

Top Priority

Tips for selling to independent retailers

ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO, WHILE MY children were still children, I was running a 500-employee corporation experiencing dramatic change. Needless to say, I was busy. My kids were among the earliest youngsters to receive flip phones because I wanted them to be able to contact me no matter what I was doing. However, I quickly got in the habit of answering the phone like this: "Hi! Is anybody bleeding?"

My co-workers thought it was funny, but it worked. Pre-teens and teenagers just don't have the same priorities their parents do, so I developed a method that established priorities very quickly.

If you produce and sell jewelry, you've experienced the other side of this conversation already. Only, the retailer doesn't answer the phone asking about blood-

shed. Instead, they tell you they'll call back, or ask you to call back next Wednesday between 8:22 and 8:27 a.m. Mountain Time. Or they don't answer at all. You're trying to figure out how to get your line in their store, and they're establishing priorities and setting boundaries.

Carrying jewelry their consumers want should also be a priority. So how do you help them see that you are part of their priorities? I won't lie—it's not easy. There are many ways to sell to retailers: trade shows, social media, trade magazines, digital advertising, e-mail campaigns—all of these are important elements of your selling and marketing mix. But in today's highly competitive environment, you could probably use a few new ideas to improve your success rate.

START WITH CLEAR GOALS

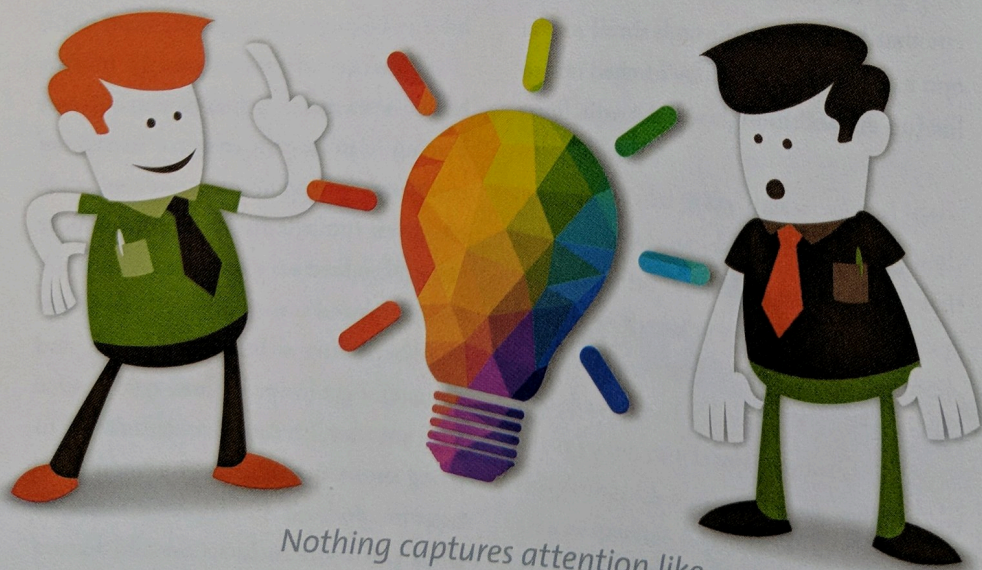
Not every retailer is right for your line, and your line is not right for every retailer. Don't even start selling until you create a list of the retailers you think are a perfect fit. This means research! Sales research was once an expensive endeavor, but today, with websites, Google Maps, and online review systems such as Yelp, you can gather tremendous insight about retailers without ever leaving your studio.

Create a list of 50 retailers that are must-have clients for your business. Focus on getting into a relationship with them. Visit their stores if you're in their area of the country, follow them on social media, comment on their online posts, and make every effort to meet them at industry events. This kind of relationship-building effort has the most reliable payoff of all the possible selling activities.

STAND OUT FROM THE REST

The easiest way to get the attention of a retail buyer is to offer something nobody else is offering. Retailers are bombarded with product options—most of them are vaguely similar. That makes the decision-making process harder because it forces them to compare and contrast vendors and products, trying to differentiate on small price variances or perceived differences in service levels.

Don't put yourself into that pile. Lead with a product that simply isn't like what



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anyone else has to offer. Once you have their attention, you can show them the rest of your line. But nothing captures attention like something new and unique.

OFFER AN INCENTIVE

Time most certainly is money. So incentivize their time. Lead with, "I know you're busy. But if you'll give me 20 minutes of your time, I'll send you a gift card for Starbucks coffee for two." This shows that you recognize that their time is worth something, and you're willing to compensate for it.

Sellers are often offended when I suggest this approach. After all, isn't it the jewelry store buyer's job to consider and buy jewelry for the store? Sure it is. But that doesn't mean they will feel compelled to point their time and energy in your direction. Offering an incentive is one way to say, "Hey, I value your time too. I'm a great partner that way."

GET THEM IMMERSSED

Many of my clients use Look Boxes as a sales tool. Picture this: A box, carefully staged to display all your jewelry once the box is opened and the protective padding is lifted off, with labels featuring product details and wholesale prices. Inside the package is also a return label for shipping, and promotional materials that encourage the buyer to take out the jewelry, try it on, and show it to customers.

The best Look Boxes are thoughtfully developed to be visual and experiential displays that also unpack, repack, and transport efficiently and safely. You need to get enough of the retailer's attention to say, "Hey, I'd like to talk to you about my

line. But first, I'd like to ship a sampling of my collection to you—postage-free both ways—and you can examine and handle the jewelry yourself. Then, I'd like 20 minutes of your time to discuss the collection and see if it's a good fit with your store." The experience is far more informative than a website or catalog, and retailers tend to respond well to this approach.

POP IN WHEN YOU CAN

I know several designers who have cut back on (or eliminated) trade shows and use that money to travel to retail jewelers instead. When you tell a retailer, "Getting your business is a high priority for

me. I'd like to buy an airplane ticket, get a hotel room, and come visit you," they know you're serious.

One time, after answering the phone with my trademark, "Is anybody bleeding?" a business associate asked me if that greeting offended my children. I said no. My kids understood that priorities are a part of life. That's all retailers are doing when they shut you out. Once you understand that it's about them and their priorities—and not about you and your line—it's much easier to set the feelings aside and focus on the real question: How do I make taking my call a priority for a retailer? Answer that, and you're golden. ♦



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