

Online gem seller on the cutting edge

BY RANDY RICHMOND
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From the prospective client's perspective, a computer screen features two windows showing two different diamonds in microscopic detail. In a third window, jeweller Jim Poag guides a tour through the cut and clarity of the two gems.

Watching the real-time video from his home, the customer poses a question and circles one part of a diamond with an electronic pencil.

Sitting in his Strathroy store, Poag sees the circle and responds.

"It's pretty wild, I think it will take off like crazy," predicts Poag, who may be the first diamond dealer in North America who can guide customers through a deal live and online.

It's enough to impress e-commerce consultant Jim Okumura, with J.C. Williams Group in Chicago, Ill.

"That's pretty leading edge—especially for Canada," says Okumura.

While several large companies may sell increasing numbers of diamonds online through the use of still photographs and graphics, Oku-

mura hadn't heard of anyone using real-time video with microscope photographs and other tools to guide customers through the process.

Poag said he's been watching an increase in online diamond-selling, with a 28-per-cent jump in October in North America alone, but he resisted until he could set up live video. "I didn't want to do that until I could give customers the same experience they get in the store," he said.

Online, simple photographs don't show the cut, clarity and other elements that determine a diamond's quality, Poag said. And many customers simply don't know what questions to ask.

"There are so many unknowns in diamonds."

But last February, Poag began working with Thorough Communications in Strathroy to enhance the store's website. By September, everything was in place.

Here's how it works:

A customer shopping for a diamond books an online appointment, then uses the phone for the audio and Internet for the video.

Poag appears live with lessons on cut, clarity and grades of diamonds. The cus-

tomér can choose a diamond, compare it to others and see how it looks in a setting.

The site is so interactive, the customer can even capture photos or video of parts of the live demonstration.

Online shopping appeals especially to the biggest diamond-buyers, those between 25 and 35 who are getting engaged, Poag said.

"Their careers are so busy. They have so little time. It's also good for people who live outside the area."

Initial sales based on the live video were a bit slow because, Poag figures, customers thought the video was pre-recorded. "Now we are getting more and more feedback. This is cutting edge."

Experts say Canadians in general lag behind others in online shopping. About three to four per cent of Canadian consumers shop online, compared to seven to eight per cent in the U.S. or Britain, Okumura said.

Even so, the numbers in Canada are rising. "We feel the Canadian market is at a very high point in its growth curve."

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