

Future Proof C Clarke Jewellers

Glint of hope as jeweller adapts to online competition

Mark Hilliard

Customers will come back if they get a really good service, says Dublin businesswoman

Carol Clarke suddenly became aware that she is surrounded by dozens of textbooks on gemstones and jewellery design, a reference library carefully assembled through decades of intensive practice.

The secret to a business surviving deep recession lies possibly in this level of expertise: learn to endure one economic collapse, adapt and you can endure another.

C Clarke Jewellers was established against the tide. A fledgling business with discordant ideas on design, it opened in a high rent Dublin shopping centre in the mid-1980s when few people were thriving and fewer still wanted to buy precious stones or keepsakes.

Disposable income

"I just spent years and years studying. I am sitting here now surrounded by about 46 books, all on gemology, and thinking: what the hell, I'm still doing it now!" says Clarke.

"To me, the key is advancing myself and trying to be as good as I can be at what I do."

The jewellery business, like

so many others, is not just riding out a recession, but adapting to a changing landscape. Today, apart from the general collapse of disposable income, established jewellers and designers have to compete with a technological age in which the internet has become king.

There are TV shopping channels, online sales, a related increase in amateurism and a new tide of couples buying diamond engagement rings abroad in spite of the associated insurance risks.

Business model

Clarke believes survival lies in adapting. She has recently become Ireland's first female jeweller (and only the State's fourth overall) to be elected to the prestigious National Association of Goldsmiths at the Institute of Registered Valuers in London. It is a position that requires its members to undergo a constant cycle of conferences and training.

She has also studied with the Gemological Institute of America and has won several awards.

Aside from designing jewellery, Clarke was the first to apply the "while you wait" business model to appraisals and recently began a niche business dealing in same-sex or civil partnership rings.

She travelled to Thailand in her early 20s, where she studied the art of jewellery making, gemology and goldsmith work and spent time at the Bangkok Jewellery Design Institute.

When she arrived home in the early 1980s, she noticed "all



■ Gemologist and jeweller Carol Clarke at her shop in the Royal Hibernian Way, Dublin. PHOTOGRAPH: BRENDA FITZSIMONS

of the jewellery looked the same, so I continued to design my own and tried to sell it".

She later did a feasibility study with IDA Ireland and found that, while most jewellers thought her designs too unconventional, the public were more enthusiastic.

"They actually liked it when I went to the craft fair but I couldn't get through to the jewellers. I decided that I would have to open my own shop," she says.

“We opened in the middle of a recession, which I considered kind of worse than it is now

thing to sell. My ideas were also a little off the wall.”

While the business endured, and ultimately prospered, during this period, recent times have brought similar difficulties.

"Gradually, within the jewellery trade itself, things were starting to get much more difficult over the last 10 years because you were starting to get the internet coming in which we never had before," she says.

"There have been a lot of well established family jewellers that have closed down because things have gotten too bad. They can't survive any longer."

'Slowly dying'

She also points to an increase in imported jewellery and, at grass-roots level, a decline in opportunities for Irish people to study the requisite skills to produce their own.

"There are three or four jewellery manufacturers left in Ireland and they are very small-scale. I see whole industries that used to be very vibrant 30 or 40 years ago slowly dying and being lost to imports from China, Hong Kong and the East," she says.

"Personally I think that you have to offer a really good service to your customers if you want them to come back."

C Clarke Jewellers, in the Royal Hibernian Way on Dawson Street, was established with her husband Chi Wai, a goldsmith, in 1986. Times were not easy.

"We opened in the middle of a recession, which I considered kind of worse than it is now. I don't know but it was a bad recession anyhow," she says.

"Lots of times we thought we would have to close down. Nothing was selling because, in a recession, jewellery was the last