

HELP WANTED

Finding the right subcontractor to meet your needs

BY SHANNON L. BROWN

Editor's Note: *This is the first in a two-part series on subcontracting. Here, you'll read about how to find a contract service provider who is the right fit for your needs. Next month, you'll hear from designers and jewelers who have worked with subcontractors about what they've learned from their experiences.*

Jeweler One: A manufacturing jeweler has grown her business beyond what she can handle. Instead of hiring employees, she lightens her load by having someone else clean up castings and pavé set stones, two areas that she's noticed take a lot of time

but don't give a huge return on investment.

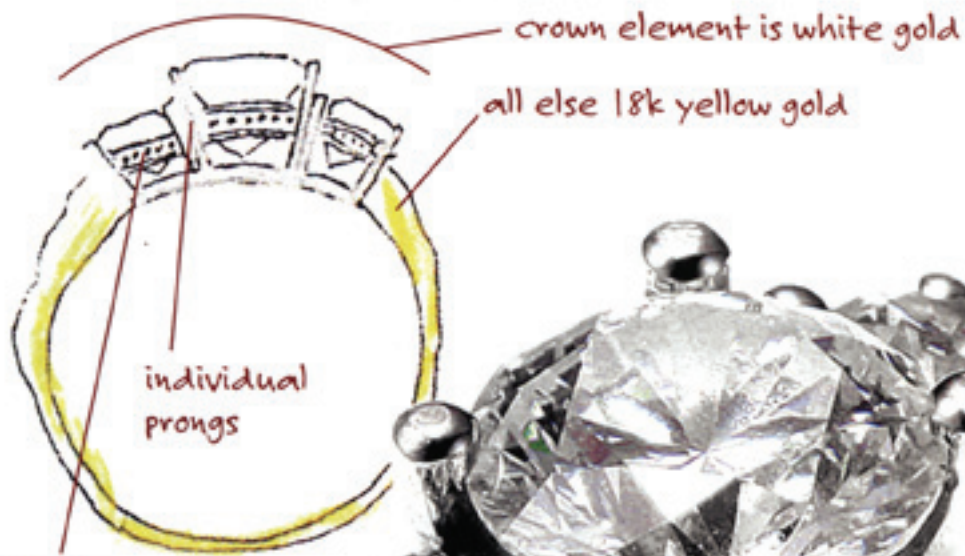
Jeweler Two: A jewelry maker decides it's time to try a contemporary metal. He proudly casts gold in-house, but casting the other metal (he debates cobalt chrome and titanium—both are intriguing) will require not only new equipment, but also time spent learning a new process. He opts to have a specialty caster handle the job.

Jeweler Three: A young bench jeweler needs to set the most stunning 2 carat emerald he's ever seen. After carefully weighing his options, he decides to have an expert in

stone setting handle the precarious job.

Jeweler Four: A jewelry designer awakens with an idea for a new ring design. She sketches it then e-mails it off to her CAD designer, starting a process of manufacturing that never has *her* sitting at a bench.

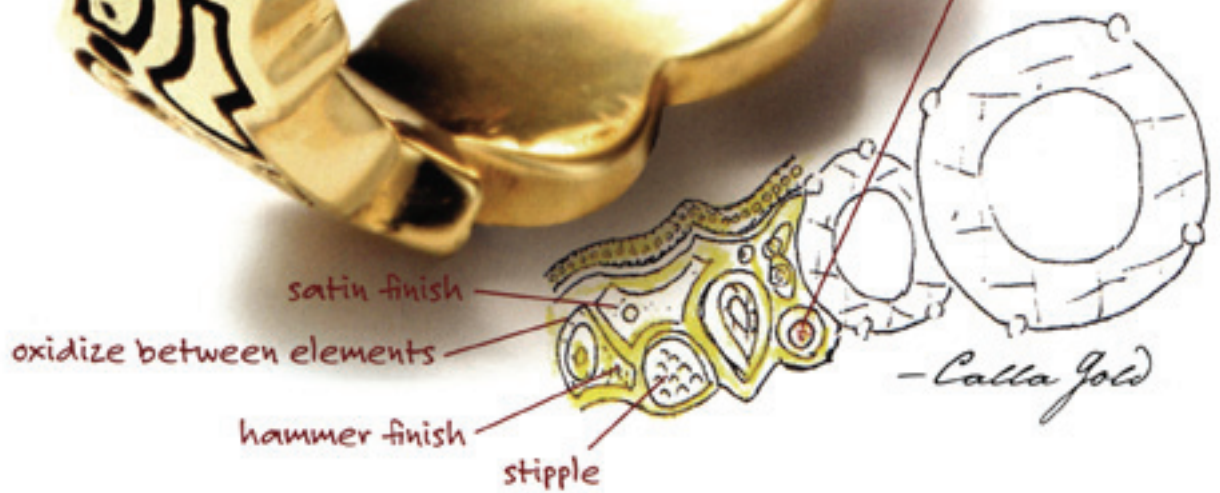
For various reasons, each of these jewelers relies on one or more subcontractors to achieve their goals. If the time comes when you could benefit from the help of an outside service provider, it's important to be clear about your expectations and find the right one for the job.



milgrain
engrave above
& below with
granulation dots
in the middle



each small
diamond is
a color —
yellow, cognac,
champagne, etc.





