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JEWELRY

The Real Cost of a Custom Engagement Ring — Broken Down by Someone Who Builds Them

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 10 min read

Why nobody gives you a straight answer

I design and build engagement rings for a living. My line is called Scott Ryan — I work in ethically sourced stones, I do a lot of custom pieces, and my signature work runs to things like the "Lotus Goddess," an 18K gold piece with plique-à-jour enameling, which is a fussy, old-world technique that takes real hours at the bench.

So when a couple sits across from me and asks, "Why does this cost what it costs?" — I actually enjoy that question. Most people in my industry don't. The vagueness is a feature, not a bug: if you don't know where the money goes, you can't tell whether you're paying for craftsmanship or for a marble lobby and a national ad budget.

I'm going to break the whole thing down. Not with fake-precise dollar figures — anyone who quotes you exact numbers in an article is lying, because prices swing wildly by market, by stone, by the month gold is trading at. Instead I'll give you the ranges and, more usefully, the **shape** of the spend as a percentage of your budget. Once you can see the shape, you can spot when something's off.

Let me be upfront about my bias: I sell custom. So I'm going to tell you when custom is worth it and, just as importantly, when it isn't and you should walk into a good retailer instead. A designer who won't tell you when **not** to hire them isn't being honest with you.

The five buckets your money splits into

Every engagement ring — custom or mass-produced — is really five costs stacked together:

1. **The center stone**
2. **The metal**

3. **The setting and labor** (the mounting, plus the bench work to build and set it)
4. **The design** (the creative work, only on custom)
5. **The margin** (the maker's or retailer's profit)

That's it. When someone hands you a price, they're handing you those five things blended into one number. Your job is to understand roughly how the blend should look.

Here's the shape I see on a typical center-stone engagement ring, as a percentage of the total:

- **Center stone: 50–70%.** On most rings, the stone *is* the budget. This is the single biggest lever you have.
- **Metal: 5–15%.** Higher if you go platinum, lower for 14K gold, and it floats with the daily metal market.
- **Setting and labor: 10–25%.** More for handmade and micro-pavé; less for a simple solitaire on a cast mounting.
- **Design: 0–10%.** Zero at a retailer pulling from a catalog; a real line item on true custom.
- **Margin: baked into all of the above.**

If your quote is wildly off this shape — say, a "custom" ring where the stone is only 25% of the cost and the rest is "design" — that's your first red flag.

Bucket 1: The center stone (where the real money is)

This is the part people obsess over, and honestly they're right to, because it's usually more than half your spend.

The biggest fork in the road right now is **natural diamond vs. lab-grown vs. colored stone (sapphire, etc.)**. I'm not here to moralize about which you should pick — I work in all of them. But you need to understand the economics, because they're radically different.

Lab-grown diamonds have fallen in price dramatically and are still falling. That's wonderful for your budget today and genuinely uncertain as a long-term store of value — lab stones are a manufactured good getting cheaper every year, so don't buy one expecting resale value. Natural diamonds hold value better but you're paying a large premium for rarity and, frankly, for a century of marketing. Colored stones like sapphire are priced on a completely different logic — origin, color saturation, and whether they've been heat-treated matter more than carat weight.

A few things a good jeweler should tell you and a bad one won't:

- **The 4Cs are not equal.** Cut is the one that makes a stone look alive, and it's the one shoppers most often sacrifice to chase carat weight. Don't. A well-cut, slightly smaller stone outshines a big, dull one every time.
- **"Just under" weights save real money.** A stone a hair under a round number (think just under the 1.00 or 2.00 marks) can cost meaningfully less than one at the round number and look identical on the hand. You're paying for the psychological milestone, not visible size.
- **Certification matters, and the lab matters.** Ask for an independent report from a top-tier lab. Not all grading is equally strict.

Because the stone is such a huge share of the budget, this is where the right choices give you the most leverage. Trading down slightly on carat and clarity while holding cut steady is the single most effective way to get more ring for your money.

Bucket 2: The metal

Metal is a smaller slice than people expect — often single digits to low-teens as a percentage. The choice is mostly platinum vs. gold, and within gold, the karat and color.

Platinum is denser and pricier by volume, and it wears differently — it develops a patina rather than wearing away. 18K gold is richer in color and softer; 14K is more durable and more affordable. None of these is "better"; they're trade-offs.

One quiet thing worth knowing: because metal prices move daily, a maker quoting you a fixed price is absorbing some market risk on your behalf, or building in a cushion. That cushion is legitimate. What's **not** legitimate is a huge markup on the raw metal dressed up as craftsmanship. The metal is close to a commodity. The labor of working it is where craftsmanship lives — which is the next bucket.

Bucket 3: Setting and labor (the part you're actually hiring a human for)

This is the most misunderstood cost, and it's the one that separates a cheap mounting from an expensive one when the metal weight is nearly the same.

A cast solitaire that comes out of a mold with four prongs is fast and cheap to produce. A hand-fabricated mounting, a hand-cut basket, French-set or micro-pavé melee where a bench jeweler is setting dozens of tiny stones under a microscope — that's hours of skilled labor, and skilled bench time is not cheap anywhere in the world. On something like my plique-à-jour work, the enameling alone can take longer than building the entire rest of the ring.

Here's the honest part: for a plain solitaire, custom labor buys you very little over a good retail mounting. For anything intricate — a specific vision, unusual proportions, heirloom stones being reset,

real hand-engraving — labor is exactly what you're paying for, and it's worth it.

So the practical test is: **am I paying for labor that's actually in this ring?** A simple design carrying a big "handmade" premium is a red flag. An intricate design at a suspiciously low price is a different kind of red flag — someone's cutting a corner you can't see yet, usually in the setting security or the finishing.

