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Successful sales: Finding your customers' comfort zone

by Kymberly Zabawa

A potential customer browsing your jewelry store's display stops in front of the colored stone counter. She squints at a stunning trillion cut tanzanite ring and then looks at you perplexed: "Is it true that tanzanite's not durable enough for rings?"

This is your cue as a salesperson to use your gemological expertise to educate your customers, and help them to feel comfortable rather than bewildered or put off, said gem dealer, jewelry designer and educator Cynthia Marcusson, owner of Cynthia Renee Co. in Fallbrook, California. The key to finding your customers' comfort zone is in your response.

The number one objective when selling colored stones is to make customers feel comfortable by answering their questions in a simple, direct and warm manner, said Marcusson, who spoke to the San Diego GIA Alumni and Associates chapter last fall.



Once a salesperson starts practicing answers to consumers' colored stone questions, the responses become a lifeboat for achieving the sale, said Marcusson. Photo courtesy of Cynthia Renee Co.

"It's imperative that the salesperson is able to answer basic questions with confidence because consumers feel and respect that confidence," said Marcusson. "But most importantly do not flinch or answer their questions with a question in your voice. This ultimately creates distrust in the customer."

Therefore, Marcusson said the most proactive response to the customer's question about tanzanite's durability is: "Tanzanite makes a beautiful ring but like emerald or opal, one has to take a little more care when enjoying it in a ring. There is a difference between hardness and durability. Tanzanite is as hard as other more durable gems, but is susceptible to thermal shock, meaning it can crack when heat is applied quickly. Don't wear your tanzanite ring in the kitchen where hot water and steam are typical. In fact, if you take all your jewelry off at home, it will last to be passed through the generations."

Here, according to Marcusson, you have responded to the customer in an accurate, truthful way that helps them understand. However, this is not the time to display your dazzling knowledge about colored gemstones. The customer will be overwhelmed with that information.

"This is a time to help the consumer feel comfortable. Try

not to answer in a way that may make them feel that they asked a 'stupid' question," Marcusson said. "Key into what seems to make them comfortable by informing them about the aspects of the stone they are interested in. This is their comfort zone. Be it romance, science, or fashion they want to hear about—just make sure to answer with finesse."

Answering customer questions with grace and élan requires continual practice, Marcusson said. She suggests salespeople pick a subject for oneself (or for the whole store if the salesperson is training others) to become proficient within a seven- to 10-day period and to practice the new knowledge on the sales floor and work it into their repertoire. She said it is also important to have a gemstone reference book handy to look up specific topics along with the customer.

Not only is it important to intellectually understand the answers, but it is vital to practice your answers out loud. If you're in a group, Marcusson suggested role playing to work the techniques into your sales repertoire by creating an environment for constructive criticism.

"Once you start practicing, you begin to pick key words and key phrases that start you off while talking with a customer. This technique becomes a lifeboat for achieving the sale," Marcusson said.

As guidelines for attendees of the sales training seminars she holds at her customers' stores, Marcusson has pinpointed the most popular colored stone questions asked by consumers, grouped them into 10 categories and produced key points for each category to help salespeople answer questions with grace and enthusiasm.

Following are some examples of frequently asked questions and responses that hit customers in their comfort zones.

Color Preferences

Q. Is it true the darker the stone, the better?

A. To a point. It's like turning the contrast control on your television. Darker makes for a clearer picture until it becomes too dark and eventually unrecognizable.

Clarity

Q. Why is there "stuff" in this red tourmaline and not in the green?

A. Due to the geology of the gem deposit and crystal chemistry, red and pink tourmalines are rarely found without

inclusions, and green tourmaline is typically eye-clean. It is not known exactly why this is. Like the Bermuda Triangle, it is one of nature's mysteries.

Color and Size

Q. Can I get a two-carat tanzanite the color of this 10-carat one?

A. Think of the ocean. A cupful of seawater is much lighter than the whole sea, isn't it? The mass of the sea concentrates the dark color. I'll get you the finest color two-carat tanzanite I can, but it won't exactly match this fine larger one.

