

COMMERCE

Smartwatches muscle analog for attention, recognition at Baselworld 2016

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Screenshot from Bulgari video for its Diagono E Magnesium

By JEN KING

From the beginning of the wearable conversation, horology experts surmised that the most logical approach would be a combination of analog function alongside technological touchpoints.

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This year at Baselworld 2016 March 2016, the industry's most prestigious fair held annually in Basel, Switzerland, watchmakers across the sector introduced forward-looking pieces that took advantage of new tech without jeopardizing horological know-how. Overwhelmingly, these wearables pair functionality with design to ensure that a brand's core consumers are not alienated, while also increasing attractiveness among those who do not typically sport a timepiece.

"The watches category is currently in a down cycle, mainly because there is nothing new or exciting in the category," said Donnie Pacheco, principal at [Clean Channel Consulting, Inc.](#), Seattle.

"Due to this lack of an overriding trend, brands are turning to wearables," he said. "While sales of wearables may not be as expected, there is nothing else to drive sales and there is fear of missing out on a potential trend.

"There is also the memory of what the introduction of Japanese quartz watches did to the industry. No brand wants to be left behind if wearables is the path forward, and is ignored or dismissed, in the way Japanese quartz watches were when first introduced."

Get smart

From designer labels such as Chanel to fine Swiss watchmakers Breguet, horologists across the spectrum head to the Baselworld to unveil their latest designs to timepiece lovers, their peers and the media. The showcase is commonly dotted with haute couture pieces and the most technologically advanced movements, but this year those mechanisms morphed from tradition to high tech.

A number of brands took to Baselworld to introduce, or reaffirm, their position in the smartwatch category. While Apple Watch sales are not where many expected them to be ([see story](#)), the smartwatch buzz is still going strong with many watchmakers appreciating the "return to the wrist" ideology it has brought with it.

"Baselworld is when the world turns its collective attention to watches. This is the one time of the year watches become top of mind for consumers, and for brands, this is the one time of the year they unveil their novelties to the world," Mr. Pacheco said.

"At an event such as CES attention is given to major electronics brands to introduce their latest products and technology," he said. "Not only would a watch brand likely be overlooked at CES, they are not moving technology forward, they are simply integrating it into their product, which does not have same impact at an electronics show that it does at a watches show."

New to the wearables field is U.S. fashion brand Michael Kors. The brand's timepieces are very popular thanks to an affordable entry-level price point, stylish designs and well-executed marketing that has synced its watch sales with humanitarian causes such as ending world hunger.

At Baselworld, Michael Kors proved that technology can be both glamorous and effortless with the introduction of the Michael Kors Access smartwatch. Expected to go on sale in the fall, the Michael Kors Access watch is geared toward a fashion-focused female consumer with a design focused on style and innovation.



Michael Kors Access

Consumers will be able to sync either an iPhone or Android smartphone with the watch through a partnership with Google. As with many similar display smartwatches, the Michael Kors Access will be customizable to fit with the needs of the wearer and her lifestyle ([see story](#)).

Taking a similar avenue is Swiss jeweler de Grisogono, which paired with consumer electronics brand Samsung to develop the Samsung Gear S2 by de Grisogono.

The "glamorously smart" timepiece features a diamond-studded bezel with addictive touch technology allowing the wearer to connect with a variety of functions such as text message alerts, a fitness tracker, a music player and a series of digital faces created by the brand.

Samsung Gear S2 by de Grisogono

LVMH-owned Bulgari also strengthened its relationship to the wearables category with the unveiling of Diagono Magn@sium timepiece, a concept first introduced by the jeweler at Baselworld 2015.

Although the connected watch will not be available until the end of this year, Bulgari returned to Baselworld to show off its latest innovations for the project. The latest addition to Bulgari's wearable offering is contactless payment, in collaboration with MasterCard and WiSeKey, for purchasing ease.

"The cooperation between Bulgari, MasterCard and WiSeKey on the Diagono Magn@sium intelligent watch perfectly embodies Bulgari's vision," said Jean-Christophe Babin, CEO of the Bulgari Group, in a statement. "We believe that technology and craftsmanship can be artfully combined to deliver a valuable and unique benefit to our clients without compromising the integrity of a timeless mechanical luxury watch.

"With the new Bulgari Magn@sium, our clients will have the luxury to forget their wallet and pay securely with only their Bulgari watch," he said. "This is extraordinary and part of the luxury experience ([see story](#))."

In a similar vein, Tag Heuer, Frederique Constant and Swarovski took to Baselworld to display the advancements they have had in the wearables category.

Tag Heuer, for instance, set up a Connected Watch Bar for consumers to explore its smartwatch offerings ([see story](#)) and Frederique Constant gave consumers a preview of the latest model and updated version of its Horological Smartwatch, powered by MotionX ([see story](#)).



Tag Heuer Connected, with mobile application

Designer duds

Although a number of high-end watchmakers used Baselworld to explore how technology can be integrated within the industry, others touted collaborations that merge fashion with fine horology.

For example, watchmaker Hublot teamed with men's wear brand Berluti to design two limited-edition watches. The collaboration has resulted in a Classic Fusion Berluti Ceramic and the Classic Fusion Berluti King Gold, with straps and dials using Berluti's signature Venezia leather.

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Classic Fusion Berluti Hublot dressed in Berluti! Discover more on hbl.it/CFBerluti

Posted by **Hublot** on Wednesday, March 23, 2016

The ceramic version was made in a series of 500 while the 18-karat gold edition is limited to 250 pieces. The timepieces sell for \$14,600 and \$29,400, respectively, and will be available at Hublot boutiques in June.

Likewise, as Switzerland's Jaeger-LeCoultre celebrates the 85th anniversary of its Reverso watch, the brand teamed with fashion designer Christian Louboutin, who kept the Art Deco shape and watch face much the same but who took creative liberty with the watch strap ([see story](#)).



Christian Louboutin for Jaeger-LeCoultre

While traditional watchmaking will not become obsolete, those who continue to create connected watches along with analog timepieces are likely to fare better as they will be able to grab the attention of a much larger market share.

"Brands that merge analog function with technological touch points will fare better on the market because it remains true to a watch DNA," Mr. Pacheco said. "Integrating the two helps leverage the rich history and functionality of watches

"Apple made an attempt by integrating a crown into the watch and having it function the way that the crown of a watch works," he said. "Merging the two also keeps the watch as a fashion piece or a true craftsman piece, instead of wearing something for the sole purpose of having what is for the most part, duplicative technology.

"There will always be people that want the latest technology, but it is a major point of differentiation to keep the true watch aesthetic."