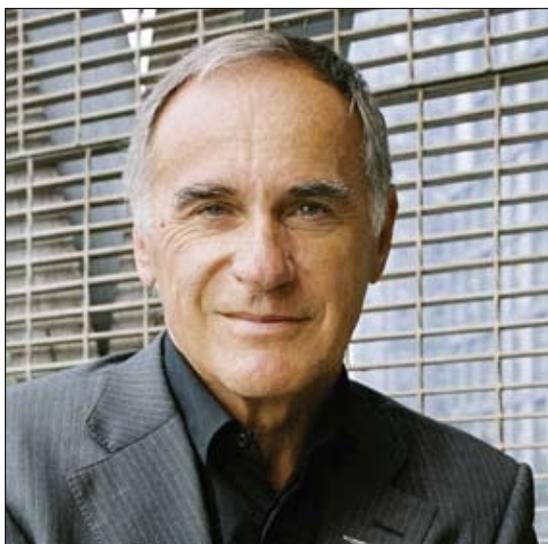


Interview

A Focus on Perfection

An Interview with Ulrich Bez,
Chief Executive Officer, Aston Martin



Ulrich Bez

EDITORS' NOTE Ulrich Bez joined Aston Martin in July 2000 and has overseen a rapid period of growth involving the moving and building of new headquarters in Gaydon, England; the development and introduction of new products including the DB9, Vanquish, and V8 Vantage; a new corporate identity; VH architecture; and new dealerships. Having worked for Porsche, BMW, and Daewoo before joining Aston Martin, Bez was responsible for the development of the Porsche 993, which many believe to be the finest of the 911 series. Bez was born in Bad Cannstatt, Germany, in 1943, and has a doctorate in engineering from the University of Stuttgart. He is the author of more than 40 scientific articles on subjects related to the motor industry. Bez has committed to remaining with Aston Martin as CEO for the next five years.

COMPANY BRIEF Aston Martin Lagonda Limited (www.astonmartin.com) is a British manufacturer of luxury sports cars. The company name is derived from the name of one of the company's founders, Lionel Martin, and from the Aston Hill speed hill climb near Aston Clinton in Buckinghamshire. From 1994 to 2007, Aston Martin was part of the Premier Automotive Group, a division of the Ford Motor Company. In May 2007, it was bought by a consortium led by British businessman David Richards and two major international investment houses, Investment Dar and Adeem Investment Company, both based in Kuwait.

How much of an impact have you seen on Aston Martin's business in this current economic climate, and is it challenging in this market to find growth?

We anticipate seeing a decent and stable business, but not major growth. We believe that the more value there is in a car and the more exclusive it is by design and performance, the more stability it has.

Early in 2008, you launched the DBS. Can you give a brief overview of that product and how it has been received in the market?

The DBS is our top-of-the-line car. The DBS is considered a good product, not just because of its features and new body. Our customers, who have a lot of experience with other luxury car brands, are excited about the product because it delivers a driving experience that exceeds expectation. If the economic situation is not really good, like right now, it's always helpful to have a good product.

You've also made significant enhancements to some of your other earlier models, such as the DB9 and V8 Vantage.

The DB9 is a well rounded, special GT sports car and, for 2009, it has undergone a number of enhancements to improve driver experience, such as increased power and torque, as well as transmission and chassis enhancements. The V8 Vantage has also been improved to deliver a power and torque increase, while also improving fuel economy by more than 10 percent.

Aston Martin is known as a very high-end brand. Do you define your market as extremely niche, or is it somewhat broader?

This is a very niche market considering that around 50 million cars are sold in the world, and we're going to make 6,000 to 7,000 units. In America, 13 or 14 million cars are sold, and we sell about 1,500 to 2,000. So this is very special. I still think that in America, a lot of people do know us, but there are a lot of people who do not know us and who would be interested in Aston Martin. So we need to be stronger in communicating the Aston Martin values in America, because America is a great base and a great market.

Will England, Europe, and North America remain your key areas of focus? Where is your focus with regard to emerging markets?

