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# People pleasing

Custom design is more than just a pretty sketch

By Llyn L. Strelau

**I**'m in the business of making people happy. Most of the time, I'm quite successful at it. All it takes is good listening skills and keeping the lines of communication open. Sounds like the foundation for a healthy relationship, and in some very important ways, custom designing jewellery is simply that: a relationship between designer and client.

In my 36 years creating custom designs, it's become pretty clear to me the process is not just about turning molten metal into a ring or re-working an outdated piece to suit a more modern wearer. Most of the time, it's an exercise in picking up nuances of a client's personality and creating jewellery that mirrors those characteristics. It's part psychological profiling, part information gathering. In the end, it should all come together in the form of jewellery with which the client is happy. When it does, there's no better feeling a jeweller can have. When it doesn't, well... we'll get to that.

### Setting the groundwork

First, let's define what I mean by custom design. Purists would say a custom design must be new and one-of-a-kind, stemming from an initial discussion with the client, preliminary sketches, a beautiful render, wax, or metal model, and finally the fabrication of a unique piece never to be repeated.

More often, custom design is the modification or adaptation of an existing piece or previous design newly tailored to the client's specific requirements. Further down the scale, and perhaps not truly custom design in its best definition, is the use of catalogue semi-mounts or components that are assembled or modified to suit the customer's taste or style.



Custom-designed ring with tanzanite, a Canadian diamond, and accented with a row of brilliant-cut diamonds. Set in 19-karat white and 18-karat yellow gold. By Andrew Costen, Costen Catbalue Goldsmiths & Design.



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18-karat gold pendant by The Goldsmiths with a one-carat natural chocolate brown diamond, natural diamond beads, and pavé-set with treated yellow diamonds. >>

In my shop, the bottom line is to give the client what they want (even if they don't yet know what that is). To do so, I use many tools, techniques, and methods to determine the most efficient and creative path to accomplish my goal. When working with some clients, it is actually possible to go directly from the proverbial rough pencil sketch on a napkin to the finished piece, but typically, there are a few more steps in the process.

First, it's important to make the client feel special, even if the job isn't that challenging or particularly interesting for you as a designer. I usually make an appointment with the client so I can devote my full attention to him or her and be completely engaged in their project. Remember that to the client, this piece is important enough to warrant investing time and energy into creating a custom design—picking a finished piece out of a showcase from among dozens of styles simply will not do. When all is said and done, a happy client is your best advertisement for additional commissions from family and friends. While the client may be content with a simple re-mount on this occasion, your shared enthusiasm will encourage them to return for future commissions.

Determine a rough budget early in the discussion to avoid over-working the design and causing potential embarrassment for the client, not to mention extra work and expense for your shop. It is easy to get caught up in the creative process only to find the client's budget does not match your brilliant design.

It is also useful to find out how a new client came to be your customer. If a contented existing client referred them, it can give you insight into his or her expectations. For example, they may have admired the style of their friend's new ring, share a common social circle with them, or were simply told how wonderfully creative your work is. This information can start the conversational ball rolling and help you get to know the new client.

Do not be afraid to charge for custom design. Explain to the client there is a premium to be paid for a designer's expertise and creative skills; a custom piece will naturally be priced higher than a mass-produced piece from your showcase or a design cobbled together from purchased components. Some designers charge a flat, non-refundable design fee up front. Others charge a design fee, but later apply it to the final cost of the piece if the client commissions it. This can help recover your cost of time should the client decide not to proceed with the job. I have always found it difficult to work this way and instead build my design time into the margins used to price the individual job. Some projects take up a greater amount of your time and energy, while others evolve more rapidly. I find they tend to balance out overall and my input as designer is accounted for. Again, communication is important—gauge the client's sincerity from the beginning to avoid dedicating time to a project for which you will not be paid.

### Getting personal

Jewellery is such a personal thing and more often than not, I find the relationship I form with a client can become quite close. This helps immensely in the design process; once a customer feels a connection with a designer and vice versa, it can be quite easy to gain insight into their character and lifestyle that will help greatly to personalize a design. Over time, repeat clients can become good friends, making the process of designing jewellery for them easier with every commission.

All designers of custom jewellery have a unique style and consistent general themes to their work. Since custom design is a dialogue between the designer and the client, effective communication is paramount. While some clients will quickly connect with you, your style, and approach, others simply don't. If you and a client don't 'click,' you may want to consider introducing him or her to another designer in your



18-karat yellow and white gold ring by Moda Anto, with 17.29-carat cushion-cut citrine and micro-set diamonds (1.65 ctw).

shop with whom they may be more compatible. While I hate to lose a client, it is occasionally in the best interest of all concerned to go your separate ways. If you know you can't make the client happy, quit while you're both ahead. You could also recommend them to one of your respected competitors whose style might be compatible.

In my experience, it's often best to suggest, direct, and encourage a design, rather than force one. Keep in mind clients typically have varied levels of experience with the custom design process. Understandably, if it is their first time, there will be a certain level of wariness, which usually takes the form of statements like, "What if I don't like the finished piece?" or "I don't know what I want, but I will know it when I see it." You can cajole and explain why a design should be done a certain way, but remember to gauge the client's response to ensure they understand you.

