

## Lighting The Path

*Josh Wimmer*

When it comes to your own brand and the designers you represent, there's no going halfway. You and your product have to shine — and you can't get there without the right lighting design.

"I think jewelers have always known lighting was important, but their interest in the last couple of years has become much more intense," says Ruth Møllergaard, principal at New York design firm Grid 3.

And for good reason. Mickey Minagorri, a partner at design firm Artco Group, mentions retail research by Disney: "There were studies where they'd have two of the same store, in the same mall, separated from each other. One had the right lighting and the other one didn't — and the one with the right lighting was doing 30 percent more sales."

Chris Harrison of Harrison's Diamonds & Designs in Ephrata, WA, installed new metal halide lamps above his cases a few years ago. "We noticed a much higher rate of closing," he says, "and before we knew it, we were up 20 percent over the previous year's same-month sales."

"The point is, you want Customers saying, 'I've never seen jewelry sparkle like this!'" says Barry Benowitz of Gail Jewelers in California, who has spent years learning the dos and don'ts of lighting. That is particularly important if you're serving discerning consumers and dealing in high-end designer merchandise that should be shown off to its best advantage.

But you also want your lighting to mesh with the atmosphere and brand you've built for your business. Determining the "right" way to do that takes work and thought.

Because lighting is so deeply integrated into store layout and construction, many of the following bright ideas are most useful if you're setting out to build or renovate your space. Even if you're staying put, though, it will help you understand why lighting makes such a visible difference in the success of your brand and those you represent.

### **Starting Out**

Every lighting scheme is its own animal — a combination of objective factors (like how much sunlight a store gets and how high its ceilings are) and subjective ones (such as the attitude the owner wants to convey, which merchandise he wants to highlight and how he wants it to look).

"Some people want their lighting to be overpowering — very bright," says Econo-Lite president Howard Gurock. "Others want it to be warm and inviting. It's a personal feeling."

Minagorri agrees: "If I'm building an old-English-looking store, or an art deco store, or a Caribbean-looking store — whatever it is, I have to make sure it feels comfortable to the store's customers. Lighting is key to that."

That said, experts agree there are some fundamental principles to start with.

**WORRY ABOUT YOUR DIAMONDS FIRST.** “The rule of thumb is that you light for diamonds, and everything else will be OK,” Gurock says. There are two main reasons for this: Most retail jewelers draw the bulk of their income from bridal and other diamond sales, and as such want to highlight their best sellers; and while gold, colored gems, and watches still look good under the cold, white light that is best for diamonds, the reverse is not true — the warm tones that enhance yellow gold can make a D-color stone look like a jaundiced J-color.

**KEEP YOUR LIGHTING CONSISTENT.** Well, then, you might think — why not use cold white for your bridal cases and something softer to show off the multi-hued new designer Italian line you just picked up?

“Unless those sections are isolated, stick with one consistent light source,” Gurock says. “If you walk into a store, and the lighting on the left side is cooler than on the right, you’re going to know something is wrong. The warmer light looks like it’s about to die.”

**LEDS FOR YOUR CASES, METAL HALIDES FOR THE CEILING.** The consensus is unanimous: If you can afford them, LEDs (light-emitting diodes) are the best way to illuminate the displays inside your cases. They’re not cheap, but they use a sliver of the energy halogen or fluorescent bulbs do, and they last thousands of hours longer. They give off very little heat, which reduces air-conditioning needs. And the light they release makes diamonds look breathtaking.

The light outside your cases is just as important. “The sale is made above the glass, not in the glass,” Gurock says. “If you bring a piece out of the case and it doesn’t look the same, there’s a good chance you’re going to lose your sale.”

In general, LEDs aren’t powerful enough to serve well as ceiling lights, especially if they’re more than 8 or 9 feet above the case. That may change as technology improves, but for now, the metal halides that have become popular in recent years are the best choice.

### ***Next Steps***

Lighting is a part of your larger sales strategy, and it affects and is affected by all the other components in play. Once you have a handle on your basic needs, you’ll need to figure out how to translate them into practice in your store.

**MAKE SURE YOUR EXPERT IS AN EXPERT.** “A lot of times, owners don’t think about where lights should be positioned, or they don’t make it a top priority — they just let the contractor decide,” says Warren Wang, president of Eastern Lighting. “They always regret it afterward.” So find an expert who understands what you’re trying to accomplish.

