

Becoming a Global Brand

An Interview with Barry Cohen,
Founder, Luminox Watch Company

EDITORS' NOTE Barry Cohen has an extensive background in the fine- and fashion-watch business having previously held positions in sales and sales management within several different accessories companies. Upon discovering a new and unique self-powered illumination technology in Switzerland in the late '80s, Cohen and his partner negotiated the exclusive rights for its use in North America and founded the Richard Barry Marketing Group, owner of Luminox.



Barry Cohen

COMPANY BRIEF Marking their 20th anniversary this year, Luminox (www.luminox.com) was invented to take advantage of a revolutionary micro gas light illumination technology and became the watch of choice for military and law enforcement. In 1993, Luminox created a dive model watch, which led to the creation of the Original Navy SEAL dive watch in 1994, that then led to the creation of the first aviation-inspired collection and a relationship with Lockheed Martin. From there, Luminox expanded the collection to include a variety of dial colors and, ultimately, an entire line of watches for the active consumer, the sportsman, law enforcement, and military groups. Today, Luminox can be found in more than 40 nations with more being added regularly.

How has the Luminox brand evolved since it's beginning?

The meaning of our brand has come into focus. In April of 2006, my former partner decided he wanted to retire, so he sold his half of the business to Ronnie and Andre Bernheim from Zurich, who have more than 60 years of Swiss watchmaking experience and own a Swiss watch factory. They are in the process of completing a new factory that will be state-of-the-art and is four times the size of the prior factory and, together, we've enjoyed the benefits of their sourcing and distribution relationships all over the world. They wanted a brand that had some "legs" that they could put into their infrastructure and develop into more of a global brand. My former partner and I built a business for 16 years and put it on the map. We were in 15 nations before and today, just three years later, we're in three times as many nations. So we've made significant strides toward



becoming a global brand. With a new company, it seemed like a good time to reinvent a lot of what was in the line, to create evolutionary models for each series that would herald the fact that we were under new ownership. Part of that was brand discovery. We went to work with branding companies to try to define the essence of the Luminox brand. Ultimately, we determined that it's "durable, dependable adventure gear." From there, the next step was to craft our core marketing message. We decided to find an advertising agency to craft this story for us. I felt strongly that the agency should be American because the soul of our company is American. We're selling "a little slice of Americana" to the whole world. We have been requested by and supplied to the FBI, Secret Service, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Border Patrol, ATF, SWAT teams, Navy SEALs, and U.S. Air Force – all of this is what's resonating with the rest of the world. I reached out to the agency I believed to be the best there is, Goodby, Silverstein Partners. After an initial conversation and meeting with Jeff Goodby, he said he was fascinated by the task of solving this puzzle for us. They created a campaign for us called "ESSENTIAL GEAR." It speaks to what Luminox is all about and avoids what it isn't. We're not about adornment; we're "real deal" gear for the regular guy. In our latest press kit, we show three ads with an array of gear that depicts three different themes – law enforcement, scuba diving, and aviation. In these ads, you see the gear that a person in these realms uses and, in the center, you see our watch. It's about what the guy in these three worlds needs. Anyone that lives or works in these "worlds" relates to that gear and can see themselves in the ad.

Is the regular guy the niche market for the brand?

Not exclusively, but we certainly do seem to appeal to this type of guy, and this story of one's basic gear for various activities helps to define what our brand is all about and is now our core marketing message. Part of our challenge was to figure out how to tell one story to markets with varying levels of maturity with Luminox, and culturally as different as say, Japan and Portugal. We also needed a message that gave us some elasticity. If you look at the core background of those who have asked for our

watches, the common theme is weapon possession. That's our foundation and we're proud of it. The question is, how do we keep building beyond that to become a lifestyle brand? This campaign enabled us, for the first time, to have an elasticity that will allow us to do anything. For instance, we had an Indy-car racer who came to us to make a series of watches tied to him. With the new campaign, we can use his helmet, his Nomex fireproof hood, and his racing shoes and racing gloves in the ad with his special watch. So this campaign gives us new-found capabilities that we had not had before.

How has the collection evolved?

We have created an evolutionary series of the Original Navy SEAL watch, the new Colormark Navy SEAL series. We also had the Original Steel and Titanium SEALs, and now there are revised EVO Steel SEAL models and revised EVO Titanium SEAL models. We also just launched a 20th anniversary collection created to celebrate our 20th year in business, which includes a new Navy SEAL collection that's had a tremendous reception thus far. By virtue of our new campaign, our target market will now be able to grow and expand. The piece we're working on for Indy racer Tony Kanaan takes us into a whole new look and type of product we've never had before. It's not inexpensive; it retails for about \$1,100. At the very upper end of the Lockheed Martin collection, we've added Valjoux Automatic Mechanical Movement watches that retail for up to \$2,200. We've bracketed ourselves up in that category, but we've also gone down in others. We're releasing a new budget Sentry series that will retail for \$225. So the line has expanded tremendously.

As a founding partner of the brand, could you have imagined 20 years later this would have worked the way it did?

I really didn't know. In the beginning, it was about having found the unique illumination technology. I did believe that putting this self-powered illumination into a watch, which heretofore had not been done, would make our watches a utilitarian tool for the general consumer. I believed, for that reason, that it was a sensible business. Did I think it would get to the point where it's at now as a worldwide brand? No. Am I thrilled and proud that it has? Absolutely. ●

A Luminox Field Chrono Series (left) and Colormark (right)