



Whatever topic was discussed during CIBJO's popular *Jewellery Industry Voices* webinars, writes Edward Johnson, the conversations always converged on two big shifts that the jewellery industry needs to embrace: the use of technology and the need for social responsibility.

Don't go dark." This was the advice of Ben Smithee, founder of New York-based digital marketing agency, The Smithee Group, back in the uncertain early days of the global pandemic. His webinar on 20 March 2020, 'Responding to Coronavirus as a Business', was one of seven online webinars or Zoom meetings I attended that day.

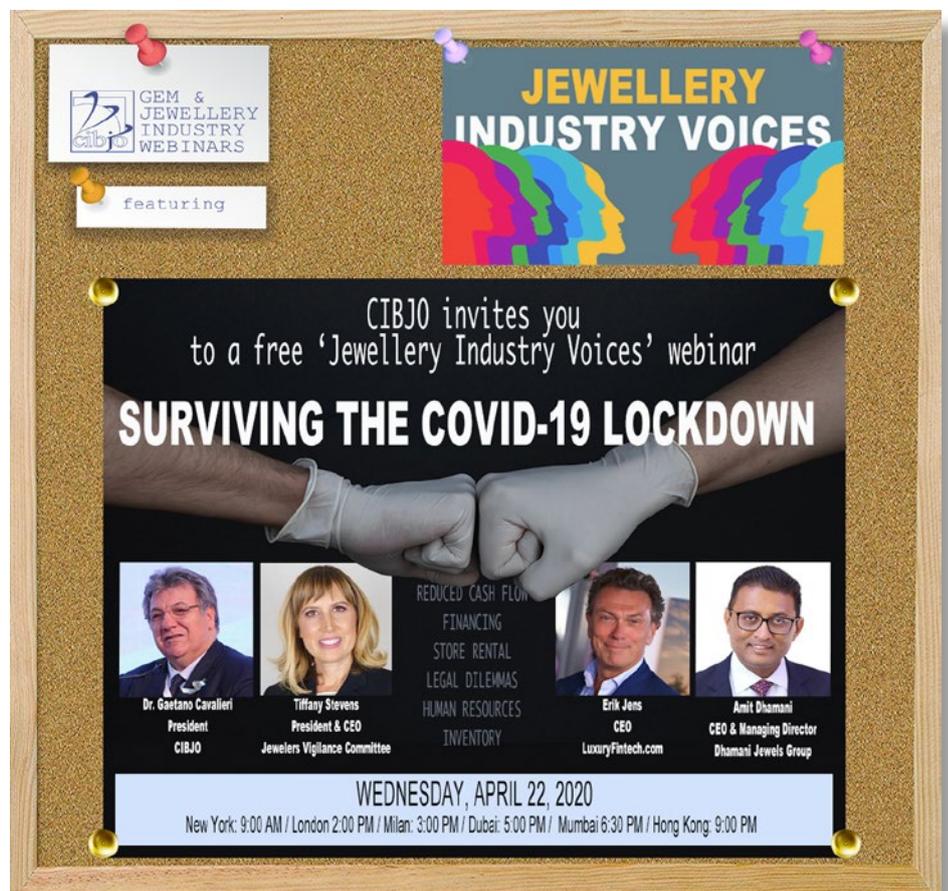
Another session from that day was gem educator Rui Galopim de Carvalho's 'Home Gemmology' webinar. Here, Rui was putting Ben's advice into practice. That very week, Rui had started a gemmology webinar series (see p. 11) that quickly went viral, one that many people name as a positive development that came out of the personal and professional trauma we all endured in 2020.

Aimed at entertaining and educating gemmologists and other members of the global jewellery community, Rui's webinars, held four times a week, reached audiences of up to 600 people. Their focus on the lighter side of gemmology allowed people to 'let their hair down' while learning something within a community of like-minded industry professionals, many of whom had been furloughed and were uncertain of what the future held.

But what about businesses? What were industry leaders thinking? I suggested to Rui that we engage these leaders, to begin talking about how the jewellery business was reacting to this pandemic. We needed to lean in, I felt; we needed to gather online and give industry leaders a

platform to talk about the issues that we were all facing and how, collectively, we could deal with them and recover. I brought this idea to Gaetano Cavalieri, president of The World Jewellery Confederation (CIBJO), the industry's oldest international trade association. As luck would have it, Steve Benson, CIBJO's director of communications, had been working on a similar concept, so we joined forces.

And so was born the 'Jewellery Industry Voices' series, which debuted on 22 April and ran weekly through the spring and summer with an average audience of more than 550 viewers per webinar. Since September 2020 CIBJO has aired the series monthly. We now have a list of 75 industry leaders who have joined as panellists, lending their voices to the conversation. Initially covering how



to survive COVID, we developed topics including gemstone traceability, pearl sustainability, the shift to e-commerce, the future of trade shows, the role of social media and brand marketing. The webinars are free to attend and open to all, with recordings uploaded to CIBJO's YouTube channel.

As I prepared to lead these discussions, I learnt that, whatever the overall topic or starting point, we always converged on two big shifts that the jewellery industry needs to embrace: the use of technology and the need for social responsibility.

