

Round and Round

'Gemstone roundtables' are big business for custom designer'

FROM THE "CAMELOT" OF KING ARTHUR to that of President John F. Kennedy, the concept of the "Round Table" has always been a romantic notion.

In the late 1980's, some retail jewelers continued this tradition of romance with Gemstone Roundtables, a lucrative way to stimulate customer interest in colored stones and custom jewelry work. For T Lee, owner of T Lee Fine Designer Jewelry in Minneapolis, the Gemstone Roundtable has rapidly become her customers' favorite custom, bringing incremental growth to her colored stone inventory and sales while expanding custom jewelry design work.

For Lee, 90% of the people contacted for such events are those who have done custom work with her in the past. "This group of customers is more predisposed to doing custom work," she says. "From the Roundtable events, I have a 90% return from my first two events and 50% percent return rate for custom work for the last one."

One key ingredient is the special guest - a gem dealer who must not only be a good seller with a diverse inventory, but someone who also possesses an outgoing personality.

A month before the event, Lee and her staff make calls to a select group of customers. Eventually they confirm attendance with a core group of 15 people, with three to five people in reserve. A postcard is sent out a week before the event and a final reminder call is made the night before. "The confirmation process is key to the event's success as an empty chair can disrupt the circle's rhythm," Lee says.

On the day before the event, the gem dealer stops by the shop to prepare fresh gem parcel envelopes. Colored stones must have an event-specific parcel number. Lee also encourages the dealer to write details on the parcel paper that may pique interest in the stone, such as "the most vivid sample of a blue tourmaline ever seen."

Because the target audience is primarily a middle-aged, white-collar professional crowd,

Roundtables are usually scheduled after business hours at 6:30 PM on a Thursday, Friday or Saturday. Each event runs two-and-half hours, with the first two hours dedicated to reviewing parcels and placing dibs on desired goods. The last 30 minutes are reserved for closing sales.

No more than 15 people at a large table are suggested. Lee strongly suggest that owners avoid serving oily foods - instead, offer mainly bite-sized portions that can be eaten easily with toothpicks. Attendees will be using their hands and a gem cloth, not gem tweezers and a loupe, to inspect the many parcels.

As each parcel goes from the first chair to the last, attendees can place dibs on stones they like. Lee and her staff are always nearby, topping off wine glasses and serving food while writing down parcel number dibs from each customer. Calling dibs on a colored stone isn't a buying commitment, or as the Gemstone Roundtable mantra goes, "it's flirting, not marriage." Placing dibs on stones is always encouraged, even if the person has no intention of buying. "That's just playing the game well," says Lee.

As customers place dibs on desired stones, their position at the table gives them preferred buying status. If a particular gemstone has multiple bids on it, the person seated closest to the number-one chair to the gem dealer's right gets the stone. Some people buy all their stones, while others pare down to their top choices.

The buying portion of the two-and-half hour event eventually concludes in the final 30 minutes of the night as people buy up everything or purge choices that can go to a customer in a subsequent buying position. Customers often ask Lee how

they can get a better chair.

"It's simple ... buy some stones," she says.

At the end of the event, people naturally ask what to do with a loose stone. On occasion, Lee will do a counter sketch to clinch a sale that's wobbling, but not very often. "We prefer to get people back in the store for a consultation," she says. "To encourage people to do custom work with me, I'll give them 15% off, and on a rare occasion will allow a layaway. The important thing is getting them back in the store and talking about their jewelry and the event with other people."

Jewelry designer turned retail jeweler, Lee is currently gearing up for her fourth Gemstone Roundtable in March. She credits Christopher Jupp of Christopher's Fine Jewelry Design in Champaign, IL, with the concept that began over 18 years ago.

Lee's first Gemstone Roundtable didn't live up to expectations, but after attending one of Jupp's seminars on the subject at the AGTA Tucson Show in 2005, her events have been executed flawlessly with strong sales. (A similar free how-to Gemstone Roundtable seminar for retailers will be held at 9:00 AM and 1:00 PM on Friday, February 3 at the AGTA Tucson 2006 Show).

The Gemstone Roundtable begins with a retailer's colored stone inventory. Lee suggests displaying unique and rare colored stones befitting of custom work. "In my store, when people ask questions about an unusual colored stone they see in a display case, I tell them that the stone is in my personal collection and not for sale," Lee says. "But if they attend a special store educational event, they can learn more about that colored stone and other gems."

Throw in the possibility of owning that stone, and the seeds are planted. Excitement about the stone and the store event begins to build. But stimulating interest in color with people stopping by the store only makes up perhaps 10% of a potential Roundtable event phone list.

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