

A Hertfordshire jewellery design business is defying the recession with soaring sales; a beacon of light at a time when many high street names are foundering on the jagged rocks of economic downturn.

Harriet Kelsall Jewellery Design, operating out of a design studio in rural Hertfordshire and a shop in Cambridge, is busy upsetting the odds, posting sales growth of seven per cent during a period Gordon Brown described as 'recession not experienced since the 1930s.'

It's an exceptional achievement and one that founder and managing director Harriet Kelsall puts down to both the sterling work her 30 employees and the inherent value of premium jewellery. In times of financial uncertainty, people limit their investments to products that possess a value they can actually see and feel. Many of Harriet's customers see her unique designer jewellery as just that; a sound alternative to placing their funds in banks or shares.

From the moment a customer enters Harriet Kelsall HQ - a wonderfully lit barn conversion on a working farm in the hamlet of Halls Green, near Hitchin - they become part of the design process. The customer plays a crucial role in bringing their vision to life, and their involvement helps to ease the nerves that come with forking out two or three months' wages on a bespoke diamond engagement ring.

It's exactly this transparent process - from first sketch to bended knee - that appeals to customers in this age of retail. At a time when businesses all over the world are being turned upside down by poor decisions made by faceless executives behind closed doors, it's good to know there are still companies that prosper from involving their customers as much as possible.

Harriet founded the company in 1998 from her kitchen table. Key to the company's rapid growth was her early adoption of the internet as a sales channel. This foresight meant that the company's barn launch in Halls Green was soon followed by a presence on the world stage. Indeed, run a Google search for 'bespoke engagement rings' and the company appears at the top of the list. This gave her business an international reach and orders soon started rolling in from customers across the globe, interested in her unique designs.

*"In 1996/1997, I put some jewellery online for a customer in Scotland so that she could see it without visiting and it worked really well - I realised then that this 'internet thing' was good. I was lucky to be in fairly early on as it's helped us to keep a good position once search engines like Google came along later," she said.*

Since then Harriet Kelsall Jewellery Design has grown to a team of 30 designers, goldsmiths and project managers. The company has also opened a shop in Cambridge and branched out into the world of dress jewellery with its Purple Label range; comprising pieces typically costing upwards of £30. All the jewellery is made in the Hertfordshire studio or Cambridge shop rather than mass-produced in the Far East; British jewellery made by British workers.

Harriet feels very strongly about the use of ethically sourced materials, both fair trade gemstones and fair trade gold and plays a leading role in the jewellery industry promoting this cause. She offers one of the only bespoke commission services that can be fully handmade in fairly traded gold, a major selling

point in the jewellery industry and an area that has only recently come under close scrutiny in the press.

But despite her expansion onto the high street, Harriet believes the company's current success stems from the market's move "towards quality and away from brands." It's a trend she believes will continue as the international retail market weathers the current financial storm.

Perhaps. But ultimately one cannot overlook the type of service Harriet Kelsall is providing. These are no ordinary trinkets; they are a full-blown expression of love, a commitment to surviving both the good times and the bad. Financial downturn has a way of polarising our desires and more and more people come to realise that true wealth and happiness is derived from love not money.

*"I think when times are hard people focus on those things that are really important to them - either getting engaged or just buying a necklace to say 'I love you'," she said. "Maybe there is an element of that behind our success."*

Nothing demonstrates this more dramatically than the surge in demand Harriet witnessed on 9/11, the actual day the planes hit the twin towers. "We saw the most phenomenal peak, five times the normal hits to the website. It was the same after the July 7 bombings and we are seeing the same now."

And while the retail industry reels in the wake of international market freefall, there will always be a demand for first-rate products and excellent service, a seemingly forgotten tenet of business and one which this Hertfordshire business will be hanging its hat on for some time to come.