

# NATIONAL Jeweler

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## Pop quiz on colored gems

### tips on answering customers' questions

What jeweler hasn't been on the receiving end of a tricky question when it comes to selling colored gemstones? Here is a sales associate's crib sheet that offers savvy responses to those prickly queries.

**The diamond industry** can pat itself on the back. Thanks to effective marketing, the American public is remarkably well-versed in diamonds: their rarity, the Four Cs, the stone's unique brilliance and more.

By  
Emma  
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The colored gemstone industry is doing a good job getting its product out there, too. Brightly hued stones have been a fashion front-runner in recent years, gracing the pages of major magazines and showcasing themselves via celebrities strutting along red carpets everywhere.

While customers are certainly demanding colored gemstones in greater quantities, there is still a fair amount of head-scratching when it comes to making an important purchase in this category. Consumers, it seems, are often all too familiar with possible scams, but barely aware of the fascinating and unique qualities of colored stones. The customer's unease in purchasing such stones can put even the best of sales associates in a pickle: How can they best negotiate an avalanche of questions that put themselves and the industry on the defensive?

Illustrations  
by  
George  
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"Consumers have heard horror stories about even the best retailers selling synthetics as the real thing," says Antoinette Matlins, gemologist and author of *Colored Gemstones: The Antoinette Matlins Buying Guide*. "It's important that the retailer has its own policy about which treatments it is willing to carry, and trained salespeople to explain simply and truthfully what the differences in treatments are."

Here are nine common customer questions gemstone retailers may face, along with some useful responses suggested by industry experts. >>>

## COLORED GEMSTONES: TRICKY QUESTIONS + SAVVY ANSWERS

### Tricky question #1

I've heard horror stories about synthetic gemstones being passed off as natural. How do I know your product is legit?

#### Savvy answer

"When a consumer asks 'Is this a natural sapphire?' you'd better hear the question he or she is [really] asking, which is, 'Is it treated?'" Matlins says.

Once that answer is established—except in rare cases, the answer should be "yes"—Matlins advises jewelers to underscore that the practice of heating rubies and sapphires and oiling emeralds has been perfected over centuries.

Doug Hucker, executive director of the American Gem Trade Association (AGTA), says it's critical to first establish that gemstones are "natural"—as in, they come from the earth, as opposed to being laboratory-created. Hucker says he would candidly tell a customer: "If you're looking for a very important purchase with a ruby, emerald or a sapphire, most of the material is routinely enhanced to make it as attractive as it can be. The unbelievably intense colors are almost always treated."

Jack Seibert, owner of Jack Seibert Goldsmith and Jeweler, in Columbus, Ohio, establishes himself as an authority by telling consumers, "With his increasing knowledge, man has the ability to manipulate and enhance that which Mother Nature instigates. You, the consumer, probably can't tell the difference—you need a sophisticated laboratory so you can make this determination. If you doubt the validity of the origin of the stone, you're probably not shopping at a store that distinguishes the difference."

Take the opportunity to educate the customer about other treatments like oiling of emeralds, beryllium treatments for sapphires, glass-filling and the like. Specify which products are considered acceptable in your store, and which ones you believe undermine the inherent value of a stone.

### **Tricky question #2**

I want a natural ruby. Why is this so much pricier than those you say are color-treated?

### **Savvy answer**

Al Molina, owner of Molina Fine Jewelers in Phoenix, has a simple response for consumers asking this question: "One word: Rarity." Then he adds, "Untreated natural gemstones are some of the rarest in the world—99.9 percent of material is treated to improve color and quality. A very small percentage of fine stones do not need enhancement."

### **Tricky question #3**

This is a big purchase for me, and I want to wear my emerald ring every day. Is the stone durable enough for that?

### **Savvy answer**

Again, this is an excellent opportunity to educate the consumer. Point out that rubies and sapphires are second only to diamonds in hardness on the Mohs scale, and while emeralds are not recommended for everyday wear, proper care and ease of use can make a fine stone last for many generations. Inquire about the wearer's lifestyle, and help the buyer choose an appropriate stone—a process that personalizes the experience and builds trust. Richard Freeman, owner of E.F. Watermelon Gallery in Old Lyme, Conn., will use any weakness in a stone to strengthen his position as a jeweler.

"Any scratches and abrasions we can take care of, because we have some of the best cutters in the industry," he tells customers.

### **Tricky question #4**

How do I know which colored gemstones are of better quality than others?

### **Savvy answer**

The Four Cs is an excellent place to start, as the consumer is probably familiar with those characteristics. Mention, for example, how clarity impacts price, but explain how colored gem clarity is graded differently than diamond clarity. Elaborate on why color is the most important colored gemstone "C" by showing consumers good, better and best color examples.

Molina uses six—not four—Cs to describe colored gemstones, adding country of origin and color treatment to his basic explanation of color, cut, clarity and carat weight. "The country of origin can make a huge difference in the value of an untreated stone versus a treated stone," he says, pointing out that a Burmese ruby can be 10 to 15 times more valuable than a Thai ruby. "One of the things that separates a knowledgeable salesman from a clerk is the ability to talk about these things in a knowledgeable way."

