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THE INDUSTRY AUTHORITY

MARCH 2011

ANNUAL DESIGNER ISSUE

LADIES PLAN When **Robin Austin**, the owner of 23-year-old Austin & Elkins in Alexandria, Va., wants to strengthen her store's selection, she looks to other women—in particular, fashionable women who seem like the kind of customer she wants to attract.



Austin finds trade fairs a particularly fruitful breeding ground. "If I see an elegant, stately woman representing a line at a trade show, it makes a good first impression—and I often stop to see the line," she says. She's landed numerous designers, including Breski and Dana David, this way. Quality, value, and interesting designs—such as mesh styles from Adami & Martucci—are paramount, as well as exclusivity. "I prefer that designers not be represented within a 25-mile radius," she says. Austin recommends retailers become better at listening to shopper requests, and pay close attention to what their customers are wearing. Last but not least, she urges buyers to wear comfortable shoes: "Nothing is more effective than a long walk up and down the trade show aisles."

ROAD TRIPPER **Deborah LaBonte's** job is never done. For the past 18 years, the owner of Positive Images Art & Unique Gifts in Austin, Texas, has not only taken her work home with her—she's also brought it on vacation. In Santa Fe, N.M., she found Michael Jensen Designs, a maker of sterling and 22k gold jewelry, and in New York, she discovered *ila & i*. LaBonte is always on the hunt for designers of jewelry and gifts that will appeal to her customers. "My daughter is always saying, 'Mom, we're on vacation!'" she laughs. Regardless of where she makes her discoveries—in a shop along the coast of Oregon or in downtown Chicago—all designers must appeal to her sensibility: "It has to be something I would wear," LaBonte explains. "I also never buy things that I say, 'I don't like that, but someone else might.'" Among the 65 lines she carries (and displays) in store are Barbara Heinrich and Petra Class, as well as Todd Reed—all of which she discovered at trade shows. However, another trick of LaBonte's is to shop the occasional retail show: "I met Sarah Graham at the Smithsonian Craft Show many years ago, and her rings have continued to sell very well for us."

WAIT-AND-SEE POLICY When considering a new designer for Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry and Watches, **Susan Eisen** takes her time—up to three years, in fact. "I study lines," explains the El Paso, Texas, store owner. "I want to make sure the fit is right, so I watch a person's progress, how their work changes." All 16 lines in her store are neither too modern nor too traditional. Another caveat: They



must be run by pleasant personalities—like Philadelphia-based Lagos, with whom she's worked since 1992. (Firms she avoids: those that abruptly cancel show appointments, don't honor exclusivity agreements, or have attitudes of superiority.) To find new talent, Eisen shops Centurion, the AGTA GemFair, the emerging-talent sections of shows, and, ahem, the pages of trade magazines. ■