

Flash Point



QP readies itself for BASELWORLD – the watch industry’s biggest annual event; a culmination and harbinger of trends since the fair’s humble origins of 1917

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BASELWORLD 2005 is fast approaching and the watch industry is entering its annual frenzy of effort as companies rush to make final preparations, turning prototypes into functional show products. While the development teams burn the midnight oil trying to turn clever ideas into working reality, marketing departments want to know from their distributors how many more clients they will be bringing than last year. Like any industry trade fair, this annual show has become the focus and fulcrum about which the business revolves. It is not just the annual cycle that begins and ends at Basel; it is the point at which the industry takes stock, gauges its mood, shares news, swaps gossip, finds new trends to pursue and, not incidentally, has a good time.

Steady growth

Basel's annual fair has evolved from the general-industry exhibitions of the early 20th century that followed London's 1862 Great Exhibition. The first 'Schweizer Mustermesse' was held in 1917 - a specialist watch and jewellery event that was the dominant annual event in both sectors. These two sectors gradually edged out other industries during the post-war period so that, by the end of the 1960s, it was clear where the future lay.

The first separate watch and jewellery fair was held in 1973. This period was, of course, dominated by the quartz revolution that so shook up the watch industry and saw the disappearance, at least temporarily, of so many long-established names. The fair nevertheless grew steadily in importance and scope over the next decade and a half, its development really picking up the pace with the renewed optimism of the 1990s.

Turbulent times

The admission of non-European brands in 1986 and the growth in sheer volume of visitors caused a crisis early in the last decade, with Cartier leading an exodus of several high-end houses to a separate 'salon' in Geneva - Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie. The SIHH caused a radical rethink of how the Basel fair should be structured and organised; the first concrete improvement being the opening of a vast new main hall in 1998. More space and a grown-up relationship with the organisers of the SIHH allowed Messe Basel to direct its energies towards planning further reconstruction and other activities, including





a re-brand to the current 'BASELWORLD' incarnation, giving focus-group type names to the different halls. Hall 1 – the main watch arena – became the 'Hall of Dreams' and the hall devoted to ancillary industries became the 'Hall of Elements'.

The next major challenge to face the organisers arose from the Swiss government's slightly panicky reaction to the SARS virus. The government's last-minute decision to bar personnel from the Far East from working at BASELWORLD almost prompted a mass departure by Hong Kong exhibitors and created both ill-feeling and pessimism – not least because the bar was not applicable to visitors from the affected regions. The opening press conference positively crackled with a tension utterly alien to the norm.

That BASELWORLD opened just as the Iraq war went 'hot' did nothing to boost visitor

numbers, nor confidence. While we will never know exactly what was said between the fair's organisers and the Federal Government after the event, the organisers were certainly quick to patch-up relationships with the Far Eastern exhibitors. There was even a bonus: space was found to return the nation pavilions from their temporary relocation to Zurich. It is to the organisers' credit that 2004 saw visitor numbers achieve record-breaking levels after the *annus horribilis* of 2003 – some 90,000 in total.

Setting the bar

But BASELWORLD is primarily the setting for the watch houses themselves. While many companies are seeking to arrange press launches outside of Basel in the hope that their creations will create more impact away from the hurly-burly of the fair, it is an unavoidable fact that new products need to shine at the fair itself. This process is helped

by ever more bombastic press launches. Overblown and unintentionally comic as these can be, they are part and parcel of the experience. Of course, being there takes more than B-list celebrities presiding over the launch of the latest horological marvel. The stands themselves frequently represent multi-million-pound investments, functioning as three-dimensional billboards that not only show off the brands' headline pieces, but telegraph status and financial muscle too.

So what are the prospects for BASELWORLD this year? Higher numbers seem a certainty, as the organisers' marketing machine has been active all year, working to improve on 2004's 89,350-strong attendance. But where the buzz will be, what rumours will gain credence, which brands will make the most noise and – most importantly – which brands will sell the most, time will only tell. ○

Further information: BASELWORLD 2005, 31st March to 7th April 2005, www.baselworld.com

