

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Easing into green

When you sell products mined from the earth, it's not always easy to keep your hands clean on environmental issues. Some jewelers have already found their green grooves, but for others, even simple steps can go a long way

By Michelle Graff

May 22, 2008

New York—From housewares to automotives, industries that paid little mind to environmental issues in the past are now moving into greener pastures—and the jewelry industry is no exception.

Since so many of its products come straight from the earth, adopting practices that protect the planet is perhaps even more important in the jewelry trade than in any other.

Yet jewelry's complex supply chain—one that often spans multiple continents before a finished product winds up in a jewelry store display case—makes tracing the origin of all materials and their impacts on the environment extremely difficult, if not impossible, for jewelers at the retail level.

But, there are now a number of efforts underway to illuminate the path that products take.

More than ever before, the industry's leaders are coming together to address issues such as environmentally sound mining and manufacturing processes, and the use of recycled metals and lab-grown diamonds that spare the earth.

A veritable alphabet soup of organizations have popped up in the last five years, each with a common goal of making the industry's supply chain more transparent.

And, at the end of the supply chain most visible to consumers are retailers—from tony industry standard Tiffany and Co. to a small shop in New Mexico run by a husband-and-wife team—who are stepping up to the plate to recycle and source merchandise responsibly.

All of the changes can be a little dizzying for retailers, leaving many to wonder what it really means to be green and how they can integrate changes in the industry into their daily routines.

As industry leaders work to sort out the answers to these questions, their overall message to retailers is this: If you can't do it all, that doesn't mean you should do nothing.

Start with something as simple as using recycled paper in the office printers, and build from there to include energy-efficient display-case lighting and recycled metals.

Peggy Jo Donahue, director of public affairs for Jewelers of America (JA), says the industry should operate under a do-what-you-can mantra when it comes to being green: "Let's not let the perfect be the enemy of the good," she says.

A FRE spirit At Reflective Images in Santa Fe, N.M., customers don't even need to step inside the store to know the extent to which owners and spouses Marc Choyt and Helen Chantler have embraced the green movement.

A visit to the store's Web site tells the tale. In an industry unafraid of acronyms, Choyt has developed his own eco-conscious abbreviation that he uses to label the pieces he displays online: FRE, which stands for Fair made + socially Responsible + Eco friendly.

Through the mere click of a mouse, the FRE tab tells consumers everything Choyt knows—or doesn't know—about the origin of the piece.

For example, clicking on the FRE tab for a small moon tree pendant in 18-karat gold over silver, the consumer learns, among other things, that the piece was handmade in the Reflective Images studio using in-house materials and cast components from other U.S. companies, but that the store is "not sure" of its caster's environmental practices.

Choyt's FRE method wasn't developed overnight. It is the result of 13 years of work that started well before green was an industry buzzword.

Choyt says he and Chantler started Reflective Images in 1995 intending to create a business that mirrors what they believe is important in life.

"We love the world and we love nature," he says. "We want our work to reflect our values."

To get his environmentally sound business off the ground, Choyt says he started with the "low-hanging fruit," making small changes at his store, where applicable.

Examples of such changes that any retailer can implement include: installing energy-efficient LED lighting, buying recycled office and toilet paper, and, for jewelers who do benchwork, using manufacturing chemicals that are more eco-friendly, such as Vitamin C as a pickling agent.

Choyt says at this point in the green game, so few retailers emphasize being eco-friendly that even making a few small changes can make a store stand out from a crowd of rivals.

"It's such a low bar, you can differentiate yourself from your competition," he says.

At the Seattle headquarters of fine-jewelry retailer Ben Bridge Jeweler, which operates 78 stores in 12 states, being green starts with the little things too.

Co-Chief Executive Officer and General Counsel Jon Bridge says he has two boxes under his desk: one for recycling and one for garbage.



Jewelers Marc Choyt and Helen Chantler, pictured here in their Santa Fe, N.M., store, started Reflective Images in 1995, determined to have their business practices reflect their love of nature.

"I assure you the garbage box is much smaller than the recycling box," he says.

