

Ultra Chic



Ultra Diamonds is the fifth largest specialty retailer of off-priced fine jewelry in the US, with over 150 stores in 33 states. **Ken Nisch**, Chairman, JGA, discusses the designing of the newest 1917 sq ft store in Woodbury Commons, Central Valley, New York



How does the design of Ultra Diamonds set it apart from other jewelry stores?

Ultra Diamonds elicits a sense of discovery for the customer through its series of walk-around cases, its variety of retail settings and presentation, be it the combination of the wall slab and pinnate approach to watches, the various sizes and approaches to walk-around cases for individual brands, lifestyle groupings, stone groupings (tanzanite), or groupings that might be organized around value or particular design sensibilities.

This is a significant departure from what often exists in jewelry stores where one finds a highly formalized, impersonal and intimidating approach to product, and where the staff and sales person assume a position of authority and control. In such an environment, the customer, particularly women, and the middle-

class consumer, and those who are purchasing jewelry more for self-gratification than for gifting, typically feel unwelcome.

At Ultra Diamonds, through the use of a series of 360-degree walk-around cases, there is a high degree of visual accessibility, a deformalization and a “side-by-side” selling opportunity that breaks down the traditional hierarchy of client and associate.

What are the key design elements of Ultra Diamonds?

Our aim was to create an Ultra Diamonds prototype reflective of its stylish merchandise and breadth of brands and selection. The new store is chic, unexpected and accessible, recognizing the breadth of selection, categories and designers that are core to the brand’s broad collection.



STUDY IN DESIGN

For added convenience and accessibility, the service function has been located into the center of the main loop, providing associates with a 360-degree vision of customers, positioning them only steps away from all areas of the store that may require assistance. A series of perimeter cases reinforce the wall-to-floor character in areas adjacent to the walk-around cases for products such as watches and fine fashion jewelry, with the areas that are located behind cases reserved fully for branding, communication and graphics, overscaled to create impact and drama in what otherwise would be unleveraged wall spaces.

The location has an extensive lease-line that has been fully activated with a window system that brings together components and elements

FOR THE RETAILER, ENABLING THE RIGHT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND APPROPRIATE STAFF SECURITY IS A DELICATE BALANCING ACT



at the branding frieze line and through a series of podiums for in-window merchandising. The combination of overscaled attract-elements work well given the nature of the outlet center shopper (who typically might be on vacation

or somewhat distracted). The frieze element provides reassurance of wellknown brands and status products and the focal displays of product become the closing element of the lease-line “trifecta” highlighting the quality and beauty of what is sold within.

The store’s neutral palette, contrasting light and dark shades finds a balance in its sense of status and luxury. Overscaled light fixtures highlight the cases, creating an almost shop-in-shop character. Its center feature of suspended rods adds a bit of shimmer and sparkle to the environment. Unexpected and light-hearted accents, unique table legs, cantilever cases, finish and carpet patterns, and accent shades bring style and flair to complement the store’s sleek and streamline fixturing, lending a contemporary edge.

How can lighting concerns such as reflection be addressed for optimal display of jewelry?

The inside of the case should always be significantly brighter than the outside of the case to avoid just the issue of reflections. Likewise, the merchandise needs to be equally appealing and attractive when taken out of the case and presented to the customer. This can be achieved through the selection of correct



lighting techniques that provide adequate front, back and appropriately directed light on the merchandise.

Today, often the source is color-corrected LED, but external positioning and the specification of external lighting must also be considered. Ceiling mounted LED sources are an option, but not necessarily the only option, with generally a halogen source being preferred, with placement determined

through analyzing the height of the case, position of the customer (are they standing up or sitting down) and the depth of the case, so that the angle of the lighting maximizes the presentation of product, without creating additional reflection or glare for the viewing customer.

At Ultra Diamonds, state-of-the-art cases, with their LED illumination and custom-built inserts, bring out the full brilliance of the products. The case design minimizes the sense of enclosure and maximizes the sense of openness, making the merchandise seem almost close enough to touch.

How have you incorporated security solutions such that they do not intrude onto the customers' privacy?

Security is typically looked at in two ways: internal and external. Cameras are primarily a vehicle for internal security and are placed in areas such as repair shops, back rooms, as well as to provide an appropriate viewing angle for access at the associate side of cases. From a customer standpoint, most security is driven off of human resource function, training, and screening of employees with main focus being associate safety rather than loss prevention.

On the front-end, appropriate cameras on entry and exits of stores, devices that allow for potential post-theft identification, and tools that help identify thieves such as height markers at exit points are also appropriate. However, when an actual "incident" occurs, it is more a reflection of poor staff training, with any technical devices related to apprehension as more of a fix of a problem rather than a solution. That being said, customers want a sense of security and safety within stores, but generally react negatively to too many safety cues, such as prominent security guards, cameras, and policies that impede them from looking at and enjoying (including trying on) products. For the retailer, enabling the right customer experience and appropriate staff security is a delicate balancing act.

At Ultra Diamonds, a center island acts as a classification and service hub to the adjacent walk-around satellite selling areas. This allows for selling areas and merchandise security to have a more controlled approach to merchandise presentation. The selling process configures "individualized selling spaces" for product presentation, while eliminating the typical "raceway" approach found in most fine jewelry stores. ■