

Title UK National Training Awards**Introduction**

A sparkling training initiative has boosted diamond sales at UK jeweller Ernest Jones. The training has increased staff knowledge and given the learners the diamond “bug”. Moreover, the program has earned Signet Trading Ltd, of Hockley, Birmingham, a West Midlands accolade in the latest UK National Training Awards.

With 200 high-street stores and around 2,000 store employees, Ernest Jones – part of the Signet Group, the world’s largest speciality jewellery retailer – has limited scope for expansion, so its five-year strategy is to make its current space “work harder”. It identified an opportunity to sell more diamonds, and in particular Leo diamonds, a product with extra facets, exclusive to Ernest Jones.

The company selected 20 of its in-store diamond advisers, senior staff or management with an interest in diamonds, for a learning trial under its development framework, known as the Signet Jewellery Academy. The plan was to make the staff passionate for diamonds.

“Like most areas of learning, the greater the level of understanding someone has about diamonds, the more confidence and passion they have for their chosen subject,” said Martin Botting, Signet Jewellery Academy manager. “Buying a diamond can often define a moment in life – for example, to celebrate the birth of a child or an engagement. If a customer is served by someone with confidence and passion, it transforms a sale into a memory. By explaining in simple terms the differences between diamonds, they can help the customer to choose the right one for their occasion.”

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One element of the Signet Jewellery Academy development framework is the diamond-adviser qualification, which uses distance learning and assessment to provide advanced diamond product knowledge. Diamond advisers are in a position to use their skills with a large number of customers, but the company felt that they were “missing the mark”, as learners lacked the confidence to introduce higher value diamonds, even though they had learned about them.

“We decided to select diamond advisers for the learning trial to integrate the new learning into the Signet Jewellery Academy,” said Martin Botting.

As a result of the learning, they needed to be able to talk with enthusiasm and belief to the customer about the attributes of diamonds – for example, how the diamond characteristic of “cut” is measured. Diamond advisers needed to help the customer to understand the product, without baffling him or her with science.

Signet turned to the independent International Gemmological Institute (IGI), of Antwerp, Belgium. Martin Botting explained: “Diamond certificates accompany selected diamonds in our range. They detail the qualities of the diamond when it was graded. The IGI completes the most diamond gradings worldwide every day. The IGI invited us to its head office, where we were immediately struck by how much passion and energy its team had for diamonds. They had a thorough understanding of diamonds and could appreciate their worth. We wanted the IGI to help us to design and deliver the learning for our trial to get this passion across to our people.”

The “Upselling with Confidence” workshop

Ernest Jones and the IGI jointly agreed learning objectives for a two-day workshop, entitled “Upselling with Confidence”. These were to:

- classify diamonds for color and clarity, using the diamond-grading process;
- explain the IGI’s certificate using enhanced product knowledge;
- demonstrate the ability to gain rapport with customers to enhance the diamond-buying experience during a role-play exercise; and
- demonstrate their ability to sell higher value diamonds during a role-play exercise.

Role-plays were designed around real diamonds and the IGI certificates. Using sales scenarios and observation sheets that are used in stores, the delegates observed and assessed each other and then gave performance feedback. A simple “team” system was then used to award marks to learners who remembered key points or identified logical conclusions as the learning progressed. “This built their confidence in their knowledge,” said Martin Botting.

An action-planning exercise was built into the workshop. Delegates reviewed statistical data that they had brought to the event as part of the work they had completed before attending the workshop. They then put together a structured action plan to achieve targets back in the work environment.

The practical diamond grading worked particularly well,” said Martin Botting. “The staff in our stores don’t have the opportunity to grade diamonds, as they are already mounted in jewellery when they arrive. By providing learners with the chance to grade a diamond for the first time, the learning experience and the passion instantly came alive.

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“The cut of the diamond is normally taken for granted, but by understanding the IGI certificate, learners had an extra tool to make a sales difference back in the store.”

One participant, Gary Reeves, from Reading, said: "I was able to put the technical information into practice while it was fresh in my head."

The training outcomes

Every month, the top 50 Ernest Jones stores receive a visit from a mystery shopper to score their sales behaviors. Mystery shop visits showed that staff who had been on the trial workshops had a greater ability to sell. Analysis of 12 weeks' trading of stores after the first 10 staff completed the training showed that diamond sales increased by 3.5 percent.

Following a mystery shop visit, one assessor commented: "We were served by Nikki Renwick, who was very knowledgeable regarding the clarity and quality of the diamonds she presented. Nikki explained how each piece was valued and, with friendly conversation, made us feel valued as a customer."

Paul Stewart, southern regional manager, commented: "I have actually seen sales being gained... Employees who have attended the workshop have the confidence fully to explain the extra knowledge. We have had a great deal of interest in the course – that is, others now want to go on it."

Moreover, the Ernest Jones team members that the learners work with also benefit, as they have secondary learning. As Dee Holman, of Crawley, commented: "I took every member of the team to one side and explained what I had learned. Having more in-depth knowledge gave them the confidence boost they needed. The whole team is very enthusiastic about the product, and it shows."

Kevin Ryan, Signet Trading's stores director, said: "The diamond event is exceptional in many respects. First, the learners have caught the diamond bug and are ambassadors for diamond knowledge in our stores. Secondly, the event is unique in the industry and therefore the world, which gives us all an immense sense of pride. Most importantly, though, the business achieved what it set out to do – find a way of growing sales in a challenging market."

Note

This article was written by David Pollitt, Editor, *Human Resource Management International Digest*.

External links:

International Gemological Institute <http://www.igiworldwide.com/>

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