

# An Endangered Species: The Independent Sales Rep

By Deborah E. Hecht, G.G. -- JCK Online, 11/1/2007 2:00:00 AM

Today, independent jewelry reps are leaving the road by the “caratful.” To earn income that covers our growing expenses, we either have to expand our territories or carry more merchandise. We have to juggle appointments and schedule appointments with overbooked store owners. Statistics gathered by [Jewelers Security Alliance](#) comparing 2005 to 2006 indicate that although criminal events against reps decreased by 14 percent, their dollar losses increased by approximately 3.5 percent. These numbers might indicate that road reps are carrying higher value to raise their bottom line. In my own case, this is true. It is fair to say that the road rep risks theft and assault around every corner. The U.S. marketplace has become more international. Even if there is civil unrest in a region, we leave an appointment dependent on that manufacturer shipping on time. More of our profit is eaten up by the increasing cost of living and travel, as well as by the regional, national, and international economic climates.

Independent reps may disappear as longtime road warriors retire. We won't make our regular sojourns through your territory with information about other store successes, consult with you about industry trends, and advise you which pieces can deliver the best bang for your buck. We won't be around to have lunch and chat about the latest graduation or share pictures of the newest grandchild. Our position as liaisons will not exist.

Does the jewelry industry recognize us as an endangered species? How will the industry re-create the functions of the independent sales rep? Here are some possible solutions.

**The Internet.** The primary problem with buying over the Internet is that you can look, but you can't touch. And there are other issues. Is the manufacturer dependable? Is his quality up to par? How much repair will you need to deal with? Can he repair? Can he repair in a timely way? What is his ship time? What is your recourse when problems occur?

**Trade shows.** These work for those who don't mind attending. But what if you can't make the show? Or what if business is so good you need to purchase more inventory throughout the year? Without your road warriors' knowledge of product availability and their ability to devise solutions, how will issues, especially with international manufacturers, be resolved? How will the right new product make its way onto your most valuable real estate, your shelf?

**Faux lines.** Today's technology might allow manufacturers to make a better “faux” line for the reps to carry. But can these be made well enough to represent the live product? Would the size of the order grow, diminish, or be affected at all? Using faux lines may diminish and eventually eliminate most dangers on the road, but would making them be cost effective?

**National wholesale rep school.** A new breed of resourceful, educated, independent reps would have to be properly trained, not only to protect themselves against harm but also to protect

manufacturers against loss. These self-motivated reps would need organizational skills along with product knowledge and people, phone, and sales skills. Fifteen years ago it was economical to fly and rent cars in different territories. Today if a rep (on 100 percent commission) has to fly into a territory, she will (or should) use an armored car service to transport her line both ways at high expense. If that rep decides to drive her own vehicle into a territory, she must make sure it's in pristine condition with extra security systems installed. A new rep needs to know how to make money even before she turns the key in the ignition. And insurance companies need to feel assured that the reps are educated in these issues and are going out with as much knowledge and skill as possible.

**Showroom.** A single showroom could be set in a central location (e.g., Las Vegas) or could travel through metropolitan areas. It could be made of several designers, each with their own representation, like a mini event, or be made of many designers represented by only one rep. Either would require the store owner to leave the store. Would you? What if there were incentives, such as free food, one night in a hotel, or even a flight if you were a large enough account? You would need to address the fact that your rep is not coming to your door. What alterations would you be willing to make? How would you fill that void?

The stationary showroom also would provide manufacturers with continual display space for new designs and store owners the ability to buy throughout the year. Along with use of the Internet, this could be a dependable one-stop shop that introduces new designers and fills retail case space, minus the crowds. It would enable retailers to benefit from the expertise of the independent rep, who may find this a safer, more productive sales platform.

As a 16-year independent sales rep (with 30 years total in the industry) looking to reinvent a productive future, I'd love to hear from you: designer, manufacturer, retail owner, road warrior! You are welcome to contact me with your thoughts and suggestions.

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