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## Wedding Jewellery Purchasing Process

### Qualitative Research Feedback

April 2007

In January 2007 we were commissioned by the Platinum Guild International (PGI) to undertake some in-depth interviews amongst recently married couples who had purchased either platinum or white metal engagement rings and/ or wedding rings.

From the feedback we gained a detailed understanding of consumers' purchasing process for wedding jewellery and their perceptions of the retail experience; exploring what factors influence behaviour and increased loyalty. This is what we discovered...

### In the UK it has become popular for couples to purchase the engagement ring together

In the UK the majority of men are traditionally proposing to their partners with more than half of men purchasing the engagement ring on their own in advance of the proposal.

However, fear of getting the wrong engagement ring as well as the rise in couples living together, and often having children prior to marriage had encouraged many couples to purchase the engagement ring together post engagement.

### When women were involved in the engagement ring purchase they undertook the majority of background research

The UK trend of delaying the purchase of the engagement ring until after the proposal has placed greater emphasis on the role of the woman in the purchasing process.

Therefore, although the final purchase was a joint decision, women generally facilitated all background research, including both window shopping and going into the retailers to look at

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engagement rings in more detail and ask questions. This preliminary research helped to simplify the process when later shopping with their partner by enabling women to prioritise retailers and rings they liked.

Women involved in the purchase of the engagement ring were not only on an emotional high from the decision to get married, but were also very excited by the prospect of choosing their engagement ring and were keen for others, including the retailers, to share their enthusiasm.

### When shopping without their partners, women often felt they were taken less seriously by the retailers

Prior to purchase, many women either visited retailers alone, or with female friends/ relatives and whilst this was a very emotionally exciting time for them, they often felt the retailers were dismissive of them; failing to empathise with their mood and answer enquiries sufficiently.

Therefore instead of feeling like a 'princess' some women felt a lack of connection with the retailers and the service they received often left them feeling deflated, undervalued and as a consequence unlikely to return as a customer.

This suggests some retailers were failing to recognise the importance of women in the purchasing process and were only interested in short term returns and immediate sales instead of looking at the long term benefits of good customer service.

### **If local retailers do not fulfill a woman's wish list the couples were traveling further a field**

Men shopping for an engagement ring were generally only visiting retailers near to their home or place of work so as not to create suspicion from their partner.

Likewise, most couples in their quest to find the engagement ring also shopped locally, however some were traveling further a field if needs were not met by local retailers. Frequently couples spread their search to nearby towns and/ or cities but a few were willing to travel to up to 100 miles or more to find the ring they wanted; often switching away from national chains and towards independent retailers.

Hence, suggesting an expectation amongst consumers of a generic range across all stores and a need for uniformed customer service as a bad experience in one branch reduced the chance of consumers returning to the same retailer in another location.

### **When choosing a retailer a good choice of platinum wedding jewellery enhanced expectations of product and retailer quality**

For many consumers the engagement ring was the most expensive piece of jewellery they had ever purchased; with many prioritising retailers that provided status and emotionally supported how special the purchase was.

Interestingly retailers that had a good range of platinum wedding jewellery were not only more likely to attract sales per se, but also sell more platinum rings and provided expectations to all of superior quality over and above retailers with a less impressive range.

### **Consumers were often not advised about the benefits of platinum**

Consumers that were determined to purchase platinum were often reassured by the retailer they had made a good decision. However, although some consumers had initially planned to purchase platinum, the cost of the metal and its impact upon the size of the diamond had led some to trade down to white gold.

Prior to purchase limited knowledge about platinum and white gold; led some consumers to base their decision on the similarity of both metals' appearance rather than the metals' durability and/ or purity.

Interestingly, although consumers were often given information to take home relating to ring designs and diamonds, in this piece of research, none had been given any written information on platinum to take away with them.

For some, failure by the retailers to educate them on the benefits and pitfalls of the different metals, specifically the need to frequently replace the rhodium plating of white gold had caused some white gold purchasers feeling regretful about their decision and, in hindsight, wishing they had instead traded up to platinum.

### Consumers were more likely to purchased from a retailer that provided good customer service

Consistently throughout the research sales consultants that identified with the customer and their situation were the most successful at converting enquiries into sales; be it men shopping for a ring on their own and feeling out of their depth, or retailers that empathised with women's desire to feel special and the centre of attention.

Sales consultants who listened to the customers' needs, providing advice and guidance on what they were looking for fed into the 'princess effect' and/ or quashed male anxiety and initial distrust (of the retailer). For consumers that also included everyday High St retailers in their search, good service could potentially uplift quality perceptions of both brand and the ring range.