Ask the Right Questions

Before you approach a subcontractor about doing some work for you, know what you need. Use the following list of questions as a starting point assessment:

- What metal(s)/gemstone(s) do I want to work in?
- How many pieces do I need produced?
- What general price points am I looking to achieve? (This will impact the quality of product you will require.)
- Which manufacturing process will be best suited to my design (stamping, casting, hand fabrication, etc.)?
- What parts of the manufacturing process do I need done for me, and what can I do myself?
- How quickly do I need the job done from the time I place the order?
- Am I willing to work with a company overseas?

If you can answer all of these questions, you have a good base from which to start a discussion with a potential subcontractor. But how do you find one?

When designer Malak Atut approaches a potential subcontractor, she shows examples of past commissions that have gone well (this page) and poorly (opposite page). This helps the subcontractor to visually understand the level of quality that she expects.

Find a Subcontractor

While some subcontractors manage the entire manufacturing process from CAD through finishing, others specialize in just one aspect, such as casting or stone setting. Those who specialize often have a network of providers they can call upon to get you what you need, ferrying the job from one to the other until the piece is finished to your specifications.

Subcontractors can be found all over the U.S. and overseas. So how do you decide whom to call? Here are a few suggestions:

• **Contact your trade organization for suggestions.** Industry trade organizations such as MJSA can point you in the right direction. "We get calls from members all the time looking for help with subcontracting the manufacturing of some or all aspects of their designs," says Corrie Silvia Berry, MJSA sales manager. "We can help them with any questions they might have about the jewelry they want to make, and using our

Buyer's Resource, they can find subcontractors who will get the job done."

• **Go local.** For some jewelers or designers, it's essential to be able to walk into a subcontractor's shop and witness the process firsthand. This makes it easier to deliver and pick up goods and check quality, but it may not be necessary—nor is it always the best option.

Kim Fox of Handfast Design by Kim Fox in Mayer, Arizona, first tried working with a local company to cast her line of findings but quickly realized that location wasn't everything. "With the first casting house, I went with someone local because I thought it would be convenient, but it was a costly mistake," she says. "There was a lot of porosity and the overall quality was poor. Basically, I had it melted down and had to start over."

• **Get referrals.** Designers and subcontractors alike say that asking peers in the industry for referrals is one of the best ways to find a service provider.



Online forums such as the Ganoksin Orchid e-mail forum and jewelry groups on social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn provide platforms for you to connect with other jewelers and get suggestions. If you don't know the person who makes the suggestion, check out his or her website. Chances are if you are impressed with the jewelry and he or she has similar manufacturing needs, the subcontractor might also be able to help you out.

Mike Sudlow, manager of the wholesale trade shop at Teneff Jewelry Inc. in Spokane, Washington, says his company's business has grown through referrals. He advises jewelers to go with their gut after an initial discussion with a potential subcontractor. "The number one [factor to consider is] do they listen to [you] and do they understand [you]," he says. "If the initial conversation goes well and you have a good feeling about [the subcontractor], try them out."

Vet the List

Once you have a list of potential subcontractors, there are ways to vet them before making a commitment. You can start by contacting

them and asking for a list of references. Just as you would check the references of a potential employee before hiring him or her, so too should you ask around about the quality of work performed by a potential service provider.

Another way to explore your options is to literally compare them. Designer Malak Atut of Zaiken Jewelry in New York City did just that with a group of three subcontractors she located through referrals. "Once I had a clear understanding of what my own expectations were in terms of finish, durability, function, and appearance, I gave the three subcontractors the same project," she describes. "During that process I was able to compare the three on a level playing field. Points for comparison were the time it took to produce, how the communication was along the way, their ability and attitude to make changes or adjustments along the way, quality of finished product, and cost."

Atut devised a point system for each of the categories, scored the subcontractors accordingly, and tallied the points up at the end to arrive at a winner. "It was actually surprising how different the results were from each manufacturer, even

though they were given the exact same instructions," she says. "I really stress the idea of taking some time and money up front to do the diligence and find the best fit for you."

That said, stay reasonable in your expectations for the first project. "I don't expect perfection," says Calla Gold of Calla Gold Jewelry in Santa Barbara, California. "I expect that the more we work together, the more they'll understand what I want... On their side, they may realize that my polishing requirements and finishing details need to be better than their general work." If the company can adjust to your needs, perfecting the product over time, it could be a good fit.

Sort Out the Basics

After making contact with one or more potential subcontractors and telling them what you need, ask them to outline the following for you:

- **Cost.** Some jewelers are concerned about broaching the subject of money with a subcontractor. But this is a business relationship, and cost is a critical factor