TECHNOLOGY

It became obvious that jewellery businesses all along the supply chain need to develop an online presence. We learnt that overall, the industry needs to adopt more 'digital first' strategies — that is, to prepare omni-channel approaches to selling jewellery. This is especially important for retailers, who should take a two-pronged approach when embracing technology. The first is enabling customers to view their offerings online more efficiently, not just for direct sales, but to draw them into the physical stores. The second involves analysing those online interactions and using the data collected from them to serve customers better.

By now, we are all familiar with the concept of our data being used by big-name firms with large tech resources. These companies tailor advertisements to our needs based on who we are, what we search for and view online, and what attracts us as individuals. "If you're not paying for it, you're the product" is the established maxim online. Using the keystrokes and landing points of customers on their online platforms, retailers should learn about their customers and thus tailor products and services to them.

One challenge that some start-ups are addressing is how to trade in gemstones and jewellery online, where a customer does not have the ability to handle or touch the product. Social distancing and travel restrictions mean the traditional mainstay of the coloured gemstone — selling face-to-face at trade shows or retail outlets — has been almost totally curtailed. Technological solutions must allow coloured gemstones, which lack an internationally accepted communication system such as the 4Cs for diamond, to

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be effectively viewed and traded online.

Technology certainly cannot replace the skills and techniques that a professional gemmologist or jeweller develops over years. It also cannot replace the sensual experience derived from seeing, touching and trying on a piece of jewellery. But a balance needs to be achieved to allow for ease of quality assessment and trading online. This balance between the physical and digital, or 'phygital,' as noted by Swiss watch industry expert Thomas Baillod

in the May 2020 webinar, is crucial for the jewellery trade to explore. During our January 2021 panel, Andrew Siegel of Hamilton Jewelers (New Jersey and Florida, both USA) explained that his retail outlets were aiming to be "high tech while remaining high touch."

We also learnt from David Block at Sarine how artificial intelligence (AI) can support more efficient diamond grading; from Charles Bonas of the Bonas Group how augmented reality (AR) gives companies the ability to show customers what a →

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Sustainable Pearls Project

Jeremy Shepherd
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piece of jewellery on the screen would look like on the customer who is viewing from home; and how using cloud-based software allows process optimisation and improved efficiency from Veronica Favoroso (The Gem Cloud, London, and Bangkok, Thailand).

RESPONSIBILITY

One of the main themes that came up in each session was the role that jewellery plays in society, especially in a time of crisis. It was clear in the early days of the pandemic that buying jewellery was not a major concern for most consumers. Toilet paper, pasta and electronic gadgets to stay connected were deemed far more important. But John Carter (Jack Lewis Jewelers, Bloomington, Illinois, USA) reminded us that "Love isn't quarantined."

During this international crisis, many people realised the true importance of their loved ones and the need for human connection. The need to celebrate those people and those connections was strong. Jewellery, so frequently given to celebrate special moments, is often

loaded with meaning for the givers AND the recipients. Birthdays, anniversaries, graduations and engagements were all still happening. New reasons to buy significant pieces, such as celebrating simply being together, also arose. Jewellers need to be ready to serve those needs.

But we in the industry also need to be aware that consumers have changed. Melanie Grant, editor of *1843 Magazine*, said that younger customers themselves now want to know "who you are and what you stand for as a brand." They increasingly expect any brand to speak to their core values, and these often include an awareness of environmental and social issues. Jewellery is susceptible to negative impacts along its supply chain, since the low-volume, high-value raw materials are often mined and processed in countries where the incomes earned are crucial for families to avoid poverty.

The ways that jewellery benefits countries in need of economic growth, particularly those where artisanal miners and cutters live in poverty, are stories that jewellers need to focus on to create

a connection between the customer and the piece. Verifiable stories of how jewellery has been responsibly produced, by people following internationally accepted standards, can help satisfy consumer expectations. At the same time, consumers can learn how the businesses they buy from can play a role in healing some of society's deepest problems, such as inequality (racial, gender and financial), climate change, poverty and conflict. Focusing only on product quality, price or service is not as attractive to the modern consumer as demonstrating the value your jewellery brings to society.

It is clear to me now, one year into this pandemic, just how resilient the global jewellery industry is. It has weathered so many economic downturns, but it

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GEMSTONE TRACEABILITY

VIABLE OBJECTIVE OR UNREALISTIC CHALLENGE

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International Colored Gemstone Association (ICA)
Brazil

Hayley Henning
Chief Commercial Officer
Greenland Ruby
Greenland USA

Cristina Maria Villagas
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Managing Director
Gubelin Gem Lab
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has consistently recovered, because people do not buy jewellery merely based on the financial value of an item or as an investment. They buy to celebrate special moments and to cement human connections. They buy to adorn themselves and express their individuality through symbolic meaning in the pieces and jewellers they choose. And they buy from people — creative people they trust and admire and who serve them with knowledge and integrity.

Jewellery companies need to serve their clients not only with quality products, but with the technology of the times, while respecting the dignity of people all along the supply chain. ■

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