sweet spot between those two extremes. He owns two small stores, each about 600 square feet. He manages one and his son manages the other. Each of them do have some help — a craftsman in the shop and an associate up front, where the key responsibility

is booking custom-design appointments. Many of those are conversions from simple repair visits. A big part of associates' training is triage.

Redesign is key for the business now, because it's hard to price shop. "It's built on emotion, when someone says 'I want to have Grandma's diamond and I want to have it restyled.' That works really really well."

Stopka compares selling virtual inventory to selling a movie studio on an idea for a film.

"Many people who work in jewelry stores seem to think that the more product they have, the more they're going to sell," Stopka observes. "But they lose that aspect of creating emotion through storytelling. Selling virtual inventory is like selling an idea. You really don't need to have something in your hands to sell it to a customer or to a prospect."

TAKE-AWAY take the time to tell the stories

"It's the choice we make to have the type of business we have." — **Robert Goodman**, *Robert Goodman Jewelers, Zionsville, IN*

When Robert Goodman was 16, his family's traditional jewelry retail business had 10 stores, all in malls.

The business he now owns with his wife, Rose-Marie, looks nothing like the one he grew up in.

"We had been successful, but we were in all the malls and we weren't willing to pay the pricing games that the malls required at that time," Goodman says. "We lost our identity because everyone in a mall was assumed to be a national."

"Closing that business was a function of not realizing what was going on and not changing our paradigm. Our time just came. And since I'm essentially not capable of doing

anything but selling jewelry, this was logical."

Robert Goodman Jewelers focuses on the work of small to medium independent designers and has two cases of watches and seven cases of jewelry. In recent years, they've also found a demand for sustainability and ethical metalsmithing. "It fits completely with our personal way of thinking," he says, and it helps them connect with younger customers.

Building relationships with small and medium-size designers is ideal for the Goodmans because they can take the time (that a salesperson at a chain operation wouldn't have) to explain sustainable design and tell the designers' stories.

It's an interesting way to run a business, he says, but it's not easy.

They're open six days a week. Those are 12-hour days for Robert, while Rose-Marie backs him up as her schedule allows. And vacations are few and far between.

Rose-Marie does the accounting; Robert handles inventory and is the lead salesperson. "We buy together, we make ad decisions together. Donations, contributions, we run by each other." They also collaborate to host art exhibits in the store.

"It works wonderfully on all levels," Goodman says. "It's the choice we make to have the type of business we have." Fortunately we haven't both had the flu at the same time!"

TAKE-AWAY don't be afraid to reinvent your business

"I knew when I would be busy and when I would not be busy." — **Michael Vesely**, *Kolman and Co., Pittsburgh*

Michael Vesely of Kolman and Co. had operated for years with a staff. At one point in the history of his



retail jewelry business, he had 22 employees.

Most of his staff was amazing, he says, but increasingly the business was fraught with problems ranging from employee drug use to theft. By 2007, the problems had snowballed to the point that he decided to phase out his staff completely and convert his business model to solo and by-appointment-only. "People just weren't the same any more. After 30 years with wonderful employees, all it takes is a few bad apples."

An appointment-only business guaranteed he could manage his schedule and make working alone feasible while cutting costs. "I knew when I would be busy and when I would not be busy," he says.

Prior to the change, he had spent \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year on advertising, but he doesn't see the need for it anymore. He stopped advertising completely, relying on word of mouth and free social-media posts.

He felt more secure, as well. Prior to the reinvention of his business model, he had had security incidents that he believed were tied to staff members. So he had his showroom built into a walk-in vault, which solved another big problem. He no longer had to set up and tear down the showroom day after day.

"One of my biggest pet peeves was that I had six people who did nothing but set up and tear down every day," he says. "Now, all I had to do was open the vault and walk in."

Although his business is largely custom engagement rings and wedding bands, he does carry inventory, a mix of bridal and fashion jewelry.

"The only downside is that when I'm out of town, I shut the business down," he says.

He's currently in another transition — downsizing his space. He sold his building late last year and is in the process of opening a smaller, 1,000-square-foot building equipped with a showroom and a living room style lounge.

"I enjoy my customers more than ever," he says. "I have almost zero headaches."

TAKE-AWAY learn to be flexible and land on your feet

"I don't have a boss other than my customers." — **Laura Pool**, *Laura's Jewelry Designs, St. Robert, MO*

For years, Laura Pool's business was almost like a pop-up shop. Because her husband was in the military, Pool — and her jewelry business — were on the move, with different incarnations of it appearing temporarily in Texas, Alabama, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Missouri.

It made her resilient and able to think creatively about business possibilities. And she got in the habit of working alone.

For the past 17 years though, she's owned and operated a small store in St. Robert, MO. Her co-worker is a somewhat demanding Jack Russell terrier named Cooper. Cooper is excited to get to work, but then he's often ready to call it a day and go home before she is.

She's chosen not to have a staff,

though, largely to avoid the small-town drama of it all. "I don't have a boss, other than my customers — and they're pretty bossy."

She is closed three days a week to keep up with custom design and repairs. She has a separate building where she keeps her polishing wheel and bench. "What I do takes time," she says. That sounds like an understatement. Her list of services mentioned on her website is long for a single proprietor, including watch battery replacement, engraving, appraisals, antique restoration, pearl and bead stringing and expert gold, platinum and sterling silver jewelry repair. She does it all.

When she's out of town — on a buying trip to Tucson, for example — she closes the store.

Sixty to 70 percent of St. Robert residents are associated with the military, aside from all of those who live on the post. So she's had to create her share of rushed engagement rings for young military guys who want to get engaged before they are deployed. Facebook marketing works for her, as well as radio and cable TV.

Pool was drawn to the jewelry world while earning a degree in interior design. She took a 3D design course, which included weaving, pottery and jewelry making. "I discovered that I had a knack for doing wax carving," she says. "That first piece came out of the mold, and I was hooked."

Then, when the couple was stationed in Pennsylvania, she got her master's degree in art metals. That experience taught her how to think out of the box when it came to jewelry design, something that has served her well over the years.

For more jewelers going it alone, see our online-extra at Instoremag.com.