

Baby Steps

Becoming more responsible, one step at a time

WHEN MY DAUGHTER WAS ABOUT

seven years old, she asked me, "Mom, how do you know when you're an all-the-way adult?" I told her I wasn't sure because every time I thought I was all grown up, I learned something else I needed to know about being all grown up. I remember the look on her face as she processed my answer. It was a look that said, "Well, if you don't know when you're grown up, how will I know when I am?"

I see that look on a lot of jewelry business owners' and managers' faces these days when we talk about responsibility, sustainability, and how to create more transparent jewelry supply chains. It's a look that says, "What is the goal, what are the milestones along the way, and how will I know when I'm there?" Rather

than feel overwhelmed, let's take a look at the steps you can take to make setting a goal and then achieving it more manageable.

WHAT'S THE GOAL?

It's much easier to achieve something if you have a specific goal in mind. The challenge with being a responsible business is that there are so many possible goals, and if you set all of them, you're likely to get overwhelmed and then quit trying. I think it's more important for you to ask, "What's my goal?" Define what is important to you. Are you concerned about safe mining practices? Child labor? Treatment of women? Education? Mercury? The environment? Global warming? Yes, you're probably concerned about

all those things, but if you think about it for a few minutes, you'll discover that they have different weights and priorities for you.

Once you know the relative value of each of these issues to you, you are ready to begin. Be clear about your values. When faced with the values of others, new problems and tragedies, or new crusades, it's easy to jump in and start doing a little bit of everything. But that's neither satisfying nor impactful.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

If you stopped eating beef entirely, you could save approximately 3,150 trees per year. For some people, that fact alone is sufficient to end their beef-eating habits. But for most of us, that choice is too big. On the other hand, going meat-free one day per week is very doable. And many people who start going meat-free one day per week find they are more than willing to extend that to two days per week. This incremental approach is the essence of progress.

There's no guideline regarding how much is enough when it comes to business responsibility, so don't approach it that way. Instead, develop a list of things you can do to make your business activities, supply chains, and manufacturing operations more responsible than they are today. Here's the pattern:

1. Add a new responsibility practice.



2. Practice it diligently for 90 days—long enough to turn it into a habit.

3. Repeat.

As long as you keep adding new practices and pay adequate attention to sustaining each one, your business will become increasingly responsible.

IT'S NOT ALL-OR-NOTHING

When you do the work of figuring out your values, you'll find that some things are nonnegotiable, and others are less rigid. In your responsibility self-assessment, you may find that child labor is a huge issue for you and you're not willing to do business with anyone who won't clearly guarantee that no child labor is involved. But you may not feel as strongly about whether or not workers have collective bargaining rights. You may discover that you are extremely concerned about both the use of mercury in mines and deforestation, but you decide that you can't tackle everything, so you choose to focus on only one of them for the moment.

Many jewelry businesses worry about how to explain this to customers. They assume that if they can't say every aspect of their business is fully responsible, then they shouldn't talk about it at all. But that's setting too high a bar and giving yourself an excuse or an out at the same time. You may have a safe full of colored gemstones with unknown origins and back stories. Be honest about those. But for the customer who cares about the history and practices behind their jewelry, have options to show them and support for your claims. Instead of waiting until you can hang the "responsibility banner" over your entire business, take

pride in hanging a small sign over one collection or one practice at a time.

Your values aren't one-size-fits-all, and neither are those of your customers. Just as grocery stores offer gluten-free, organic, locally sourced, and low-carb options, jewelry businesses need to be cognizant of consumer concerns with species protection, reforestation, human rights, and global warming. While it's important that we find a way to address all these issues, these big problems aren't going to be solved overnight. It's more important to start somewhere, than to not start at all.

My daughter, who is now in her mid-30s, recently asked me, "So, if I asked you

the same question today, what would you say?" And now, I know the answer: "Being an adult isn't about reaching a specific goalpost or age. It's not measurable. So what I look at is if I am a little more adult each day than I was the day before." That's good advice for building a responsible business, too. If each day you are a little more responsible than you were the day before, you're on the right track.

Wondering about how to take those first steps toward responsibility? Join Andrea Hill and other like-minded industry peers Oct. 25-26 at the Chicago Responsible Jewelry Conference (responsiblejewelryconference.com). ♦

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