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*Synthetic-diamond merchant Tom Chatham tries to add a new facet to the gem trade*

**T**HOMAS CHATHAM MAY soon be a girl's best friend, but he's the diamond industry's worst nightmare. Head of the largest synthetic-gem company in the U.S., he plans to unveil a line of affordable man-made diamonds next year—a move that could turn the \$11.5 billion business on its ear.

Synthetic gems aren't fakes; they're real stones, grown in a

laboratory instead of being formed under the earth's surface. The technology was pioneered by General Electric for industrial use in the 1950s but has never been applied to the consumer diamond market. Chatham's new synthetics would be produced in Siberia, where Russian scientists have been working on man-made diamonds for some time.

According to Chatham, his plan has already roiled some big players—notably De Beers Consolidated Mines, which keeps a tight grip on the world's diamond supply. "He's treading on some major toes," says industry analyst Joel Arem.

De Beers says it's not worried about Chatham, the 48-year-old president of Chatham Creative Gems. Gem-quality synthetic diamonds will never take off, says a De Beers spokesman: They're uneconomical to make and too yellow in color. Some industry figures disagree—although many synthet-

ics are yellow, white diamonds are easy enough to grow, says Robert Hazen, a scientist at the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D.C.

What's more, some Siberian synthetics have already been found mixed into parcels of natural Russian stones: The Gemological Institute of America says it recently detected several examples. GIA research manager Emmanuel Fritsch says the numbers so far are "minuscule,"

and the synthetic stones can be detected with proper equipment.

But Chatham's stones are effectively identical to natural diamonds—unlike faux gems, they're equal in hardness and refractivity to their natural siblings. And at \$700 a carat wholesale, Chatham figures prospective newlyweds won't care that a rock is man-made. "Seven thousand dollars is a lot to spend on a symbol," he says. ■



**Chatham:  
Friend or  
faux?**