

Engineering and Craftsmanship

An Interview with Benoit de Clerck,
President, IWC North America, New York



EDITORS' NOTE *With the Richemont Group since 2000, Benoit de Clerck served as the managing director of Richemont's watch division for the Middle East, based in Dubai, before assuming his current position in 2004. Prior to joining Richemont, he worked for TAG Heuer and R. J. Reynolds.*



Benoit de Clerck

COMPANY BRIEF *Founded in 1868 in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, by a Boston watchmaker, IWC (International Watch Co.) produces handmade, luxury timepieces. The company is owned by Geneva-headquartered Compagnie Financière Richemont SA.*

How do you plan to deepen IWC's penetration in the North American market?

The market is getting crowded, but luckily, the pie is getting bigger, and so is IWC's slice of it. So we're in good shape in that respect. In terms of distribution, we are not looking at expanding it too much. We believe we are with the best partners, and I say partners because that's what our distributors are; we are with them on rosy days and grey days. That said, we're emancipating the distribution a little bit to make the brand available in certain areas. This year, for example, we have chosen a partner in Orlando, to have a presence there. We're happy with our partners, and we're not looking at expanding IWC's distribution exponentially.

Do you think of IWC's target market as a niche group?

Yes, but the demand is definitely growing. IWC is known for its watches' engineering and craftsmanship. So we are defined as a mechanical watchmaker in the U.S. The people who buy our watches know what they want to buy. They go into a store and they say, "I want this watch, this reference, and this number." They know exactly what they want.

How do you define the brand's collection?

I think IWC is one of the best-defined collections in Richemont's watch brand

portfolio. Our image is very clear, with watches in four product pillars, three of which represent the elements of water, air, and land. The Aquatimer is like the sea. The Pilot and Spitfire models represent the air, and our Ingenieur watch represents the land. In the fourth pillar, we have our complicated watches – the Tourbillon, the Minute-Repeater, and the Skeleton, for instance. So our collection is well defined and segmented and a lot of fun to work with.

Do you expect growth within those four product pillars?

Oh, absolutely. I think there is a lot of room to grow within those key segments. The sky's the limit. We can do a lot of fine tuning and do something out of the ordinary in each of our segments.

Is IWC's typical customer a bit younger these days?

I think statistics can answer that question. I love the U.S. because there are more and more affluent people there every day. There are more and more millionaires day by day. These numbers speak for themselves. And a younger generation is definitely finding the brand. Even our newer customers are very loyal to the brand, owning two or three of our watches just a few years after discovering us. They keep on wearing IWC, choosing the Aquatimer for their vacation in the Bahamas and the Ingenieur for a ski trip. We have watches for every occasion. In fact, I recently spoke to an American gentleman who had just purchased his 67th IWC watch. That kind of news is the best motivator we can have.

Is there an opportunity for IWC with female consumers?

More and more females are wearing big watches. I know that some women are wearing our Portuguese watches, for example, which are 40 to 42 millimeters wide. Despite the fact that IWC is a masculine brand, women are enjoying our watches. So women are becoming an important target for us.

Does technology play a major role

in the production of your watches?

What makes IWC unique is the craftsmanship. It is part of the DNA of the brand. Now, I think technology comes into play when we design our mechanical movements and such, but craftsmanship is synonymous with IWC, and it will remain so for years to come.

How important is after-sales customer service to the overall success of the brand?

I believe that after-sales customer service is an integral part of sales. I really work very hard on that. It's not easy to implement it in the market and to have it be effective on a day-to-day basis. Yet, for me, it goes hand in hand with sales. You cannot sell a watch without having customer service. Luckily for us, our watches are of a very high quality, so they don't require a lot of repair. We have few complaints and our customers are very happy.

Is a standalone, flagship IWC boutique in the works?

We're working on that, but it's important to find the right strategic partner, for one thing. Secondly, the place is important; location is the key to success. So I'm discussing a couple of opportunities, but this kind of project takes time. However, one day we will have our own boutiques. Why not?

Which IWC watches do you wear the most?

It depends on what I'm wearing and who I'm meeting; I change watches like I change my shirt – every day. I love it. For business, I will probably wear a Portuguese automatic seven-days power reserve, and over the weekend, I might wear the Ingenieur or Aquatimer. It depends on what I'm doing.

What are your key priorities for the brand in the years to come?

The momentum for growth is there, so it is very important to me that our partners make money selling the IWC brand. We also want to make sure that we keep up the excitement in our factories about our craftsmanship, to meet the demand of the market. ●

The Minute Repeater (top, left); Ingenieur Chronographs