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Posted : 09 August 2010

■ ■ ■ A matter of time & passion

By Leo Boon Yeow



Chris Long, co-founder of Azimuth, local luxury watch manufacturer that caters to the masses.

The ability to measure time has always been one of mankind's greatest achievements, evolving from the sundial, to iconic hourglass, and to the most accurate in the world today - the cesium fountain atomic clock.

Somewhere in between the hourglass and the atomic clock, lies the ever dependable mechanical wrist watch. Invented out of necessity by tying a pocket watch around the wrist, the concept took off in the early 1900s and has since been considered a Swiss specialty.

At the tender age of 15, Chris Long fell in love... whether it was the perfect face or slender arms, it was hard to tell, as the form and function of the humble mechanical wrist watch drew him in to the world of

rare and unique watches.

The youth who went on to become the co-founder of avant-garde watch brand Azimuth, developed his fascination with timepieces with an entrepreneurial edge, hunting out vintage watches at flea markets, which he revived and sold to earn enough to build up a small personal collection.

Unfortunately, as his passion for vintage watches grew, the trend among watch collectors for the rare and unique waned.

Getting the time right

2000 was a new era for timepieces. Collectors were on the prowl for bigger and bolder designs and they were also willing to part with good money for such new watches.

That meant that even as the rare and old faded in popularity, the higher prices for timepieces in general, made it hard for second hand watch collectors like Long to feed his passion.

Alvin Lye understood the problem being an avid watch collector as well.

After studying the direction of the industry, the pair decided that the time had come to pool their resources to realise their aspirations to not just buy watches but also make them.

The year was 2004 and economies were picking up from the impact of the SARS outbreak.

"We really had to thank the Swiss watch industry for increasing their prices every year.

If they had not done that, our process of starting Azimuth would have been much harder," he said with a mix of gratitude and resentment on losing a hobby, yet gaining a new direction for his passion.

Just like their latest creation, the world's first single hand watch that goes anti-clockwise, the creators of Azimuth didn't set up business by following the normal path.

First on their list was a name.

Keeping it simple, but effective

The requirements on naming their new brand were simple but effective - the name had to start with an 'A' so it would be among the first in any glossary, and it had to be meaningful.

"The meaning of 'Azimuth' is that it is a measurement of direction, which is apt because a watch is a measurement of time," said Long of the name in a matter-of-fact manner.

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The direct approach of the men behind the watch brand also went into the product even as Azimuth aimed to gain a foothold in the luxury watch market.

You must also have passion (for what you do) because when you have no money, it is the passion that can keep you alive.

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Marketing gurus over the years have consistently mandated that a sky-high price tag must be accompanied by the sky-high prestige a luxury item represents.

Azimuth sought to turn that idea around.

Long wanted to offer fellow watch aficionados the chance to appreciate the myriad of processes that reveal the "true value" of a well crafted watch.

The new brand would offer timepieces that not only looked nicer but were also "more affordable to the masses".

There was however one problem. Neither Long nor partner Lye had any formal training in watch manufacture.

The solution was "research from books in the library, as well as books specially ordered from MPH," said Long.

The potentially crippling fact was also turned into an advantage ... "pure passion and some technical knowledge that enabled us to create something different from what other people from the industry can offer" said Long of Azimuth's initial years.

Drawing inspiration from anything but watches, both men decided to mould Azimuth's identity around outlandish designs "inspired by objects of fantasy like robots, spaceships and super-cars," said Long with a sparkle in his eye.

"We try not to limit ourselves with watches... if we try to get inspiration from watches, we will end up making what looks like another watch," mused Long.

Testing the market

Being passionate watch collectors themselves, both Long and Lye were well aware of how watch-lovers tick, but still they sought feedback on their designs.

Comments like "has commercial value" from some watch collectors had the duo excited, along with observations from a long-time associate in Switzerland who was impressed that theirs was not another "me-too" design, with even their military-styled watches being quite different from those found on the luxury watch market.

