

Midas TOUCH

CEO of Hublot, Jean-Claude Biver, cushioned the luxury watch world against the quartz revolution. He tells us how to manage watch brands.

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It is pure love for the art of watchmaking that has kept Jean-Claude Biver going on for so many years. For someone who revived watch brands like Blancpain and Omega and is now leading Hublot, Biver comes across as a humble man with a warm personality. He is greatly revered in the watch industry and is a candid speaker. He has many accomplishments to his credit, beginning with Audemars Piguet.

Behind the scene

Biver joined AP in 1975 where he learnt how to make, design and sell watches. This infused the fine art of watchmaking into his system. After AP, Biver, along with his friend Jacques Piguet, bought the oldest brand in the world, Blancpain, which was founded in 1735. They started developing the brand in 1982 with the concept that they would never make a quartz watch, because they wanted to develop exclusive traditional watches. Biver created the slogan, "Since 1735 there has never been a Blancpain quartz watch and there never will be," and positioned the brand as the ultimate offering in haute horlogerie. Many watch brands followed suit and reintroduced traditional mechanical movements in their collections.

Family problems led Biver and Piguet to sell Blancpain to Nicolas G Hayek in 1992, who gave Biver the opportunity to join the Board of Directors of Swatch Group. He remained the CEO of Blancpain till 2002 and also undertook the resurrection of Omega. Although he only managed the product and marketing aspect of Omega, the influence can be still seen today.

Biver embarked on another adventure in 2004 when Carlo Crocco of Hublot appointed him as the CEO of his company. Biver wanted to buy Hublot, but Crocco did not want to sell. He was, however, attracted to Biver's proposition and the two men reached an



understanding according to which Crocco remained the owner and president of the board of directors, but retired from the operational management of the company.

The Metamorphosis

Under the guidance of Biver, Hublot launched its new guiding principle of 'fusion', where they fused unusual materials such as gold with ceramic, magnesium and Titanium with rubber, and traditional Swiss watchmaking art with the visionary craft of 21st century.

"The philosophy of Hublot is to combine the past with the future. Don't repeat the tradition, but take these traditions forward and try to add some future elements in them," he says. A fine example is their latest Gold King Power watch, whose dial is made of red gold and platinum. Red gold is an amalgamation of 75 per cent gold and 25 per cent copper. The little amount of platinum prevents copper from rusting and keeps the watch ever shining.

Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH) Group recently became the majority shareholder of Hublot. The acquisition, however, does not bother Biver. He explains, "When you buy a brand which is a successful product, profitable, is under no debt and has a very capable team, there is nothing much you can do for it, apart from maintaining it. The British used to say, 'Don't change a winning team', and I think this is what LVMH is doing. It's my opinion and also my experience that the fact that LVMH is a majority shareholder of Hublot will not make any changes. The M&A happened about 18 months ago and we haven't changed yet."

Biver has his marketing strategy in place. According to him, first of all, the product has to be attractive, innovative and exclusive. "This is the base, without which you can go and do something else. Second, if you have your brand in place, it needs to be worn by the right people. If the brand is worn by people who have a bad reputation, then it will never grow. It becomes imperative to choose a good customer for which you need to go through the best distribution



network. Since jewellers have a customer base, you have to move amongst the best jewellers who will make the product reach the right people. Also, you need to have promotions, events and advertisements which are specifically targeted towards the people you want to reach. Finally, you need the help of God. Nothing can be done without some help."

Indian connection

Biver is happy with the growth rate of Hublot in India which is same as its growth rate in other countries. He, however, has additional parameters to judge growth, "Growth is good, but what is interesting is the quality of growth. The quality of people in India buying our products is excellent. I would prefer smaller, but a better quality community of Hublot owners. If you start with good people, the numbers will only become larger in the future. However, if you start from the bottom, it will never go up. We have started in India in a spectacular way, because quite often,

we see in newspapers and magazines good people wearing our watches."

After-hours

Biver is not just a magician bringing watch brands back from the dead. He has other passions as well, the prominent one being his family. "No education, no love and no tradition, means no future. Who can provide these three basic needs better than the family? The family is our future. So, my family is my passions. I invest a lot of time, value and love in my family," he explains. His other passions include cheese-making, which he fondly connects to the traditions of the early farmer-watchmaker era. He's a wine connoisseur, cycles regularly to boost his blood circulation and sails and skies as he spends quality time with his family.

Can he craft a watch himself? "I can't make the watches we produce. I can just make simpler watches for children. I am like a sports trainer. I can train a person, I can make him perform, but I can't run the Olympics in his place." He sure is doing a fine job of creating winners. ■