

AUTOMOTIVE

Bentley, McLaren share performance priority despite divergent positioning

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McLaren 720S

By SARAH JONES

LISBON, Portugal – Luxury automotive designers are eyeing the potential opportunities in eco-friendly and autonomous mobility.

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The “Luxury Car Design: What the Future Holds” panel at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on May 15 brought together designers from Bentley and McLaren to discuss their respective brand’s approach to building cars for affluent, particular clientele. Despite being fellow British automakers catering to similarly wealthy buyers, McLaren and Bentley have considerably different car design approaches and positioning.

"Luxury customers are able to see and to feel the difference when you enter such a car, you don't slam the door," said Stephan Sielaff, director of design at [Bentley Motors](#). "It's more like you shh and you're in this cocoon of luxury.

"There are different smells, different touches and feels," he said. "You're in your own

world."

Engineering innovation

McLaren's headquarters in Woking, Britain, also houses its Formula 1 team. The brand's racing ties influence its automotive design, as it puts the function and performance of its vehicles first.

For instance, its recently launched P1 car was designed to be the fastest production car on road or track, leveraging the brand's understanding of aerodynamics.

Keeping the driver central, McLaren's 720S Super Series car has its doors cut into the roof, allowing the owner to open the doors easily nearby to other cars in a parking lot.



McLaren's 720S

McLaren has also embraced electric technology, becoming the first supercar maker to create an electric model. Its chief designer Dan Perry-Williams also anticipates that half of McLaren's cars will be hybrids by 2022.

The brand's BP23 hybrid GT, which has not been priced yet, has already sold all 107 vehicles produced.

While McLaren's following began in Europe, its main customer base today is in the United States.

Engaging its owners, McLaren hosts track driving events, allowing these enthusiasts to have a racecar driver experience complete with fitness training.

Bentley Motors' Mr. Sielaff pointed out that while McLaren and Bentley are positioned very differently, they may have some overlapping interest from auto aficionado collectors.

While McLaren focuses on the experience behind the wheel, many Bentleys are chauffeur-driven, prioritizing the passenger's travel. Most design details are produced by hand, from stitching on the steering wheel to wooden features.

Even with this main difference, Bentley also has a racing heritage, leading to cars that balance performance with luxury.

Like McLaren, Bentley is thinking ahead, particularly as millennial consumers age and become potential clients. For instance, affluent Californians may desire an alternative to Bentley's leather, so the brand is experimenting with vegan interiors made out of materials such as vegan leather or seaweed.

Bentley receives many requests for one-off orders. The design team works with customers and consults its bespoke Mulliner department, creating what the customer wants unless it interferes with company policy.



Artist Angela Palmer with Dan Parry-Williams and Stefan Sielaff

While the bodies of their cars are inspired by different worlds, both McLaren and Bentley have received some unusual paint color requests.

McLaren was asked to create a covering of crushed diamonds, while one Bentley client wanted her car to match a favorite color of nail polish.

Looking ahead

Both designers mentioned the possibility of self-driving cars.

With the race for autonomous vehicles heating up, Apple was reportedly making a move that could potentially help it join in on the competition faster with assistance from a boutique automotive manufacturer.

The rumor mill has been turning in the automotive and tech industries regarding a possible purchase of British automaker McLaren by Apple. In its continuous fight against Google, Apple has been working with a variety of tech-related firms for autonomous driving research and development, and acquiring **McLaren** could mean a faster prototype as the automaker has a much smaller manufacturing process than others in its sector ([see story](#)).

These speculations have not come to a fruition as of press time.

Bentley's autonomous driving concept unveiled last year featured an artificially intelligent holographic butler to assist the passengers. This assistant will get to know the owner's preferences, helping to guide them.



Bentley's Future of Luxury concept

"Obviously, we have to reinvent ourselves all the time," Bentley's Mr. Sielaff said. "And at a very traditional brand like Bentley with a lot of heritage, obviously I don't want to throw the heritage, don't do that.

"But we have to really make sure, make this disruption feelable in the company and in our product and make the name stick."

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