We are definitely growing from where we

were a few years ago, when our focus was in England. Initially, we wanted 30 percent of our sales in England, 30 percent in America, and 30 percent in Europe and the rest of the world. This is now changing to include 25 percent of our production and sales in growing markets such as the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe, which will help us become more stable and give us a wider base.

There are a handful of other players in the high-end luxury segment. Is it challenging to differentiate, and how do you show what makes this brand unique?

By spending a great deal on marketing, you can take something that has no substance and make it the greatest product on earth. This is where we are fighting because we do not have a huge marketing and advertising budget. Our substance is our reputation. No other product in the world has such style integrity, which is a result of our focus on perfection in the overall detail of our cars. And we are authentic, because we are the smallest independent car company in the world with our own technology and our own body. We are not set up for mass-market lifestyles. All of our people are involved in giving their signature to each piece. In this regard, we are very different. But we need intelligent customers who understand the substance of our cars.

Since you joined the company, one of your focuses has been the dealership network. Is that where you want it to be today, and do you see major changes in terms of how the dealerships will look in the future?

So far, I have been really happy with how we've built up our dealerships from 60 to 128 dealerships worldwide. In America, we continue to expand. I just came out of a meeting where we discussed Salt Lake City, Utah; Austin, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; and other potential outlets. We are also expanding into Greece, Turkey, and other countries in Eastern Europe. We just started in the Czech Republic, and we have a foothold in Moscow. So there will be a lot of activity and many challenges in the future.

You made sure you had a state-of-the-art production facility in 2007 when you opened a new stand-alone design center. How critical is innovation for the brand?

Innovation is very important, because we have enough heritage and history. I am convinced that, on the basis of such a heritage, we



need to have a future, and this is why we need to be innovative. This means not only in the product itself, but also in how we live and what we demonstrate. This is why our new design studio is a sustainable building, which is cooled and heated from the earth using only sustainable material with a huge storage of CO². It's where we show our responsibility, but we also show new technology in our craftsmanship. We need to be ahead of the big game, because the only way an independent small company can be successful is in being quick, flexible, creative, and fast growing.

When you look back to 2000, when the opportunity came up to join and lead Aston Martin, what excited you about it? And looking back some eight years, has it been what you expected?

This is a very good place, but I was excited because I felt there was a lot to develop. And I told them I needed five years to develop something with the plans we had in mind, and that's exactly what they gave me.

And after those five years, you were having such a good time that you couldn't leave?

Exactly. We became profitable. After four years, we had our own technology, with our own dealer network, purchasing, and logistics, which enabled us to go to Ford Motor Company and ask it to release us and give us freedom to develop the brand further.

There are many people at Aston Martin who have had an opportunity to work closely with you and who know you well. If I were talking to some of them without you in the room and asked them what it was like to work for Dr. Ulrich Bez, what do you think they'd say?

They would probably start laughing and say this guy never gives us a raise. He is always running and challenging us, more often when he is traveling, because then he has time to think about it. I am challenging, but I think my employees find that rewarding.

With all the technology out there today, how challenging is it to get away from the business, and do you ever turn it off?

Not really, because this is my life, and I enjoy this very much. And this business is not just the speed and rubber. I think about all kinds of things such as political situations, the

developing Internet age, and world communications to have an understanding about what we can do in our business. I put work aside when I am in the car with my wife and my two girls, and we have time to talk about whatever concerns them in school or sports. But it always comes back to our real-life experience. So, in principle, it's life.

One would think an exciting part of the job is having access to all these great cars. What do you drive, and do you have to try all the cars?

Nearly every day, I'm driving something different, and that sounds like the exciting part of my job. But I drive a car with parts of all types, cars under development, and benchmark cars. And I drive competitor cars. And I have to do this in the evening, and sometimes I'm angry because I'm not happy with what I have to drive, whatever it is. So it can be really hard. I enjoy it only when I'm on the test track and have a good car, and the car is smoothly running, braking, and steering. That is really relaxing. Then I don't think about business; I think only about the car and how I get along. ●