

GEM OF A COMEBACK

Houston Jewelry reopens with new market strategy

By GREG HASSELL
Houston Chronicle

THIS time last year, the folks at Houston Jewelry & Distributing Co. were closing their business down.

A local institution — the first store opened on Main Street in 1953 — Houston Jewelry was long on history but short on profits. To make matters worse, it was owned by 35 family members who couldn't agree on how to turn things around.

"We thought it was better to end the business while we were still friends and not end up in court," said Rex Solomon, whose grandfather started the business.

Now Houston Jewelry is back.

In some respects, the changes are minor. The name has been changed slightly to Houston Jewelry & Fine Gifts. Owners Andrew and Rex Solomon are still there, but the dozens of relatives are out of the ownership picture.

The new store is at 9521 Westheimer, only one block from the old location. You can stand in front of the new Houston Jewelry and see the old place.

A lot of employees also made the move, despite the 10-month hiatus when Houston Jewelry was out of business. All but four of the store's 27 employees returned to work at Houston Jewelry after the reopening.

"I have worked here since September of 1957," said salesman Sal Vasquez. "I feel like I am part of the family."

Many of the customers are loyal holders, too.

"I have been shopping there about 20 years, a long time," said Sherry Kennedy. "I have bought more wedding gifts from there. My wedding ring is from there. Just about all the jewelry I own is from that store. It's nice to know they are back."

While much is the same, much has changed at Houston Jewelry.

Most importantly, the company has trashed its old catalog showroom concept. Houston Jewelry now operates like traditional retail stores. You look around, pick something, and that is the object you buy. No waiting. No catalogs.

When it was a showroom, customers could buy jewelry right out of the case. Most everything else was stored in the back.

Catalog showrooms typically stock a broad array of merchandise that includes toasters and tiaras, stereos and sterling silver. You can look at a sample in the showroom or order out of the catalog. Either way, you end up waiting around while your order is filled, an important drawback in an age when shoppers feel pressed for time.

Catalog showrooms also have been



Ben DeSoto / Chronicle

Houston Jewelry sales clerk Sal Vasquez helps Mary Sidney, a longtime customer happy to see the jew-

eler back business after a 10-month hiatus. The new store is at 9521 Westheimer, a block from the old location.

slammed by discounters such as Sam's Club and Toys R Us.

"The catalog showroom industry is virtually dead," Rex Solomon said.

By limiting its inventory to high-end gifts, Houston Jewelry avoids competing with the discounters on items such as toasters and vacuum cleaners. The new store has limited its stock to jewelry, watches, perfume, pens and fine gifts such as crystal, silver and china.

The store contains 6,000 square feet, much smaller than the 83,000-square-foot behemoth Houston Jewelry once occupied.

Houston Jewelry tries to beat its competitors, stores such as Harry Gordon or Bering's Gift, by offering discount prices on its jewelry and gifts.

"This is a much nicer store than your average mom-and-pop jeweler," said Kevin Brosh, national sales director for Town &

Country, a Massachusetts-based jewelry maker. "It is unusual to find discounts on high-quality items like this."

Brosh compared Houston Jewelry to the Little Switzerland chain of duty-free shops that dot the Caribbean, carrying Rolex watches and fine perfumes.

"Our regular selling price is less than those shops," Solomon said, claiming that buying direct from manufacturers helps Houston Jewelry to keep costs low.

Company President Andrew Solomon said business has been solid since Houston Jewelry reopened a couple of months ago. Last Saturday, the store drew 650 customers.

"Sales have been very good," he said. "Sales in jewelry have been better than we expected, and I think that is a good sign for the economy."

If business continues to improve, the Solomons hope to open more Houston Jewelry stores in town.