

Q&A

Montblanc increases mobile outreach and visibility to create aspiration

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Montblanc Rouge et Noir pen

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As Richemont-owned Montblanc celebrates its 110th anniversary in a changing landscape, it is proving that heritage and innovation go hand-in-hand.

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The German watchmaker is unveiling a heritage-focused line of products that recall its nautical founding and the early Rouge et Noir products. Looking ahead, the brand will work with the disruption that technology has regularly wrought upon the watch and fine writing instruments by continuing to cultivate aspiration among the world's future luxurians.

"I think the core requirement for a maison like Montblanc is to get in touch with the younger clientele and create that relevance and create that aspiration for those products," said Jens Henning Koch, executive vice president of marketing for Montblanc. "Once you know certain elements, you experience it, you're writing with it yourself, you appreciate it and really find a great pleasure with it."

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In this Q&A, Mr. Koch shares his thoughts and the present and future of the watch industry and how Montblanc intends to reach the consumers that will help keep the brand prestigious for the next 110 years.

Could you talk a little bit about the watch industry as it is right now and give a forecast for the next several years, if you have one?

The watch industry has been through many different developments in the overall understanding of the industry and reinvented itself by also defining what the meaning of a fine watch is. So one really has to look into the different segments of the watch segment that might develop in a different way.

Right now there is a new shift toward smartwatches, or let's say an awakening of smartwatches, yet one has to see which segments are affected and what function those watches have.

A fine watch is a piece allowing you to express yourself and to appreciate mechanisms and the beauty of mechanisms, the beauty of technical solution, which is in a certain sense are not needed today. You have had smartphones for years; you have had mobile phones for years. The time is being shown all around.

So, there's the question of what the luxury watch and fine watchmaking has, a different function going beyond only

showing the right time. It is also about appreciating how that time is mechanically shown and the craftsmanship that goes into watch expresses sophistication. I think we are convinced that segment will further prosper.

Then there's the segment where you are in a lower price range where it is just in the pure functionality where you're used to just having a watch, and there smartwatches are gaining territory. I see the existence of fine watchmaking and luxury watches as an expression of sophistication and connoisseurship, and yet with a meaningful use of smartwatches.

The great thing about smartwatches is it brings something to the wrist of younger clientele who didn't have anything on their wrist before. So it's a lot. If you look, the figures show smartwatches are going to wrists where there hadn't been a watch before, so it's creating the experience of having something on your wrist, looking at something on your wrist, and then stepping into the field of luxury watches.

I know Montblanc is celebrating 110 years, can you speak a bit about the importance of heritage and the role it has in creating the idea of a luxury watch that is about more than functionality?

When you look into today's world there are many many changes, many many disruptions, many many new and great ideas improving how we live, innovations, new thoughts and ideas and technical solutions. Yet it is that these changes, beyond are the optimistic appeal, create also a certain kind of question of "Who am I, what is important to me, how do I position myself and how do I express myself in this world?"

Heritage is in a certain way a way to make reference to that, and one could say style requires heritage. When it comes to defining a style, for yourself, about where and how do I want to express myself, I can see this in terms of quoting something from the past, making a reference to something.

The better you understand the point of reference, the better you understand, so to speak, the rules, that also created new ideas. Why did mankind make a right turn there and not a left turn? How can the reality that is here today and that heritage be understood in terms of style and also technical solutions, mechanical solutions, craftsmanship, know-how?

This creates a rich expression that we as a luxury maison consider very important, and that's why heritage is something not looking back and something you blow take away all the dust; on the contrary, when you look at what has created a rich heritage there is a very, very good reason for it. To translate that into today is super interesting and exciting: When we looked into the past 110 years of Montblanc for writing industries, in the writing industry, there is a very impressive pioneering spirit right from the beginning.

This pioneering spirit of finding a new solution and how to deal with ink and the convenience or inconvenience of that time with the leaking, to find a new mechanical solution here, convenient yet elegant, and bringing that really important writing mode to a new level, that was striving for perfection. This is very crucial for Montblanc and very crucial for our consumers today.

When you look at our consumers today, they are those who are on their social mission, who are onto something. This pioneering spirit is true to the maison and speaks to our customers.

