

When it comes to offering the best jewelry

mega stores

by Josh Wimmer

BIG DIAMONDS, BIG PLANS, BIG SALES — in the jewelry business, we like to think big. And the retailers we present in the following pages like to think MEGA big. While their stores differ in some ways, ranging from freestanding buildings to mall locations to independent chains, they have one, well, BIG thing in common: sheer square footage in the quintuple digits.

So is bigger necessarily better? On the one hand, these owners and execs do make it clear that size is no substitute for the fundamentals — excellent customer service, a commitment to your community, and solid business sense. On the other hand, even when pressed, few of them could come up with any real drawbacks to having a larger footprint, and none of them would con-

sider going back to a smaller store.

More than anything else, they say, more space means more jewelry means more opportunities to make sales. And though even the most mega of megastores might not be able to match the Internet for pure unlimited selection, with inventories in the tens of thousands of pieces, they can come close enough, especially since they have room for in-house services that make a difference, like bench jewelers and engravers. “There are simply tremendous benefits to having size,” says Susan Jacques, CEO of the 62,500-square-foot Borsheims in Omaha, NE, echoing everyone else we spoke to. “There are so many more positives than negatives.”



Steady as she grows

When Donnie Thompson started at Windsor Jewelers in 1978, it was tiny, with room for only four showcases. Ten years later, he bought the store from its owner, the A.A. Friedman chain. Ten years after that, he moved it to its current location, a two-story powerhouse across the way from the elite Augusta National Golf Club. Needless to say, the 10 years since then — which would bring us to today — have been very good to him and his team.

“We started at zero, and I guess in 15 years, we had probably beaten out most of the AGS stores, most of the chain stores,” Thompson says. “And we really plowed anything we made into inventory. It was about just having more merchandise and trying to shop as hard as we could, trying to get the best value we could for the customer.” That’s led to having a vastly larger inventory than most of his competitors, he says — and a proportionally higher client base, as well. “I consider us a regional store. We find that for about a 100-mile radius, people will look at other jewelry stores, but they usually want to look at us, too,” he says, then pauses, his Southern grace and humility kicking in. “I’m not saying we make every sale ... but we do make most of them.”

WHAT ADVANTAGES DOES YOUR SIZE GIVE YOU OVER SMALLER STORES?

Donnie Thompson: Everything, in my opinion, is an advantage. We have 20 to 30 times the amount of inventory of most stores. When customers come in, they don’t want to look at 50 engagement rings — 2,500 rings, that’s what we have. If they want to see a lot of platinum, we probably have 1,000 engagement rings just in platinum.

WHAT ABOUT STAFFING? IS THAT A CHALLENGE AT YOUR SIZE?

We have to make sure we’re open long hours, and that there’s coverage for that; and you have to make sure you have the right people here at the right time. You almost have to have a couple of managers, but that’s what we do. It’s never been complicated for us. If we see we’re out of something, we just pick up the phone and

we get it. We’re back to real simple retailing.

HOW ABOUT MERCHANDISING?

You’ve got customers coming in who want to spend \$100, and we try to have the best thing they can get for \$100. And we do that for every level and category. We probably have, say, 200 different styles of diamond crosses on hand.

IF ANOTHER JEWELER WERE ASKING YOUR ADVICE, WHEN WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THEY BUILD A MEGASTORE?

We talked to a lot of people who were doing this back in the ’90s. Everybody’s always scared. I don’t know that you ever have, in your own mind, the perfect time. But you move on and you don’t look back. We increased enough the first year we were in this building that we were able to pay for it, and it was a pretty expensive building. It comes down to: If you only buy one ring, how many rings can you sell? One.

HOW DO YOU HAVE A PARTY IN A STORE YOUR SIZE?

I feel like trunk shows are mostly for people who don’t have inventory. We’ve got a trunk show all the time.

WHAT’S YOUR BIGGEST PAIN IN THE NECK RUNNING A STORE THAT’S SO LARGE?

Computers. We switched to a new system recently, and we’ve been like a guinea pig. It’s kind of ridiculous — we run a jewelry store, but keeping the computers running is our biggest problem. We can’t seem to go 48 hours without something going down, and we spend a fortune on them.

IF YOU HAD TO GO BACK TO A SMALLER STORE, WHAT’S THE SINGLE BIGGEST THING YOU’D MISS ABOUT YOUR CURRENT SIZE?

You’d miss not having what you need when you need it. We can wait on a customer much faster than they could go online and hunt down what they want. You can come in here, try it on, make sure it looks right, and go. And people will always pick that over looking at a picture online or in a catalog.



WINDSOR JEWELERS

Windsor Jewelers

Augusta, GA
www.windsorjewelers.net

YEAR FOUNDED
1978

OPENED CURRENT LOCATION
October 1998

TOTAL AREA
13,000 square feet

SHOWROOM AREA
6,500 square feet

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES
50

DATE OF LAST EXPANSION
October 1998

COST OF LAST EXPANSION
Not provided