“I hired two different lighting consultants,” Benowitz says of building his fourth and newest store. “The last one worked for Disney. These guys are geniuses at doing different types of retail applications, but they just didn’t understand what makes jewelry sparkle. He spec’d out these bulbs, and they made the diamonds look terrible. You could see all the inclusions.”

The consultant did other good work for Benowitz; he’s not sorry he hired him. But, he concludes, “If a consultant hasn’t done a jewelry store that rocks, they’re just guessing.”

**LOOK UP.** Your ceiling plays a crucial role in lighting for a couple of reasons. First, its height will determine how powerful the metal halides above your cases need to be.

Benowitz suggests, "Every showcase should have two 4-foot-diameter cones of light hitting it, and they should cross over." The higher your lamp, the wider that circle of light will be when it hits the case.

Recessed ceiling lights are the most stylish way to go; designers and retailers seem to agree that track lighting is passé. Of course, your ceiling may be too high for recessed lights. If so, consider a soffit or a good-looking fixture. Harrison replaced his 56 halogen track lights with 15 pendants. "They fit the feel of the store," he says, "and one light will cover a 6-foot case."

"You have to search a bit more, but you can find some really beautiful chandelier-type things," Mellergaard says. "And if you have the rest of the lights recessed in the ceiling, a hanging decorative object like that will attract people's attention without increasing the light output too much."

The other element of your ceiling to consider is its color. White, off-white, and light blue are recommended because they reflect ambient light instead of absorbing it. "Avoid yellow, because that can reflect in the diamonds," Mellergaard says. "And if your color is very dark, you're going to need more light, because it will absorb it."

**MAP IT OUT.** "You can't leave it up to eyeballing it," Benowitz says of placing ceiling lights to hit the right spots on your cases. "Make a paper template of the case, put it on the floor where the case is going to go, and then shine a laser at the ceiling and mark exactly where the lamp is going to go. You don't have a lot of room to fool around with metal halides."

Further, Minagorri notes, "The right thing is to really understand every showcase, the product in it and how much revenue needs to come out of each showcase to make the lighting worth your while."

**COVER YOUR CUSTOMER.** If the cone from your ceiling lamp is wider than 4 feet when it hits the case, that's OK — just make sure it's wider on the right side.

"Whatever extra light you have, you want it to fall on the customer's side, because when the customer takes a ring from the salesperson, he or she is already 12 to 14 inches in front of the case," Benowitz says.

He also recommends positioning a couple of metal halides so they'll shine from behind a salesperson and hit the customer at a 45-degree angle. This "key light" will ensure your customer is properly illuminated while trying on a piece of merchandise.

**LOOK AROUND.** "If you don't have big windows, you're not going to have a lot of ambient light," Benowitz says. "You need that for balance, because if it's dark and you just have metal halides in the ceiling, it's going to be pretty harsh." White fluorescent lights can supply the necessary extra brightness.

If you do have windows, you may have to compensate for the effects of sunlight. "You can circuit your ambient lights so that there's a control on those closest to the windows," Mellergaard says. "They'll be dim when sunlight is bright and come back up as it fades. There are also wonderful films that don't cut down on light input but do cut glare and UV fading, rather than having to use tinted windows or blinds."

**BRIGHTER ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER.** "There are a lot of people who want to put very, very high-temperature lights — 6,000 to 6,500K — over diamonds, because that will hide any flaws in the stones and give them a very exotic look," Gurock says. He doesn't recommend that, though.

"For one, a sophisticated customer will think they're being taken," he says. "Two, when a woman puts a stone on her finger, if you have that really high-temperature light, her hand looks like a cadaver. It's an immediate turnoff."

Wang agrees. "A customer doesn't expect such brightness. It can affect their judgment."

### **Final Stages**

Once the basic lighting plan for your showroom is well established, you can start thinking about how to augment it. Even when it's not directly shining on your merchandise, light is a powerful way to draw customers' attention and subtly influence their experience.

**CHECK YOUR GLASS.** "A lot of times, showcases use a standard glass that is very reflective," says Arco's Minagorri. "That's really uncomfortable, especially when you use a lot of lights. There are companies that manufacture clear or low-iron glass that absorbs those reflections."

**ROOM SERVICE.** If you have a private room for doing appraisals or sitting down with bridal or other high-profile customers, it has to be lit with as much care as the sales floor, with at least two levels. "You'll want lighting that would suit the jewelry directly over the desk, but fluorescents as well, for general illumination. And you'll want it circuited so that you can have them on together or separately," Møllergaard says.