### **Tricky question #5**

You say that this rich, blue sapphire is the best quality, but I prefer stones in a paler shade. Are such stones still a good investment?

### **Savvy answer**

Beauty, as the cliché goes, is in the eye of the beholder. And a customer with a product he or she deems beautiful will be a happy customer.

"You have to make it clear that they're the person wearing it and enjoying it, and passing it down," Freeman says. "If they buy strictly to buy, it will never become part of the family structure. You have to explain that if it's special to them, it will become special to their children."

Hucker says it's important to put the customer at ease, all the while educating them about the product. He might tell a customer: "Richness in this center stone is what commands the highest price, but many of my customers really prefer this pastel color, and it's more affordable because it's not as rare." The key, says Hucker, is to make sure the customer is buying with confidence. "You've got to have the ability not to paint yourself into a corner and [make sure the customer] is not embarrassed to buy a less expensive gemstone," Hucker says.

### **Tricky question #6**

Why does this 2-carat ruby look so puny when I compare it to a 2-carat diamond?

### **Savvy answer**

Explaining the physical makeup of a gemstone is a great way to gain trust with the customer. Molina, per usual, cuts to the chase with his

suggested model response. "Very simple," he tells customers. "A sapphire is denser—it's heavier, so it displaces more weight, and therefore gives an appearance that is 20 to 25 percent smaller than the diamond."

Matlins offers this opening line for those customers seeking a specific carat weight: "Do you mean a ruby that weighs 2 carats, or did you have a particular size in mind—like the size of a 2-carat diamond?"

### **Tricky question #7**

You sound so knowledgeable about gemstones. How do I know that I can trust you?

### **Savvy answer**

Two years ago, AGTA conducted a survey that found that customers were more willing to buy from jewelers affiliated with an industry association—a phenomenon Molina taps into by supplying many of his customers with a biography touting his education and certifications. "Tell them the story about the organization," Molina advises. "Then tell them your [personal] story. People want to make sure they can trust you."

Freeman says his vast inventory of high-quality colored stones is often impressive enough to establish him as a colored stone expert. "People see diamonds everywhere. But if we show them fine tourmalines and fine garnets, it blows their minds," Freeman says.

### **Tricky question #8**

You say that nearly all sapphires and rubies are heat-treated. Does this affect their hardness and durability?

### **Savvy answer**

While most experts agree that heated stones are still extremely durable, some feel that consumers need to be warned about special care for those stones that endured excessive heat as part of the treatment process. Seibert points out to customers that the cutting and polishing process is extremely harsh. "Once a stone has been through the treatment and cutting process, it's going to be a survivor," Seibert tells clients.

But, Matlins warns that jewelers would be wise to protect themselves by educating consumers about potentially brittle stones. "High heat has a significant effect on treated stones, and consumers need to be warned about caring for and wearing them," Matlins says. "The retail trade thinks they've covered this with blanket statements [about durability] on the receipt. I'm just waiting for some consumer to take this issue to court."

### **Tricky question #9**

On the Internet, I saw a very large ruby with a gorgeous hue. Do you have anything like that for a similar price?

### **Savvy answer**

This is your moment to shine—not only on your own merits, but on behalf of brick-and-mortar jewelers everywhere. Point out how colors differ from one computer monitor to another. Explain how stones are easily switched in cyberspace. Perhaps most importantly, elaborate on the merits of shopping from a jeweler with a physical storefront, versus one on the Web. Hucker says such propositions are an opportunity for jewelers to showcase the breadth of inventory at their disposal.

"I'd say, 'Certainly I can get a fine ruby for you. What is it about what you saw on the Internet that appeals to you?'" Hucker says.

Seibert suggests putting the very legitimate fear of fraud in the minds of consumers who browsed the Web. "I'd tell them that the possibility of switching gems is real, as is outright fraud," Seibert says. "And, returning an item purchased on the Internet is almost impossible."

For colored gemstones, the ability to stand behind the product before, during and after the sale helps jewelers stand apart from the pack of online jewelry sellers.

"Brick-and-mortar stores are in business because we can show consumer the product," Seibert says. "They can touch and smell and experience it at all levels. We can romance and sell it to them—at, hopefully, a reasonable price—and stand behind it."

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**Colored Gemstones, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition: The Antoinette Matlins Buying Guide** (6 x 9, 250 pp., more than 200 photographs and illustrations, 24 in full color, ISBN 0-943763-33-9, Quality Paperback Original, \$18.99) and all of Antoinette Matlins' books are available from retail bookstores, amazon.com, GIA, Kassoy, Rubin, Grobet, and other jewelry supply houses, or directly from GemStone Press, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091. Tel: (802) 457-4000, Fax: (802) 457-4004, [www.gemstonepress.com](http://www.gemstonepress.com). For credit card orders, call (800) 962-4544. Add \$3.95 shipping and handling for the first book, \$2.00 each additional book.