

The ability to keep prices within a certain range is one of the major advantages of having a production line. Because design time is spread among many pieces, rather than concentrated in a single, one-of-a-kind effort, the artist can afford to price a piece less expensively than he or she might otherwise.

"[A production line] amortizes your design time so that the effort you put into creating the line gets paid for over a long period of time," says Betty Helen Longhi, a jewelry crafts-person making both one-of-a-kind and production pieces in her studio, Expressions in Metal, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "The whole idea is that you can make a good design, then make it a lot of times to cover the cost of designing."

"As a person who's in business, you need to make money and produce product the public can afford," she adds. "The best way to do that is to do production."

A production line offers another distinct advantage to the craftsperson as well — a steady stream of income from proven sellers. "The advantage is in having repeat orders," says Sherris Cottier Shank, a Southfield, Michigan, gem cutter who recently introduced a line of production gemstone carvings. "Once jewelry manufacturers start selling [production pieces], they continue to reorder and it's a very steady business. Establishing the business in the first place [can be] hard, but once it's rolling it has a momentum all its own."

**T**HE STARTING LINE. Developing a production line can mean anything from a design replicated multiple times by the artist's own hand to a studio where hired assistants and commercial subcontractors do the majority of the execution of the artist's designs. Karash, for example, hand fabricates virtually all of her production, which is generally limited to 10 to 15 pieces at a time, while Boston, Massachusetts, production jeweler Betsy Frost relies extensively on subcontractors and paid assistants to create her line of sterling silver jewelry, which is sold in galleries across the country.

Other artists opt for limited production, in which the same basic design is used either a limited number of times, or with slight variations in each piece. "I do theme pieces, where I take a basic background format and design elements that I use, like a pearl and a piece of forged gold, and design around that," says Longhi. "I can charge a production price, because the way of designing it has been set and mechanical problems have been solved, but it gives me the freedom to play within those parameters. For me, that's been a great way to do production work without the burnout of cranking out the same piece over and over."

Whatever type of production the artist chooses, the first step to creating a production line is

design. While some artists choose to design pieces specifically for the line, others select strong sellers from the artist's one-of-a-kind offerings that will lend themselves to production.

"I originally made one-of-a-kind pieces, then I chose something I could move into production," says Karash. "I chose [the ones I did] because they were pieces that I could duplicate fairly easily and because they were very popular. They're also pieces that I can make fairly quickly and sell at a reasonable price, so they're very affordable and very wearable."

For Cottier Shank, the incentive was to find a more efficient way to meet demand for a particular type of gemstone. "When I was doing strictly one of a kind, I was doing a lot of carved onyx, and it seemed no matter how much I cut, I was still cutting more, so I decided to look into a way to make that process easier," she says.

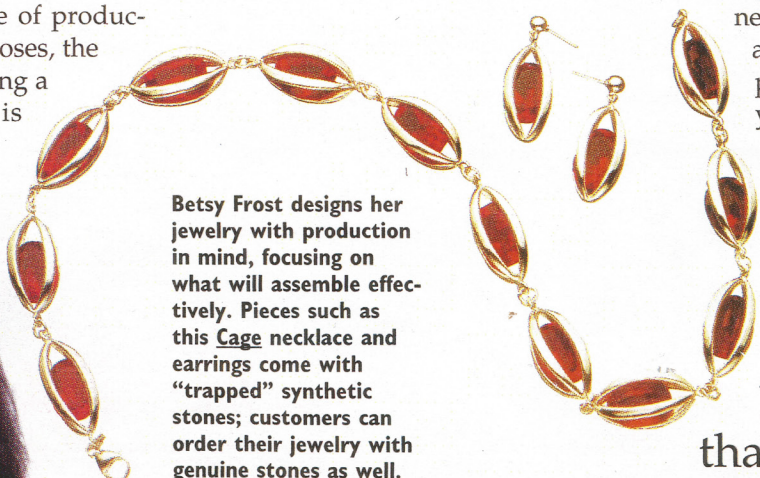
Frost, on the other hand, designs her pieces with production in mind. "When I'm creating, I'm creating new prototypes and I'm trying to design in a way that will assemble effectively and work on a production level," she says. "I haven't made a one-of-a-kind piece since art school."

To be a successful addition to a production line, a piece must be easily reproducible, whether it achieves that status intentionally or serendipitously. "You have to be able to control the outcome of what you're doing," says Karash. "If you have a piece where you're spending a lot of time doing elaborate mechanisms or something, it doesn't lend itself to production because you can't make it fast enough and it's very tedious [to repeat]."

Designs should also avoid one-of-a-kind materials, such as unusual gemstones or other materials that may not be readily available when that big order comes in. "In my one-of-a-kind pieces, I use a lot of unusual things — colored surfaces and horsehair and things like that," says Karash. "But I don't use them in my production pieces: I stay strictly metal in those. My production pieces don't have stones in them, but if I were [using stones], then I'd have to have a source to get that stone every time."

"You have to be careful to design a piece you know you can reproduce, that you can polish and finish, and that you can do all these things in the right amount of time," says Cottier Shank. "When you do production, everything is exaggerated — any problem that you have with one-of-a-kind will become more [of a problem]. So if you design a piece that's difficult to polish, and then you have to sand and polish 300 of them, your life is really bad."

For a gem cutter, that means working in a material that lends itself to repetition as well. "You have to have pieces of rough that are always the same size and thickness, so that eliminates certain kinds of materials, or it means you have to do a lot of rough preparation," says Cottier Shank. "When you've promised someone this piece is going to be just the one you showed them, you can't make changes along the way."



Betsy Frost designs her jewelry with production in mind, focusing on what will assemble effectively. Pieces such as this **Cage** necklace and earrings come with "trapped" synthetic stones; customers can order their jewelry with genuine stones as well. Photos: Peter Groesbeck.

"Managing is something that takes longer than I ever thought it would . . ."