**SHOW THEM THE WAY.** "One store did something very clever," Gurock says. "They had lighting installed into the floor, so that it formed a path that took customers back to the bridal case, where the best merchandise was." The human eye is naturally drawn toward light, he says, so "subconsciously, people don't even realize they're moving toward it."

**ADD A LITTLE COLOR.** "We have some cool prism lighting behind our cases," says Erik Halfacre of Traditional Jewelers in Newport Beach, CA. "It shoots out colors that come out in kind of a blue and purple split."

"We're using a lot of accent pieces, special 3-D acrylic forms," Minagorri says. "They're translucent. We use them in walls or cases to eliminate the continuity of the store just being one color. This is very subtle lighting; it's not going to affect the product, it's going to create an environment."

Wang notes that LEDs offer more control over the color of the light they emit. He doesn't think most jewelers are particularly interested in that feature yet, especially when it comes to showcases, but it could become more popular in the future.

**WATCH YOUR WALLS.** "If you have walk-up wall displays and use hidden LED strips vertically along the side to illuminate the product, that's incredible, because it means you can put the jewelry on two or three shelves," Møllergaard says. "But because of the high intensity from the LEDs, the back then needs to be wrapped in suede or something soft that will absorb the light, so that the merchandise is illuminated but you're not seeing sort of a dim glow."

**HEIGHTEN AWARENESS.** “People are starting to like having their ceilings illuminated, with maybe just a single fluorescent strip all the way around,” Møllergaard says. She’s also seen a number of stores painting cloud scenes or similar art on their ceilings to catch ambient light and for extra verve. “It is a bit of an extra cost, but it finishes the store better.” At Traditional Jewelers, a lit-up replica of the Sistine Chapel adorns the ceiling.

**WHEN TO BREAK THE RULES:** Ideally, you’d show off diamonds and silver, platinum and white gold under cold, pure white light, while washing colored stones and yellow and rose gold in something warmer. Unfortunately, the discrepancy between the two types of light will more than off set any positive effects — the warmer light will most likely just look dimmer, as if you’re not properly maintaining part of your store.

As such, lighting experts and store designers suggest varying your product lighting only when the sections being lit differently are isolated from each other. For example, if you display separate Types of jewelry in separate rooms, you could light those rooms differently.

On the other hand, when Frank Adams Jewelers opened a new store in Saratoga, NY, in December 2007, owner Kimberly Adams Russell opted To try something unorthodox. “We have halogen lights up front, because gold looks best in that particular lighting,” she says. “Then, as you head toward the back, where we have timepieces and diamonds and bridal jewelry, the LED lighting is very Bright. I feel like if we had LEDs everywhere, it would look almost obnoxious. Pearls and gold look better under halogen.” And her David Yurman boutique section is lit by fluorescents.

The gradual front-to-back setup doesn’t distract the eye, she says. “I think people just walk in and when they get to the diamond counter, they’re like, ‘Whoa! Your diamonds are bright!’”

The only major disadvantage, which she understood going in: “If we want to do any major floor moves, we always have to be aware of what jewelry looks better in which case.”

**WARNING LIGHT:** “You do have to think about the ‘KISS’ principle — lighting needs to be designed as simply as possible. If you use a lot of different lamps, the wrong bulbs are going to get into the wrong fixtures. Also, sometimes the fixtures make it really difficult to replace bulbs.” Ĩ RUTH MøLLERGAARD

**WARNING LIGHT:** “When you first turn an inferior light on, it may look bright, but then could quickly go downhill. I would avoid buying any light without at least a three-year warranty, because that just means whoever is selling it doesn’t have any confidence in the way it’s engineered.” Ĩ HOWARD GUROCK

**WARNING LIGHT:** “Most people do not replace bulbs till they’re burned out. With metal halides, the average lifetime of a bulb is 10,000 hours, but the factory recommends replacing them at around 6,000 hours — there’s dimming and a color shift; you notice when you put a new bulb in. When you replace bulbs, replace them in sections, once a year, right before Christmas.” Ĩ WARREN WANG

**WARNING LIGHT:** “When you’re building a new store, you may have to deal with really strict codes that say you can only consume so many watts per square foot, so plan accordingly.” Ĩ BARRY BENOITZ