"They found our designs refreshing, that's why we kick-started immediately, and came out with our first watch called the Bombardier 1."



Long's watch, a limited edition retrograde designed by himself.

Like the plane, the Bombardier 1 took off.

"During that time when we created the Bombardier 1, the size was 48mm. In 2004, it was considered to be very big, and we proved that we were correct about the trend in big watches," Long said with a proud smile.

With a brand and an iconic product in hand, Long and Lye set out to face the world with their first store, a 100 square-foot space in Far East Plaza.

The outlet was furnished with only 100 pieces of the Swiss manufactured watch made with an initial capital of S\$80,000 gathered from family and friends.

Price and Perseverance

Being a small upstart brand, Azimuth knew that to compete in the mature watch industry, they needed to have a trump card up their sleeve. It was Price.

"We try to keep it affordable by sacrificing our profits. You can tell by the old car I am still driving!" said Long in mock indignation.

It also helped that the Bombardier 1 caught the attention of a Danish watch journalist who fell in love with Azimuth's minimalist approach.

That stroke of luck meant a huge dose of publicity in their first year, which helped Azimuth rise in the watch industry and become extremely popular in Denmark for a period of time.

Azimuth was now able to open a flagship store in OUB Centre, a strategic location in the heart of the CBD where the Swiss-made watches started to sell among trendy, young white-collar workers around Raffles Place who were drawn to the quirky designs.

It was then that the team also discovered their true calling.

"Our true edge is in design. We don't want to create a 'me-too' product and that spurs us to think out of the box, producing watches that the industry has never seen before," said Long.

However he conceded that no matter how "interesting and quirky" the design, "the big boys have the advantage of having more money to invest in R&D and advertising."

This financial advantage also means the bigger players can control the supply of movements - something which a small outfit like Azimuth is unable to match - thus allowing them to be unaffected in terms of product delivery.

Azimuth was soon viewed as a contender and a threat by several established brands which brought the Singapore pair to court for alleged copying of designs and ideas, a battle which Azimuth eventually won.

It was also a battle to expand within Singapore due to the strong hold by established brands on the luxury watch market and public wariness.

"In the beginning, a large proportion of the people who noticed Azimuth are the naysayers. Basically, they are Singaporeans who look down on other Singaporeans. It was very difficult.

"But there was a smaller group who are nationalistic, and the reasons why they buy our product are because we are Singaporean and the product is interesting," said Long.

Rather than swim against the tide, Azimuth banked on raising a positive profile.

"So how we survived, was [that] we did small distribution, and we have gained traction because of our presence over time, and more involvement in advertising and promotions," he said.

Passion in lieu of money

Today, Azimuth continues to produce limited number of timepieces within a modest five family of designs amounting to over 20 models, with prices ranging from about S\$1,999 for a simple but effective design, to about S\$120,000 for a complex tourbillon piece.

The company also boasts of considerable "traction" in terms of acceptance with watch collectors.

"Consumers who buy an Azimuth are savvy consumers. Over 90 percent of them are seasoned watch collectors, so they know what they are buying," said a proud Long.



Limited edition watch to commemorate Singapore's National Day.

"Now it's more to our advantage" said Long, adding that "the Republic of Singapore brand name is very well received overseas" due to international perception now of Singapore that's associated with cleanliness and exceptional attention to detail.

To further introduce the brand to the rest of the world, Long also casually mentioned that Azimuth will be opening a flagship boutique at the Marina Bay Sands - Singapore's latest stop for high-rollers and the well-heeled with a world-class casino and retail mall.

According to Long, Azimuth will also be cranking up its production volume this year to meet burgeoning consumer demand.

Time may be of the essence in starting a business, but in the case of Azimuth, its founders believe that in order to succeed, there must be "intense passion".

"The [luxury watch] environment is very harsh, and because of that you have to make sure you have designs that sell and really have a very clear direction of where you want to go.

"You must also have the passion, because when you have no money, it is the passion that can keep you alive," said Long.

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