

# Freshly Minted MONTBLANC

CEO LUTZ BETHGE AND THE LUXURY  
BRAND LEND THEIR CLOUT TO UNICEF







(Pictured): At left from left to right, Director of the Montblanc Cultural Foundation Ingrid Roosen-Trinks, Montblanc CEO Lutz Bethge, and President and CEO of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF Caryl M. Stern at Montblanc's Beverly Hills boutique. Photo by Suzanne Nyerges. Opposite, Montblanc's "Signature for Good" Meisterstück fountain pen. Courtesy of Montblanc.

BY JUDY SECKLER

Lutz Bethge, Montblanc's charismatic CEO, is a man of ideas with the energy to make them happen. In troubled financial times, he has taken a great product and wrapped it around major philanthropic causes. Additionally, in his five years at the helm of the company, he has masterminded an expansion with new lines and reinvigorated the brand.

Montblanc stores all over carry men's and women's elegant leather goods, jewelry and high-end watches, as well as the company's writing instruments. For the walls of its stores, the company has commissioned well-known artists to create artwork that incorporates the Montblanc logo.

Quality, luxury and handcrafted elegance are traits that have cemented Montblanc's reputation for more than 100 years. Each

pen is still handcrafted in a multi-step process that assures that the customer always makes the first stroke: employees test a pen's flow with colorless ink until its touch and performance meet the company's exacting standards.

"Writing has a special meaning," says Bethge. "When you write, it's emotional. You keep your first love letters, but e-mails aren't permanent."

At the company's Hamburg, Germany, headquarters, Bethge's office is decorated with a striking photograph of the six snow-capped Alps that served as

*"When you write, you're leaving a trace in history. It makes you eternal."*

LUTZ BETHGE, CEO, MONTBLANC INTERNATIONAL

inspiration for Montblanc's stylish white star logo. The photograph daily reminds the chief of the company's history and identity.

Indeed, a pride permeates the entire company, and Montblanc esteems itself as close-knit. In fact, the corporation has been known to hire several generations of the same families. It's not uncommon for longtime employees to be working with their children and grandchildren.

A tour through the Montblanc factory reveals a passionate and proud staff, committed to perpetuating the Montblanc brand. The

creation of one of the Montblanc Meisterstück fountain pen takes 35 steps for the nib only and 250 steps for the complete fountain pen, according to Bethge. The writing nib is hand ground and tested thousands of times.

Montblanc maintains its high level of quality and design without outsourcing to Asia for labor. Whereas other great companies have sacrificed quality to maintain their profitability, the company has kept control over its product and has stayed true to its identity. By sticking to a 100-percent handmade process, Montblanc can offer its clients one-of-a-kind





(Pictured): Above, Montblanc CEO Lutz Bethge. Photo by Suzanne Nyerges. Right, Montblanc's "Signature for Good" Stingray Cufflinks. Courtesy of Montblanc. Opposite, the exterior of Montblanc's Rodeo Drive boutique. Credit: Alberto Rodriguez/Getty Images.

fountain pens.

Clients who have everything can create a custom-designed pen from start to finish with their own personal designer from Montblanc. From the sketch stage to the jewel inlay stage, the entire undertaking is recorded on camera so that the client becomes part of the process and has a record of his or her pen for posterity. Major manufacturing processes can be watched online via an Internet site especially created for each of these customers. "Customers sit with the designers and the craftsmen and find the experience is so enjoyable," says Bethge.

Adjacent to the factory is the Montblanc Museum, where the company's history is preserved. There, among other attractions,

visitors can enjoy a display of the world's most important books by the celebrated characters of the Montblanc Limited Writers Edition. Many satisfied customers have a deep connection with Montblanc's wares; Bethge himself describes one situation where an 80-year-old gentleman who had inherited his grandfather's Montblanc pen had no children to whom he could bequeath it. In turn, he gifted it to the Montblanc Gallery, saying he was returning it to its home.

With all its good fortune, it would be easy for Montblanc to sit back and bask in its glory. However, Bethge is a firm believer in giving back. For many years, the company has had a foundation

in place to spearhead its involvement in charitable causes.

Ingrid Roosen-Trinks, director of the Montblanc Cultural Foundation, is responsible for organizing the company's charity efforts. Various film, music, sports and fashion celebrities line up to participate.

The company easily attracts star power on a level that's unprecedented in philanthropic circles. Montblanc selects a prestigious ambassador to represent its foundation, such as acclaimed Chinese pianist Lang Lang who holds the top spot as Chairman of the Montblanc Cultural Foundation. Anil Kapoor, well-known for his recent role as the game show host in the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*, has also been a Montblanc ambassador for India and supported the worldwide "Signature for Good" initiative. How Montblanc has struck this balance between business and philanthropy is one of the most remarkable and commendable qualities of the brand.

It works because the company "sees itself as a brand for arts



and culture," says Roosen-Trinks.

Bethge's latest effort, "Signature for Good," promotes the spread of literacy around the world. "Education is the only thing that interrupts the cycle of poverty," explains Caryl M. Stern, president and CEO of the United States Fund for UNICEF, a Montblanc partner. The organization's

School in a Box, a compact treasure trove of teaching supplies, is used in Africa, South America and Asia for the 100 million children in those locales who are unable to attend school. Montblanc has pledged \$1.5 million to the UNICEF cause.

In September 2009, Montblanc held an elegant rooftop auction at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills, California, to reach for its goal. At the event, Roosen-Trinks gathered glamorous portraits, taken by Roger Moenks, of a dozen film and TV actresses dressed in top designer gowns, representing famous literary heroines and wearing Montblanc jewelry. Each successful bidder received a one-of-a-kind, twelve-karat, solid gold Meisterstück pen in addition to a celebrity portrait of these actresses. In one brilliant moment, Montblanc hitched its brand to some of the most recognizable faces in the world. The pen maker has plans to continue this strategy in the future.

Many celebrities were touched by the cause. "It's a wonderful idea," said actress Stefanie Powers, who spends one-third of her year living in Kenya, Africa as the director of the Mount Kenya Game Ranch. "I understand the importance of teaching things that are relevant to people."

The culture of writing has been part of the Montblanc's legacy since the company's beginnings, and Bethge passionately believes traditional penmanship will never die—even in the digital age. "When you write, you're leaving a trace in history," he says. "It makes you eternal." □