Pricing

Q. Why is this so expensive? It's a garnet.

A. Many people think of garnet as a small, dark, cheap gem found in Granny's boring jewelry. Garnet can be very inexpensive, but in the larger sizes and with the addition of pinks and purples, the price increases.

Gem Species

Q. What's the difference between morganite and pink ice?

A. "Pink Ice" is the marketing term for a man-made cubic zirconia, which does not occur in nature. There is a mineral called beryl, like the woman's name. Green beryl is emerald, blue beryl is aquamarine, and pink beryl is called morganite, after J.P. Morgan, the noted American financier. Morganite is a natural rarity; pink ice is made in a laboratory crucible.

Durability

Q. Is tanzanite durable enough for rings?

A. Tanzanite makes a beautiful ring, but like emerald or opal, one has to take a little more care when enjoying it in a ring. Behave as you do when wearing a nice silk blouse: Pay extra attention to your actions, but enjoy wearing it at the same time. Ring design also plays a part in your enjoyment of tanzanite; some designs provide more protection than others.

Cutting

Q. So, I don't want any gems with windows?

A. I try to get the most perfectly cut gems possible. But, I have to operate within the constraints of what is found in the market. Sometimes it is realistic to have perfectly cut gems; other times it is not. Most gems are from Third World countries and cut under conditions different from Western technological standards. When these gems are very rare and/or valuable, sometimes we have to overlook slight cutting irregularities.

Origin

Q. Where do these stones come from?

A. Sometimes we can track the origin of the gem with certainty. Other times, gems in their rough form are sent to cutting centers where they are cut and redistributed according to quality. Colors and internal characteristics are indicative of certain local-

ities, but we can't always be certain.

Treatments

Q. What about stones being treated?

A. No gems, whether colored, diamond or pearl, come out in their natural state looking as they do in a piece of jewelry. Faceting gems is part of the enhancing treatment that goes into bringing unformed gems to market standards. Sometimes we go a bit

further with this fashioning process and subject the gem to heating, irradiation or other permanent color enhancement techniques.

Have you ever seen a red sheep, white fox, or a purple cow? I haven't either, yet we consider crimson wool, white linen and blue suede to be natural materials. For centuries, gemstones have been processed in bringing them to the jeweler. It's when these treatment processes are used in misrepresenting a gem that they are considered fraudulent.

Sapphires have been heated since Marco Polo's time. If we didn't heat sapphires, there would be very few available and their prices prohibitive.

Synthetics

Q. You mean you can't tell a real gem from synthetic by just looking at it?

A. This is a tremendously complicated issue and is getting more so by the day. I wouldn't believe anyone who said they can give you a definite answer through sight alone. Even the most experienced gem dealer can be fooled.

What people are really looking for is guidance when asking a question. As a salesperson you must use your intuition about how much information to give. Whereas some customers like to hear technical information, others may want to know about romance. ♦



It is important to help customers feel relaxed when answering their colored gemstone questions by keying in on what makes them comfortable, said Cynthia Marcusson, owner of Cynthia Renee Co. Photo courtesy of Cynthia Renee Co.



Cynthia Marcusson provides jewelers with creative combinations of fine colored gems, artistic jewelry design, marketing expertise and intensive training seminars through her company Cynthia Renee Co., formed by Marcusson in 1990. Marcusson writes and speaks on various aspects of successfully marketing colored gems and has written articles for JQ Magazine, Rapaport Diamond Report and Jeweler's Circular-Keystone. In 1999, Marcusson will be featured in seminars for the AGS conclave and the JCK Show-Las Vegas.



Editor's Note: In Focus is offering \$25 for every jewelry retail selling tip we publish. Please submit your tips along with your name, title, name of your jewelry store and contact information to GIA, In Focus Retail Tips, Kimberly Zabawa, 5345 Armada Drive, Carlsbad, California, 92008 or call (760)603-4137.