



Christophe Georges

EDITORS' NOTE *Christophe Georges has held his current post since August 2007. Earlier, Georges served as Managing Director for Bentley Europe, based in Berlin. Prior to his Bentley career, Georges worked in Sales Operations for Rover Europe.*

COMPANY BRIEF *Bentley Motors (www.bentley-motors.com) is the third largest R&D investor in the U.K.'s automotive sector and the 18th largest nationally. The company employs around 4,000 people. Bentley exports over £500m worth of goods every year to established markets like the U.S., as well as emerging markets like China and South America. Bentley's global sales for the first half of 2012 increased by 25 percent with 3,929 cars delivered to customers and all global regions up from the same period in 2011.*

How was Bentley positioned over the past few years during the economic crisis?

The crisis has been deep for everybody; we haven't been immune. In the luxury car sector, the decline was even sharper than elsewhere because a car is a visible toy. You don't feel very good driving a luxury car when the market is struggling. Customers were lacking confidence.

The art market didn't decline the same way. When you buy new art, only those invited into your home can see it; cars are highly visible.

The crisis could not be reversed so we needed to manage it and understand that the business is always a cycle. We needed to prepare ourselves to emerge after the crisis.

Our history has been a roller coaster. In 2003, when we introduced the Continental GT, the success was tremendous. Within four years, we multiplied our business by a factor of 10. We've had to focus on customer satisfaction. Also, we have not lost a single dealer during the crisis. The brand has to maintain relevance and remain aware of its brand image. At the same time, we invested heavily in new product development. We increased sales last year by 32

Built for the Future

An Interview with
Christophe Georges, President and Chief Operating Officer, Bentley Motors, Inc.

percent. This year, sales are up 25 percent so far against last year's gains.

Bentley is considered a top-tier product. Is your clientele niche or is it broader?

Of course it's a higher niche, but we're attracting people from the lower segment as well. When we introduced the Continental GT, customers were coming from other premium brands and it gave them the opportunity to move up. The biggest source of customers came from the S-Class range of Mercedes-Benz. The Continental GT clearly created an opportunity for these people to move up. Before we launched the Continental series, the high-end market was selling 2,000 to 3,000 units per year and it consisted of Rolls-Royce, Bentley, and Ferrari – very few. The segment below that was the S-Class category, but those cars were all half as expensive. Between those two, the market was simply nonexistent. We were positioning the Continental in between – higher than the S-Class but lower than the high-end. We created a market segment. Aston Martin, Maserati, and others followed, but we are dominant in the segment. We maintained dominance. It's a niche market but one that has grown.

How critical is innovation?

Innovation includes combining the best luxury, comfort, and refinement with performance, acceleration, and sportiness.

In terms of innovation, even if it's not the reason why people buy our cars, we need it to be convenient, which includes good phone and navigation systems, for instance.

Related to our "clean/green" strategy, for example, we have the engine in Mulsanne – it has variable-displacement technology. It's eight-cylinder, but you cruise on four cylinders, and once you press the throttle, it's back to eight. It's absolutely undetectable. We continue to reduce emissions. We also offer the new V8 engine for Continental GT – it offers 40 percent fuel efficiency boost and CO² reduction. Even though customers aren't necessarily motivated by this, the technology is there.

How important is it to incorporate the heritage of the brand into your modern design?

Heritage is part of our goodwill; we cannot lose it. We make sure to balance and link heritage and DNA with modern design – it's a modern interpretation of what Bentley is about. We have to define what Bentley should be in



Bentley recently debuted a new V8 engine in its Continental GT coupe (pictured) and the GTC convertible. The new 500-horsepower powerplant offers dynamic drive as well as a 40 percent improvement in fuel economy.

the future without losing what's coming from the past. It's about having the right artist to make it happen.

Has the word luxury lost some of its meaning and can you define what true luxury is today?

Nobody can ever define what luxury is – it's all relative. As individuals, we all have ideas of what luxury is for us. For one person, spending one week on holiday could be a dream. For others, it's normal to have holidays, but they want to buy a plane. Luxury is relative to an individual's situation in life. For some, luxury is to be seen as having a nice meal in a restaurant. It's all dependent on the dreams individuals have and what they're aspiring to. It's the desire to access something that is not always easy to access.

In the car sector, for some, a premium car in the segment below ours could be luxury. For somebody else, luxury is Bentley. Within our category, we are the ultimate expression of luxury.

When you moved from Europe to the U.S., did you know that the timing was right to take on this role and has it gone as planned?

Not really. Life is always full of surprises. I've never had a career plan. I function according to opportunity and what I like to do. When I was with Europe, it was new. America was part of the dream – it's a great country. In 2007, when I decided to come to the U.S., it was a record year, the market was booming, and the U.S. market was successful – it was all about business development. Then the crisis came about and nobody expected it. It created more spice in my career. It has created a challenge to manage, which I didn't anticipate. But it has been great to go through it and to see how we're emerging today. It has created a lot of satisfaction.

How challenging is it to balance it all?

It's a business like any other. People are key. You have to have a strong team to be able to contribute and be supported. When the team grows and you can work with highly skilled people, it makes it much easier. There is a lot of travel and you're touching a little bit of everything. But when you can count on the team, you can organize yourself in a good way. ●