

Master Plan

Engaging and entertaining customers is part of the shopping experience at Talisman Collection in El Dorado Hills, California. | BY JOYCE KAUF

Walk into Talisman Collection in El Dorado Hills, California, and you will see children rummaging through a treasure chest, men strumming guitars and women selecting diamond jewelry from a rolling cart. What at first glance might suggest a haphazardly designed store is in reality a very clearly defined retail environment. “I wanted to break the mold that people normally associate with jewelry stores and create an interactive and engaging experience,” says owner Andrea Riso, explaining why a children’s play area and a man cave are integral to her success as a retailer of branded and custom diamond and gemstone jewelry.

A talisman is a token of good luck. Yet Riso left very little to chance in creating her retail concept store, applying her experience in retailing, media and marketing. “Since the early 1980s, I always had a hand in the jewelry business, but the opportunity to open a store did not present itself early in my career,” she points out. While pursuing a career in the corporate world, Riso simultaneously studied at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA). She later returned to school for a master’s degree in communications and change management, turning her thesis into the “master plan” for Talisman Collection, which she opened in 2013.

FOLLOW THE PLAN

The master plan reflected Riso’s merchandising approach that all customers are ROBO — research online, buy offline — customers, making it imperative that both the online and brick-and-mortar shopping experiences are engaging and memorable. She emphasizes the need to break through the “intimidation factor” with transparency. “Take the mystery out of diamonds and make a complicated subject matter approachable and attainable,” Riso advises.

In her quest for creating a destination store, Riso looked for an affluent suburban community without a Neiman Marcus within 70 miles that would enable her to offer merchandise on par or better than that of the prestige retailer. Located in Northern California, “smack in the middle” of Napa Valley and Lake Tahoe, El Dorado Hills is also a convenient stopping-off point between those tourist attractions.

NATURE INSPIRED

Talisman’s picturesque setting played a role in its design motif. Riso replaced three sides of the building with tall windows to let the natural light stream in and give customers a view of the colorful flowers, vineyards, olive trees and lake that surround the store. “I wanted to bring the outdoors in while at the same time maximizing the potential of natural light,” Riso says.

Nature also influenced the interactive solution to creating traffic flow between the store’s front and back doors — a 770-square-foot three-dimensional “river” that runs through the store. This photorealistic artwork is filled with shells, crabs, turtles and all kinds of sea life, as well as gemstones. “People spend a lot of time peering into it,” says Riso, describing the often “hilarious” scene of people crawling on the floor. Replicating Talisman’s sun logo, a giant sun chandelier shines down on the river with 129 six-foot-long blown glass rays. Additional light comes from the “sky” — a 528-square-foot Dale Chihuly-inspired blown glass fixture in blue.

Display cases line two long walls of the 2,700-square-foot store, with one jewelry case in the center. The sales counter is actually a full-service bar. “I try to avoid having people sit at the jewelry case,” Riso notes, preferring to keep the sales process “mobile.” Equipped with iPads, salespeople roll beverage carts up to customers who are seated on couches or easy chairs placed around the store.



Talisman also carries accessories, fine leather goods, men's jewelry, rare guitars and "always diamonds." Riso merchandises by designer galleries and secondarily by color within that gallery. "The jewelry has to resonate with me and fill a want or need in terms of our global clientele, which is driven by ecommerce." Yael Designs, Beverly K, Paula Crevoshay, Suzy Landa and Ninacci are among her top sellers. Custom work with existing design houses accounts for about 60 percent of sales.

ENTERTAIN AND EDUCATE

"A vivid takeaway from studying the Apple store for my thesis is the genius of entertaining children while the grownups are shopping," Riso points out. Her children's area has iPads, but more popular is a big treasure chest filled with semiprecious gems and rocks. And Riso goes a step further with "educational tools" — a gemscope, presentation magnifiers and "big fat tweezers."

Rather than giving a gift with purchase to the mother, little girls get a small gemstone ring while the boys are given a polished rock or rough amethyst. "We start them early so they can appreciate what is behind the jewelry. Not only does it instill a comfort level in the kids, but the parents feel this great benevolence toward the store for occupying them," Riso points out.

MAN CAVE

A large corner at the rear of the store was converted into a man cave, separated from the other parts of the store by a darker carpet and with museum reproductions of airplanes and hot air balloons suspended from the ceiling. Instead of paintings or something "overtly commercial" on the wall, Riso, a self-described punk rocker in college, used guitars as wall fixtures, but never initially planned to sell them. Located in close proximity to recording studios,

Suzy Landa

Talisman has become a meeting place for music lovers. "People heard about the cool jewelry store with guitars," she says. Through word of mouth, other groups as diverse as yoga teachers and fiction writers congregate there as well. "I never invited them," says Riso. "They just show up. It's like their clubhouse."

With its eclectic decor and designated areas for shopping and play, Talisman redefines the traditional shopping environment. "It is really all about the jewelry but it's engaging and fun," Riso concludes. ♦