Bucket 4: Design (custom only)

On true custom, someone is doing creative work: consulting with you, sketching, rendering in CAD, revising. That has value and it should be a visible, explainable line item — not a mystery.

At a retailer selling you a stock setting from a catalog, you are paying **zero** for design, because there wasn't any. That's not a knock on retail — a great catalog setting is a great catalog setting. Just know that "custom" as a word gets stretched. Picking a stock mounting and choosing the metal color is **personalization**, not custom, and it shouldn't carry a custom design fee.

Bucket 5: Margin — and the retail markup nobody explains

Everyone marks up. I mark up. Margin keeps the lights on, pays the bench jeweler, and funds the mistakes we eat when something goes wrong. A business with no margin is a business that won't be there for your warranty.

The real question isn't **whether** there's margin — it's **what the margin is paying for**.

At a big retail chain, a meaningful share of your price is funding overhead you're not wearing on your finger: prime mall real estate, national advertising, sales commissions, deep inventory sitting in cases. Traditional jewelry retail has historically run on keystone markup — roughly doubling the wholesale cost — and sometimes well beyond it on branded goods. That markup is real and it's largely funding the store, not the ring.

Custom and independent makers usually carry lower overhead, so more of your dollar goes into the actual materials and labor. That's the genuine efficiency argument for going custom or independent — not that we're nobler, but that our cost structure is lighter. The trade-off is that a big retailer offers scale, standardized warranties, and easy returns that a solo maker may not. Both models are legitimate. You just want to know which one you're paying for.

Custom vs. retail: the honest verdict

- **Go retail/independent stock setting when** you want a classic solitaire or a common style, you value an easy warranty and return policy, and you don't need anything bespoke. You'll often get

more stone for your money because you're not paying for design.

- **Go custom when** you have a specific vision, you're resetting an heirloom stone, you want unusual proportions or genuine hand-work, or you simply want to be part of building the thing. Pay for design, pay for labor — but make sure both are actually in the ring.

The worst outcome is paying custom prices for retail work, or retail prices for a stone that was quietly downgraded to hit a number.

Red flags, in plain English

- **No independent certification** on a center diamond, or pressure to trust an in-house grade.
- **Pressure and false urgency** — "this price is only good today." Real makers let you think.
- **Vague, all-in pricing with no breakdown.** You should be able to ask, "What's the stone, what's the metal, what's the labor?" and get an answer.
- **A "custom" fee on a stock catalog setting.**
- **A price that's too good.** In this business, a suspiciously cheap intricate ring usually means a treated stone, a soft grade, or thin, insecure setting work that fails in a couple of years.
- **Nobody will tell you where the stone came from.** Ethical sourcing is answerable. Silence is a choice.

How to get more ring without getting fleeced

Here's what I tell friends who aren't paying me:

1. **Spend your leverage on the stone, because that's where the budget is.** Hold cut quality, and trade slightly on carat and clarity. A brilliant, well-cut stone reads as more expensive than a bigger dull one.
2. **Consider lab-grown or a colored stone** if budget is the constraint — just go in clear-eyed about resale.
3. **Buy "just under" the round carat weights.** Same look, real savings.
4. **Match the maker to the job.** Simple design? A good retailer or independent is plenty. Specific vision or heirloom reset? That's what custom is for.
5. **Ask for the five-bucket breakdown.** Anyone honest will walk you through stone, metal, labor, design, and margin without flinching.
6. **Don't over-buy the setting to hide a compromised stone.** A dazzling mounting can't rescue a dead center stone.

A ring is one of the few things you'll wear every day for the rest of your life. You should know what you paid for. The couples I most enjoy working with aren't the ones with the biggest budgets — they're the ones who understand exactly where their money went and feel good about every dollar of it. That clarity is the whole point, and you're entitled to it whether you buy from me or from anyone else.

Key takeaways

- ② Your ring is five costs stacked together: center stone (usually 50–70% of the budget), metal (5–15%), setting/labor (10–25%), design (0–10% on custom only), and margin baked throughout.
- ② The stone is where your money and your leverage both live — hold cut quality and trade slightly on carat and clarity to get the best-looking ring for the price.
- ② Custom's real advantage is lighter overhead, so more of your dollar reaches materials and labor; retail's advantage is scale, warranties, and easy returns. Match the model to the job.
- ② You're paying for labor only when labor is actually in the ring — a simple solitaire carrying a big "handmade" premium is a red flag; so is "custom" pricing on a stock catalog setting.
- ② Always demand independent certification, a plain-language cost breakdown, and a straight answer on where the stone came from. Vagueness and urgency are warnings.
- ② A suspiciously cheap intricate ring usually hides a treated stone, a soft grade, or insecure setting work that fails within a few years.

Frequently asked questions

What percentage of my budget should go to the center stone?

On a typical center-stone engagement ring, expect the stone to be roughly 50–70% of the total — it's usually the single largest cost, which is why smart choices there (favoring cut, trading slightly on carat and clarity, buying just under round carat weights) give you the most ring for your money. These are ranges, not guarantees; actual prices vary by market, metal prices, and the individual stone.

Is custom always more expensive than buying retail?

Not necessarily. Independent and custom makers often carry lighter overhead than big retail chains, so more of your dollar can reach the actual stone and labor rather than funding stores and advertising. But for a simple, classic design you're not paying for any design work at retail, so retail can deliver more stone for the money. Custom earns its price on specific visions, heirloom resets, and genuine hand-work.

What are the biggest signs I'm being overcharged or misled?

The clearest red flags are no independent certification on the center stone, refusal to break the price into stone/metal/labor/design, high-pressure "today only" urgency, a custom design fee on a stock catalog setting, and no answer about where the stone was sourced. Also be wary of prices that seem too good on intricate rings — that usually signals a treated stone, a soft grade, or thin, insecure setting work.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.