

BY MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

Design from the Heart

Jewelry that means something to its wearers—and its creator

Jill Felts' business is all about believing in the meaning of her work. As the jewelry designer and proprietor of Compelling Creations, Inc., says, "I design sterling silver jewelry that speaks to people. It may seem backwards, but I don't design to market a bestseller; I design a piece with a meaning that resonates with me—a challenge or a truth."

When she does that—by a process she calls "designing from the heart"—more often than not the pieces do end up becoming bestsellers. Felts believes that's because the themes that resonate most strongly with her also hit home with her customers. They become, in effect, conversation pieces.

Among its designs, Compelling Creations fabricates custom charms for camps, schools, and other organizations, often incorporating the group's logo in the design. "I've always believed that people are walking, talking billboards when they believe in something," Felts says, and that's an important aspect of Compelling Creations' marketing plan. The kind of person-to-person discussions triggered by her "walking, talking billboards" create a more valuable connection between her business and potential customers than would simple advertising, she contends.

That's not to say that Felts doesn't exercise more conventional forms of creativity. As proof, she cites her four-quadrant approach to marketing her designs. Her company 1) crafts logowear for organizations, 2) does fundraising for nonprofit organizations through an affiliate marketing program, and 3) sells retail through its website. The fourth quadrant, which Felts says is the newest and most exciting addition to the business, is an independent sales rep program. "This program is empowering women all over the country through the jewelry marketed at 'Wear it and Share it' home parties and local craft shows," she says.

Felts started her business on little more than a wing and a prayer, she says. While she always had confidence that it would eventually go somewhere, she started out with no clear vision of how it might spread. At first, her jewelry designs were primarily a channel for self-expression. "But when other women loved the designs, I was

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encouraged, which bolstered my confidence and drive," she says.

For the first few years after launching her company, Felts struggled to find the right direction for her venture. She describes the business as "floundering" in the mid-1990s, although she remained convinced it would grow into its purpose. "I just didn't know what the purpose was," she laughs.

Her big break came in the form of a chance encounter with a stranger at an Atlanta shopping mall—an opportunity that turned out to be not at all what she expected.

Felts was gazing at some silver crosses on display behind the counter of a chain store best known for its often-raunchy gag gifts. She was pondering the dichotomy of the product placement when her reverie was interrupted by the voice of a stranger at her elbow. Asked what she found so interesting, she responded that she was a designer of sterling silver jewelry and as such always scrutinized silver items when browsing through stores.

The stranger turned out to be the vice president of vendor relations for the chain in question, and he informed Felts that he was responsible for finding new vendors for the nationwide operation. She told him about the Zipper Art on which she was then focused, an assortment of 36 zipper-pull designs ranging from peace signs to cats and dogs. She walked away with the man's business card and an invitation to pitch her Zipper Art to buyers at the chain's national headquarters.

Recalling the incident, Felts says she was "flying high, with dollar signs bulging from my eyes, like in a cartoon." She began doing mental math, multiplying the chain's 500 stores times her 36 designs times each store's daily customer count, and the *ka-ching* of imaginary cash registers began ringing in her ears.

When she told her husband about the seemingly propitious encounter, she felt a bit deflated by his less than enthusiastic response. Upon hearing the name of the chain, he wondered if it was really such a good fit for her designs. Disturbed but not deterred, Felts resolved to forge ahead and sent a proposal to the chain's headquarters.

Lying awake that night, she found herself engrossed by a question she couldn't get out of her mind: Who was she? In searching for the answer, Felts says she became sure of one thing: She was not the type of person who wanted her daughters shopping at the stores with which she was casting her lot.

She was in a panic for the next couple of days, sleeping little but with her vision still blurred by those dollar signs. A few days later, however, the decision was taken out of her

hands with a call from the chain's purchasing department. Felts, it turned out, just wasn't "raunchy" enough for them.

She couldn't have agreed more, and says she laughed and sang and danced with her daughters after hanging up the phone. And within two weeks of the big chain's rejection, she got another call, this one from two women affiliated with the Girl Scouts of the USA. Would she be interested in creating four zipper pulls for that organization?

"My company had been floundering because I didn't really know who I was supposed to be in business," Felts says. "For the first time, I felt my entrepreneurial spirit align with my true self. With this new sense of freedom, I now felt compelled to create my own line of jewelry, and the company I have today was born."

Her first design was the Follow Me pendant. She says her goal was to capture the essence of the responsibility women have to set a good example for their children, family, and friends.

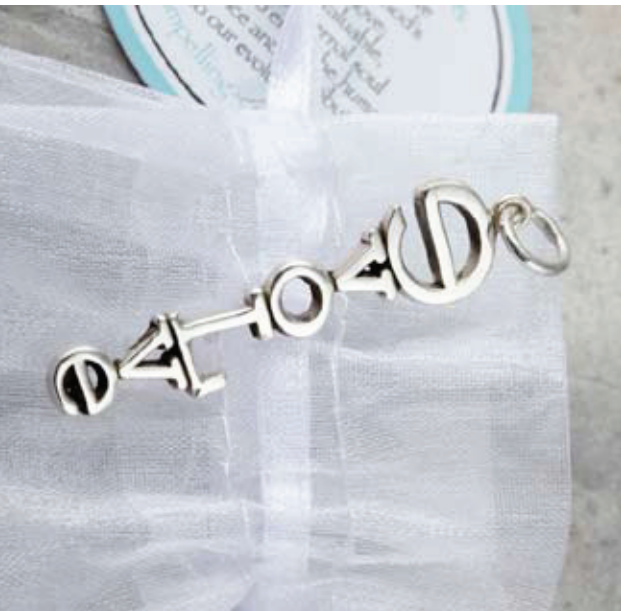
Since then, Compelling Creations has expanded to include dozens of lines and designs that promote unifying messages and speak to people of all ages. Its GenGreen pendant, for example, aims to "mainstream green." The Erika Kate pendant seeks to ease the burdens borne by parents of children with life-threatening heart disease. A lifesaver-shaped pendant reflects the fundamental values of faith, family, and friends.

While Felts' business has grown increasingly successful over the years, she's faced challenges along the way. A big one was dealing with self-doubt. "I learned that you just have to put one foot in front of the other," she says. "You have to envision the perfectly baked soufflé, but it is created one ingredient at a time. Focusing solely on the end result can be daunting."

Entrepreneurs must realize that who they are and what they do need to be aligned, she adds. "You need to *believe* in what you do. My medium is jewelry, but what we're really doing is connecting one woman to another. That's what keeps us going."

Felts wasn't sure at the outset whether hers was going to be a "hobby-business" or a "business-business," so she registered the company's original name, Classy Creations, only in her home state of Georgia. It was cheaper than registering it nationally, but it ended up being an expensive mistake. As the company began to expand and gain national recognition, it started bumping into other businesses using the same name. So Classy Creations became Compelling Creations.

"Changing the corporate name was a very expensive process," Felts says.



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Felts also had to overcome a propensity towards over-reaction when faced with business challenges. "I think this is pretty common among start-up entrepreneurs when sales plateau or something is just not budging," she says. "I've wasted a lot of money on knee-jerk reactions trying to fix problems too quickly. I have learned to spend time researching and talking with people before I throw money at a problem."

Like most entrepreneurs, Felts has endured a few bumps in the road on her journey to success, but she wouldn't change anything about the ride. Her two daughters, one now a college sophomore, the other a senior in high school, have been working alongside her since they were young children, and that's been another gift. "I hope they have learned from me to think outside the box," she says, "and that there are no limitations."

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