If a smartwatch is a way to get a person who has never worn a watch to wear one, how do you get people who do most of their writing on word-processing or through texts, how do you get those typists to get a really nice pen?

When it comes to writing instruments we are used to disruptions. Since the phone came out, or the telegraph, it wasn't needed anymore to write a letter, you could give a call. Then of course with the personal computer, and with now smart phones it's on a totally new level.

But here we look at it in two ways: one is the functional way, you write a text message in terms of writing a postcard. But there are certain functions for example thinking about new ideas you draft a script of your thesis you are perhaps going to write, or the letter you're going to write, and you may think in terms of how do I structure it and you have to come up with a strategy.

So whenever it comes to ideas and inspiration, handwriting is quite important, we have found out.

On the other hand, a writing instrument also expresses how important sophistication is to you. It is perhaps not speaking to those who are 15 or 16, but maybe those stepping into their first jobs the younger clients don't buy it for themselves but get it as a gift, then use it, appreciate it, and when it comes time to the important moments of writing, which is your signature, this is something where this fine writing gains importance, and this is what we are stressing

with our activities in fine writing.

The beauty, what you express when you write it, when you get a nice card and a congratulations is a totally different impression than a text message, and likewise it is how you express your style when it comes to writing.

Until now, there has never been a Montblanc pocket watch, but there are two for this series. Why now?

This is all related to the heritage. When Montblanc was founded in 1906, our fine founders had before spent time in the U.S. so the Transatlantic sea travel was very important for the founding. That was the core idea of our watch collection this year.

When it comes to sea travel at that time it was very much pocket watches, so as a reference to this time, we introduced pocket watches, one limited to eight pieces, the other one to 110 pieces.



Rouge et Noir pen

What else is planned for the 110th?

The Rouge et Noir theme is very closely linked to the 110 years. We will highlight those 110 years within the different markets.

Some will see this in a big exhibition. For the U.S. we are planning this for the second semester of this year, we're trying to bring this to New York in autumn. There will be just a handful of places worldwide where we're going to host this exhibition to highlight that story.

We have different things now planned for the whole year to stress and make a reference to those pioneering ideas of the whole Montblanc history. We're going to introduce new products when it comes to icons, when it comes to leather products we'll have a new line, we'll have special watch launches. So some nice novelties coming up over the year, always stressing that pioneering element.

We've talked a bit about product, so I want to shift back to strategy. The big buzzwords are mobile and omnichannel and how Montblanc is using those channels and trying to reach young people in particular.

That is of course a focus because we think, talking about how style requires heritage, that there's a big interest especially in expressing style. I think the core requirement for a maison like Montblanc is to get in touch with the younger clientele and create that relevance and create that aspiration for those products.

Once you know certain elements, you experience it, you're writing with it yourself, you appreciate it and really find a great pleasure with it. This experience is something we want to create so therefore it is for us very important to create that exchange.

We're going to be involved and further work on our social media presence, but likewise we [have created] a Montblanc universe where you, so to speak I was referring to the exhibition in real life you can step into that and experience the launches.

And mobile is super important. The fluent luxury consumer spends 15 hours a week on digital for himself, not for job purposes, but for private enjoyment and a big share of it is mobile, even more so in Asia than the West.

So the mobile experience of Montblanc Universe will be enhanced throughout the year. It is on one hand stressing through communication channels what we've realized over the last two years, that the younger clientele is very open for new products in terms of new launches, but interestingly enough not only through digital campaigns but also in real life when it comes to the pure point of sale.

So it's all in parallel, working on communication channels, creating experienced platforms and events like an

exhibition where you can experience the maison, and of course constantly creating that appeal at the point of sale. Through decoration and our new boutique design, we are addressing that target.

Do you have any partnerships planned?

There is one partnership with BMW, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. They launched their new 7 Series last autumn and we cooperated for special leather products, and also we are going to have a mutual event [on April 14] where we, in Munich at the BMW headquarters, are going to present a very special BMW and Montblanc product together.

Both maisons strive for perfection, both maisons strive for the young progressive clientele, with consumers who are, as I mentioned, up on their mission, who are really creators and doers, and both maisons are very style conscious. Design is very important to both of us.

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