Ben Bridge Jeweler uses the most up-to-date, energy-efficient lighting in all of its stores and uses recycled materials in the construction of new stores. Bridge says the company also uses recycled materials for bagging and wrapping, and chooses paper cups over Styrofoam.

For the company's 76 stores in shopping malls, Bridge says the retailer encourages the malls to recycle and, if the mall does, Ben Bridge participates.



"Just thinking of doing things of this nature is important," he says.

It's not just jewelers that are getting into the green act; other examples of environmentally friendly retail abound. Macy's recently announced a partnership with the National Park Foundation, as well as a series of "green" promotions, merchandise and in-store events. And J.C. Penney Co. has begun labeling its eco-friendly private-brand merchandise, from apparel to home accessories, as "Simply Green."

Minimizing the environmental impact of mining on the ecosystem is just one aspect of green that industry leaders are confronting. Tiffany and Co. angelfish cuff in 18-karat white, yellow and rose gold, pictured above, retails at \$240,000.

Cleaning up 'dirty' mines Using the right lighting and filling up the recycling bin are simple enough changes, but when you get into sourcing metals, the green issue gets more complex.

Green leaders throughout the industry agree that the average retailer is fairly far removed from the mining companies. But there are steps retailers can take to support efforts to clean up dirty mines, help keep them clean and trace their metals through the supply chain.

One is to sign an online petition to support No Dirty Gold's "golden rules" pledge.

Launched in 2004, No Dirty Gold is a campaign by Oxfam America and Earthworks designed to draw attention to environmentally irresponsible mining practices worldwide.

No Dirty Gold urges manufacturers, retailers and consumers to source gold from companies that mine responsibly and calls on mining companies to respect human rights and the environment.

Earthworks President and CEO Stephen D'Esposito says to date, companies representing 23 percent of U.S. jewelry sales have signed on to the pledge, which can be done online at Nodirtygold.org.

He says even if jewelers can't directly influence mining practices, by signing this pledge, they can show their support of industry clean-up attempts.

And, if any consumers ask about the store's use of green or recycled gold, signing the pledge gives retailers the ability to say, "'We're signatories. We can't solve these problems ourselves. [But] we're trying to do the right thing,'" D'Esposito says.

Other organizations working to clean up the mining industry include: the Council for Responsible Jewellery Practices (CRJP), which is trying to make the entire supply line green; the Association for Responsible Mining, which works to bring transparency and credibility to the development of a framework for responsible artisanal and small-scale mining; and the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance, which focuses on establishing a voluntary system to independently verify compliance with environmental, human rights and social standards for large-scale mining operations.

In an effort to streamline the industry's efforts, D'Esposito organized the Madison Dialogue, which began with a meeting in New York of a dozen representatives from non-governmental organizations, retailers, trade associations, mining companies, foundations and agencies, including the World Bank.

The meeting resulted in an organizing committee, a Web site, MadisonDialogue.org, where retailers can go to keep up with green issues, as well as the Madison Dialogue Ethical Jewelry Summit, held from Oct. 25-26, 2007, in Washington.

D'Esposito says so many groups and initiatives were popping up in the industry, along with growing press coverage and retailer interest in green, that he felt the dialogue would be a good way to start a conversation among all involved.

"We thought—I thought and others thought—the Madison Dialogue would be a good way to bring everyone together," he says. "Out of it hopefully will come some real concrete standards and the ability to assess if mining companies are meeting those standards."

Finding a balance on metals Another green issue that confronts retailers when it comes to gold, silver and platinum is sourcing recycled materials.

At Reflective Images, owner Choyt says the store uses recycled gold and partially recycled silver, and is moving toward 100 percent recycled silver.

He acknowledges that moving entire supply chains to 100 percent recycled is tough for retailers, especially in cases where they have longstanding relationships with suppliers.

"The supply chain thing is very, very difficult," he says.

For those interested in sourcing recycled metals, Choyt says, "what they have to do is they can't source from China anymore."

Instead, he says, source from manufacturers in the United States who work in recycled metals. Choyt says, though, that this can be more expensive, especially for retailers who have been buying mass-manufactured metals as cheaply as possible from China.

For those concerned about cost, he recommends starting with just a few recycled lines and not cutting off metals from China entirely.

