

# Seek and Find

*Tips for finding and reaching your core customers*

## CONSIDERING HOW MY CAREER

ended up, I was surprisingly un-entrepreneurial as a child. But I remember one summer when I was obsessed with my lemonade stand. I wasn't particularly good at figuring out my labor or raw material costs, but I was very keen to understand where to put the stand to get enough traffic that I could be entertained while engaged in beverage sales. Our street was not particularly well trafficked so over the course of the summer I moved my stand closer and closer to the community pool, eventually figuring out which street offered the most walking traffic, and where on that street I could park my venture without getting in trouble.

At the MJSA Expo in March, I worked the Designer Collaborative "advice booth" with Marlene Richey. The question we an-

swered most was *how do I find customers?*

The short answer? You don't need all the customers, you just need the right customers. So find the audience that your products and services most resonate with, and then figure out the best path to reach them.

Of course, the short answer begs a longer explanation.

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE CUSTOMERS GONE?

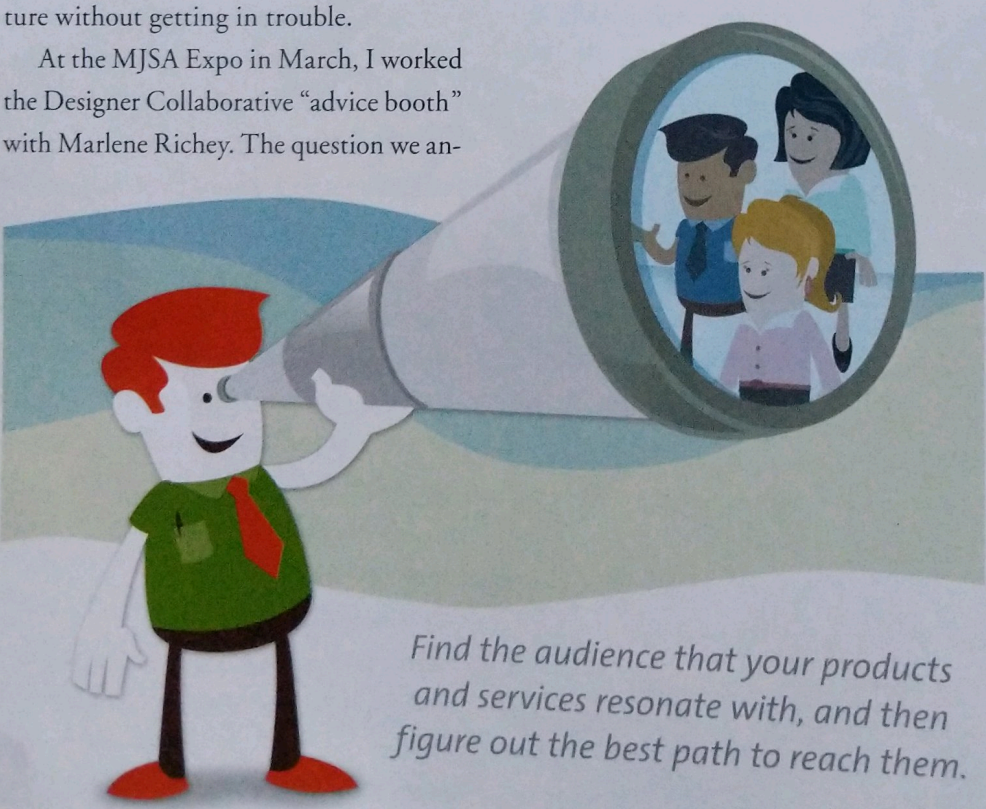
In the past three to four decades, the best ways to reach consumers was through independent jewelry retailers, chain jewelry retailers, and (for jewelry designers)

through craft shows and art fairs. Until 10 to 12 years ago, sales reps and showrooms also offered a distribution path.