Good sales consultants were seen as professional but approachable in their manner; respecting the customers' budget and attentive in the service they provided. As many couples were purchasing the ring together and in some cases with children, retailers who were able to provide a separate area for the couple to discretely discuss the purchase and if needed provide distractions for the children were felt to add value to the experience.

Consumers that were happy with the sales experience felt the service they received fitted the investment they were making, and interestingly whilst budget was a priority for many, good

service encouraged some to spend more than they had initially intended (and were happy to do so!)

When customer service matched or exceeded expectations consumer confidence and their enjoyment of the process increased: cementing the relationship between the retailer and the consumer and optimising future sales opportunities.

### **The purchase of the wedding rings was generally less emotionally involving than the engagement ring**

When it came to purchasing the wedding rings couples are generally shopping together with the purchase of the rings being acknowledged by almost all as more symbolic than the engagement ring. However, although the purchasing process was often led by the woman, research was less extensive and the experience often seen as less exciting by those that had been involved in the purchase of the engagement ring.

Caught up in their wedding preparations, many women were distracted by other events (such as finding the wedding dress) often causing the purchase of the wedding rings to be seen as just another thing to cross off a long list of planning and preparations.

### **The popularity of male wedding rings has increased but many couples were failing to set aside a sufficient budget**

The research suggested there is an increasing expectation for a man to wear a wedding ring, with almost all couples purchasing wedding rings for both of them. This has had a positive effect on sales as men were not only purchasing heavier rings but, particularly amongst those in their twenties, there was a trend for men to opt for wedding rings with diamond insets.

However whilst these factors could have a significant impact upon total spend, there appeared to be little guidance on what budget consumers needed to set aside for the wedding rings; with most couples guessing budgets and often underestimating total costs.

### Retailers prompting consumers on lead times and budget may potentially increase future spend

Couples that had set aside sufficient time and budget to purchase what they both desired were generally shopping for wedding rings earlier than those that spent less. Some couples had planned the purchase of the wedding rings to coincide with important anniversaries, with some increasing their budget and buying the rings as birthday or Christmas gift to each other. However purchasing wedding rings later in the wedding planning process often reduced total spend and greater demands on their money nearer the wedding had encouraged a few to look for cheaper alternatives; reinforcing need amongst couples for extra planning and sufficient budget to be set aside for the wedding rings.

Additionally, couples that purchased their wedding rings later saw the purchasing process as more stressful and in some cases this put extra strain in their relationship: with some buying the rings separately or leaving it to the female to make the final decision on purchases.

Therefore, whilst many retailers were advising couples on lead time for the wedding rings there may be further opportunities for the retailer to make contact with customers who previously purchased engagement ring to prompt them on lead times and provide guidance on budget (potentially by post).

### Matching metal was a priority for the woman's engagement and wedding ring but significantly less important for the couples' rings

The appearance and metal of a woman's wedding ring was driven by the engagement ring, with all women choosing a wedding ring in the same metal as her engagement ring to avoid the metals wearing on each other. Therefore initially trading consumers up to a platinum engagement ring encouraged a woman's future wedding and potentially eternity rings to also be in platinum.

However, although both halves of a couple were purchasing a wedding ring, interestingly the rings were rarely seen as a set; with purchases being driven by individual needs rather than joint needs and with little importance placed on the couple's wedding rings matching or having similar appearance.

Although the wedding rings were a mutually involving purchase, insufficient funds at time of purchase often led the woman's requirement to be prioritised over the man's and many men were trading down to white gold or titanium to save money.

These findings suggest there may be opportunities in the future for the retailers to build upon the wedding rings' symbolic and emotional unity by communicating the importance of the metal of both rings being the same.

### Good customer service encouraged long-term loyalty

Most consumers that received good service when they purchased the engagement ring were returning to the same retailer to purchase their wedding rings; simplifying the purchasing process and making it more time efficient by reducing the need to shop around (despite not always being seen as the cheapest option).

A positive sales experience increased long term loyalty with many also returning to purchase eternity rings, additional wedding and birthday gifts as well as referring 'their jewellers' to friends and family; all of which had a substantial effect on a retailer's sales and turn over.

### There are opportunities to add value to the purchasing experience of wedding rings

Although the wedding rings purchase was often seen as less involving than the purchase of the engagement ring several retailers had added value to the experience by providing service that exceeded consumers' expectations; including sourcing rings, matching internet prices, making home visits and personal follow up calls (pre and post wedding). Some retailers also rewarded customers who purchased more than one ring with discounts; others gave women gifts of earrings and one noted a future bride's birthday by sending her a bracelet.

This suggests that there are opportunities for some retailers to work harder to replicate the 'princess effect' with the wedding ring by improving customer service but also by providing small gifts for the bride or ideally the couple to share after the wedding, e.g. potentially premium chocolate, matching pens, vouchers for M&S, or flowers, etc.