Bridge says Ben Bridge uses some recycled gold but simply can't source everything that way.

"Some jewelers are doing all recycled gold," he says. "We can't do that. We're too big for that."

He says the company has too many suppliers, and the market is not at a point where it is going to bear the extra cost associated with recycled gold.



Each piece of Reflective Images' jewelry, like the moon tree pendant above, is sold with an explanation of where the materials originated, if known, and how the piece was crafted.



Reflective Images utilizes recycled gold and partially recycled silver in its jewelry whenever possible.

"I assure you it would price us out of the marketplace," Bridge says. "It would sell to a few people, but it would not sell to very many."

But one day it will.

"We're building awareness," he says. "[But] it's a long way down the road."

Is the green consumer here? The last, and most important, piece of the green puzzle for retailers is the consumer. Retailers grapple with the questions of what it means, exactly, to advertise as a green jeweler and how much being environmentally friendly means to their customers. Will their patrons pay a higher price just because a product claims to be environmentally friendly?

Last year, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-UK), known in North America as the World Wildlife Fund, published a report grading the practices of the world's 10 largest, publicly traded luxury brands in response to what it claims is a growing interest among consumers in companies' ethical and environmental practices.

The report, titled "Deeper Luxury," included top jewelers Tiffany and Co., Swatch Group, Bulgari, Richemont and LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton.

No company scored higher than a "C-plus." Bulgari received an "F," and even Tiffany, noted for being ahead of the curve when it comes to the environment, received a "D-plus."

The WWF-UK did not respond to *National Jeweler's* requests for comment on the report's findings, which were blasted by the CRJP as being "undeserved and unwarranted" and based on a flawed and inaccurate grading method.

How much consumers pay attention to reports such as "Deeper Luxury" is unknown.

Some leaders in the industry's green movement believe the green consumer is already browsing the display cases, while others insist environmental issues are still a couple of generations away from making a large impact. Bridge says younger consumers may claim to be concerned with green, but he is not convinced.

"When push comes to shove, are they going to spend extra to buy something that looks exactly like something else?" he asks. "We're not there yet, and I don't think the youth are there yet either, but they're at least talking about it."

JA's Donahue disagrees.

"I think the [green] consumer's already here," she says.

And for retailers concerned that advertising some of their pieces as "green" will shine a harsh light on the rest of the merchandise, she says it is up to individual retailers to decide based on their customers if being green is worthwhile.

No matter how many consumers are aware of issues right now, Choyt says now is the time for retail jewelers to embrace the green movement.

"Within five years, there's going to be some kind of tipping point. It's going to be huge," he says. "You can get

on the wave now and really be proactive, or you can ignore it."

Get off to a green start

Stephen D'Esposito, president and executive director of environmental organization Earthworks, offers these simple steps retailers can take to be green.

- 1) Sign the No Dirty Gold campaign's "golden rules" pledge, available online at Nodirtygold.org.
- 2) Ask suppliers where they get their gold, silver and platinum. If they don't know, ask them to find out, so the dialogue gets moving throughout the chain of custody.
- 3) Look to utilize reused, recycled and reconstituted metals, if possible.
- 4) Get behind important policy initiatives such as mining reform.
- 5) Identify companies that have similar commitments to the environment and work with those businesses.

Editor's note: To learn about Fiddlehead, a gift store on Boston's trendy Newbury Street that specializes in eco-friendly merchandise, and the latest in coral developments, read [Boston's uncommon shop](#) and [Don't make coral a fashion victim](#), respectively.

Links referenced within this article

Nodirtygold.org

<http://www.nodirtygold.org>

Madisondialogue.org

<http://www.madisondialogue.org>

Nodirtygold.org

<http://www.nodirtygold.org>

Boston's uncommon shop

http://www.nationaljewelernetwork.com/njn/content_display/independent/e3i1752bc99a224d5809b0aaeaf6bccdd841

Don't make coral a fashion victim

http://www.nationaljewelernetwork.com/njn/content_display/independent/e3idd76da9cd5a7a6acd73fd53b8493e2a5

Find this article at:

http://www.nationaljewelernetwork.com/njn/ys/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003807343



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.