Let's start with the reps. There are so few reps visiting jewelry stores and carrying lines today that most brands can't find one, even after seeking and advertising for years. Where have all the reps gone? Most of them have retired, without a younger generation of reps to replace them. Concerns for safety and security, sluggish purchase activity at retail that made it hard to make a living, and the internet all conspired to kill the jewelry sales rep. As the reps of yesteryear took to working trade shows to meet with their customers, there grew a perception that trade shows were an adequate replacement for on-the-road activity.

So let's talk about trade shows. Highly focused trade shows that sell finished goods to jewelry specialty retailers continue to offer reasonable ROI for smaller jewelry producers. But the large shows have all become so expensive that it is extremely difficult for a smaller jewelry producer to make a reasonable ROI. There are two reasons for this: First, costs of trade shows have skyrocketed, and second, retailers walking trade shows are generally not shopping.

Why aren't the trade show shoppers shopping? Because retail is struggling with the changing market conditions and expectations driven by consumer commit-



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ment to digital. Websites, social media, digital advertising, and e-mail marketing dominate consumer mind-share, and retail businesses that don't have the digital footprint to generate foot traffic simply don't have the sales volume to buy new jewelry at shows.

### START WITH YOUR SELLING PROPOSITION

So what's a small jewelry business to do? Your first step has little to do with marketing, and everything to do with business planning. You need to know—at the cellular level—the answers to these questions:

- Who are we?
- What do we do that makes us different?
- Why do we matter?
- To whom do we matter?

If you don't know the answers to those questions—or if your answer isn't compelling to some definable audience—then finding your consumer will be next to impossible. But if you know those answers, you can figure out how to tell the story of your brand, and you can figure out to whom you should tell it.

### FIND YOUR CORE CUSTOMERS

Analyze your current customer list and look for common themes in your best customer segment. Pay attention to who responds most readily on social media, and analyze what traits they share. Consider every type of categorization: age, gender, geographic location, interests, social types, values, communities they belong to, education level—all these categorizations could point you in the direc-

tion of a shared theme among your target customers. Be curious, be tenacious, and look at your customer and prospect data in as many different ways as you can until you start developing a profile of your target customer.

Consider hiring a college intern in a marketing program to do this analysis for you, for credit. If you have the budget, you can hire a market research firm to collect and analyze your data or conduct focus groups for you.

### FIND A WAY TO REACH THEM

Once you know who your target consumer is, you can figure out how to reach them. That may be through a select

group of independent retailers, it may be through a different retail channel entirely, or it could be direct-selling through your website and other digital channels. Once you know the "who," you can figure out the "how."

This is where you hit the "oh, wow, everything has changed" wall. Jewelry selling used to be geography-centric; each community had one or more jewelry stores, and the people in the community largely bought from their jewelry store. Today, jewelry is sold all over the globe, and the average consumer in the middle of Kansas can easily buy from a jewelry seller in Florida, Oregon, or Spain.

So simply targeting "independent re-



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## BUSINESS STRATEGIES

tail jewelers" may be insufficient. In addition, the jewelry retailers are struggling, so their open-to-buy (cash available to buy new inventory) is very limited. If you have a sharply priced line that appeals to a broad base of consumers, then trade shows may still be the way to go—particularly if you can finance your retailers with generous terms.

You'll be better off if you can identify a subset of retailers, a category or type that is likely to do well with your line. Maybe your line does well in college towns, or appeals to consumers likely to buy fine art. With that kind of segmentation, you can develop a targeted list of retailers and sell to them directly using a

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combination of e-mail, phone calls, postcards, and look boxes.

With better customer knowledge you can also do a better job of targeting craft or art shows, festivals, or special interest audiences, such as cruise ships, vacation spots, or holiday markets. And because you've done the work of figuring out who you are and to whom you appeal, you'll have a better chance of creating messaging and a voice that works well in e-mail advertising, on website pages, and

through social media.

In some ways, very little has changed. Advertising has always been about figuring out who your audience is and how to reach them. Today there are more channels, and many of those channels require some digital skills, but the underlying requirements are the same. In my childhood, I discovered a strong link between lemonade and swimming pool traffic. What will your customer link be? ♦

## Discover the right insurance coverage for the jewelry making and selling profession.

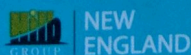
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