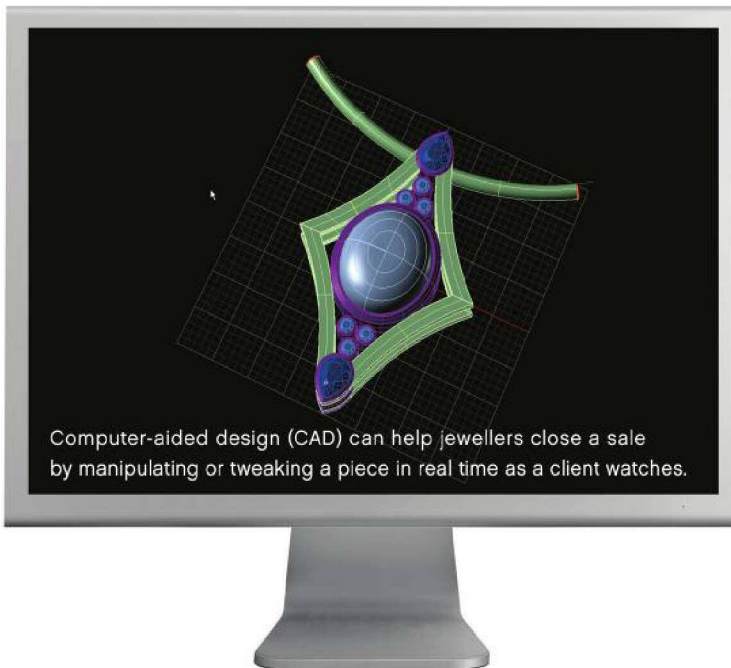
After the initial meeting with the client, some designers will simply present a selection of designs from which to choose. I prefer to develop the design through dialogue to reach a final piece. Of course, as designers and goldsmiths, we have an understanding of craftsmanship and restrictions of materials or techniques a layperson does not possess. To them, a design might look good on paper, but that doesn't necessarily mean it can or should

be built. It is our job to share this knowledge with clients, educating and explaining why a piece should be made a certain way and how it will stand up to wear and tear. Also, remember that levels of perception are not equal; some clients have the ability to visualize a finished 3-D object from a simple pencil sketch, while at the other end of the spectrum, there are those who can look at a finished ring in white gold, but are unable to visualize the same piece in yellow.

While the process will need to be tailored to individual clients, use as many techniques and tools as possible to get your message across. I usually begin with a simple pencil sketch to get the creative juices flowing and to start off the dialogue with the client. I find it very important that the initial sketches are life-size to establish scale and proportion. You may need to expand some details with larger drawings, but proportions tend to be distorted if the sketch is larger than life. When working with gemstones, placing the actual gems (even simulated stones will work for this purpose) on the sketch can be a useful visualization tool, although creating a 3-D model out of paper, cardboard, wax, or even a piece of silver sheet or wire also gets the message across. To help approximate the finished piece, I often use 'Blu-Tack' to stick gemstones on paper, wax, or metal model, creating an 'instant' ring the client can place on their finger. The same material can be used to briefly attach a gemstone or model to the client's neck or ear.

### Going high-tech

One tool that has become standard in our shop is computer-aided design (CAD) software, which allows the designer to create virtual jewellery onscreen and manipulate or tweak it in real time. If your CAD skills are up to it, you may do this interactively with the client present or you may wish to have them return to view a photo-realistic rendering at a later date. I find showing the customer a colour rendering can help close the sale, as they are able to see the finished piece from every angle. CAD also makes it easy to play with different colour, size, and shape combinations of metals and gemstones.



If you have the skill and the right software, you can use a tablet computer like an iPad to great advantage. Imagine photographing the client's hand, ear, or neck and superimposing a full-colour rendering of the new design on the image. It's the next best thing to 'being there' and takes virtual jewellery to the next level.

To help ensure the client is satisfied with the finished piece, I usually encourage him or her to return several times to view it or have fittings. It is far easier to make changes during the creation process than to risk finishing the piece only to find it is not quite what he or she had imagined.

Personally, I find the most satisfying experience is when the client picks up the finished piece and their eyes light up. If the dialogue between designer and client has been successful, there is nothing more rewarding for both of you.

While I admit I've had the opposite reaction, looking back, it was most often due to a breakdown in communication and taking for granted the client truly understood my concept. Having the client fully engaged during the process can avoid these surprises. Very often, it only takes slight modifications to satisfy the client, even in the final stages of creation. Fortunately in the last 25 years, I can count on one hand the number of times I have either had to re-make a piece from scratch or simply admit I was unable to satisfy the client. In these rare instances, it is best to cut your losses by refunding the deposit and adding the piece to your inventory. It will eventually sell to another, more appreciative client and you will recoup your expense. Insisting that a client is 'stuck' with jewellery with which they are unhappy only results in negative advertising in the long run.

Collaborating with clients to create custom jewellery can be one of the most satisfying aspects to our industry. When a client receives glowing praise from family and friends (and even complete strangers) about their new piece of jewellery, their response usually runs along the lines of, "Thank you. My personal jeweller designed this piece just for me." This kind of advertising is priceless. ✧



'Moby Pin' by Llyn L. Strelau featuring a natural multicoloured Chinese freshwater pearl set in 19-karat white gold, with accent white diamond and demantoid garnet.

*Llyn L. Strelau is the owner of Jewels by Design, a designer-goldsmith studio in Calgary established in 1984. His firm specializes in custom jewellery design for a local and international clientele. Strelau has received numerous design awards, including the American Gem Trade Association's (AGTA's) Spectrum Awards and De Beers' Beyond Tradition—A Celebration of Canadian Craft. His work has also been published in Masters: Gemstones, Major Works by Leading Jewelers. Strelau can be reached via e-mail at [designer@jewelsbydesign.com](mailto:designer@jewelsbydesign.com) or (403) 228-0644.*