

# Fueling Creativity with Maximilian Büsser, Founder MB&F



In August 2018 the INSEAD Alumni Association Switzerland hosted “Objects of Beauty: Fueling Creativity” featuring Maximilian Büsser, Founder of MB&F, at the Zunfthaus zur Waag in Zurich. The evening conference was organized by Mafalda Tenente, MBA’06J who summarized this premium knowledge event and discussion into five key ideas.

Read on to find out more about fueling creativity....

## Five Takeways: Fueling Creativity with Maximilian Büsser



Creativity is a skill that can be nurtured. Until recently creativity was seen as a special talent or a gift. But according to more recent research, it is increasingly thought of as a skill you can work on, according to Mafalda Tenente, **MBA’06J**, event organizer and moderator, explaining that if there is passion creativity can be nurtured. She pointed out that there are certain conditions under which creativity thrives, and one person who really understands this is Maximilian Büsser.

Maximilian Büsser had a meteoric career as a turnaround specialist in the watchmaking industry before he was even 31 years old. Despite being at the peak of his success, he left the corporate world at 39 to establish his own brand MB&F.

Creativity is at the core of the brand Maximilian Büsser and Friends. The story of the journey that brought him and his team to disrupt in an extremely conservative industry is a compelling one that offered insights

into creativity, resilience, risk-taking, self-knowledge, and the luxury watch industry.

## Mechanical Watches are Pointless and Beautiful

MB&F has many firsts. It was the first watchmaker to put balance wheels and escapements up front or on top of the watch, showing the beauty of the engineering. The transformation of energy into time that is beautiful is a guiding theme at MB&F. It created one of the most complicated watches in history. It proved watches don't have to be round. The team designs watches that are reminiscent of fantasy super-cars, science fiction inspired moon-stations, frogs, and other non-traditional forms.

MB&F deconstructs traditional watchmaking to make 3d kinetic art, which gives you time, but that's not the point. A Perpetual calendar watch was a triple revolution. The complications of this type were flawed throughout the history of watchmaking. One of the friends in the MB&F team, a self-taught watchmaker, solved the problem by developing an entirely new complication that can cope with calendars and leap years.

### **Don't Choose a Job, Choose a Mission**

A young engineering graduate, Maximilian Büsser was applying for jobs at large consumer brands. An engineering education back in the day did not address humanity and beauty but his instinct told him that watchmaking might. Recalling that thirty years ago, the Swiss watchmaking industry was facing the quartz disruption with thousands of jobs at stake, he explained that it was not very attractive to university graduates and engineers. But he was convinced to enter the field by the CEO of Jaeger-LeCoultre, who asked him: Do you want to be one of 250,000 people in a big corporation, or one of the few who are going to save Jaeger? The opportunity led to seven "extraordinary" satisfying years, not only preserving 40 different watchmaking "know-how" and many jobs, but also creating a strong profitable company.

Büsser deeply admires the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century watchmaking tradition of the Vallee de Joux. Between 1720 and 1870 all the innovation that defines the industry today was created by genius artisans making beautiful pocket watches who developed split-second chronographs, tourbillons, and perpetual calendars. Büsser added that these watches usually still work today.

### **Know Yourself**

Therapy and self-examination helped Büsser to understand that it was time to leave the corporate world to start his own brand. A career in corporate management is mainly about managing people and delivering what the market wants, what will sell. To be more creative and artistic meant that he would become an entrepreneur. Just what kind of entrepreneur he was going to be and exactly what kind of products he would create, even how big the company would be at full fruition, was made clear by the effort of self-examination. For example, he understood he was good at having ideas that others don't have, a social liability as a child became a strength as an adult. He can also bring great people to work together to create and collaborate.

He understood that there would be no shareholders that might be fearful or nervous of his seemingly anti-commercial business ideas. In later years, he had the humility to understand that ambition to create a new movement every year, sometimes two new ones, was not sustainable. No other company in watchmaking industry does it, and he came to see the wisdom of it.

The early years of growth were buoyed by the economic boom of the first part of the millennium, but the 2008-09 financial crisis had an almost disastrous impact on orders. The

entire luxury goods industry was affected. It is not impervious to economic cycles. Büsser said that it was effort and commitment by everyone in the company that averted job losses during the downturn, as well as maintaining sales targets. To keep exploring ideas beyond timepieces, music boxes and writing instruments, Büsser has opened several novel art-gallery-style shops around the world.

### **Creativity Goes Hand in Hand with Fear**

Every time he creates a new piece that truly expresses his creativity, there is fear. When he launched a particularly iconoclastic watch, the Thunderbolt, in his words the “craziest” watch since founding, Büsser says he was terrified. It was true to childhood visions and phenomenally expensive to make but the retailers did not like it. He approached one by one bloggers, journalists, and influencers. They loved it. Soon after stories about the watch were published, the retailers were getting demand. And the watch that had inspired the most fear became the company’s first best seller.

### **Sustaining Creativity**

Creativity is cultivated when by working with people that share the same values. Never do anything you know that you will look back on and regret.

Being creative means getting out of one’s comfort zone. It means tolerating fear. It also means becoming quickly bored. It means helping other people achieve and create things.

Büsser posits that 100 percent of children are creative, inventing stories, singing, and dreaming. He says that children are creative because they are not scared of being wrong. Children are taught by adults to not be wrong, so they won’t suffer. To counter the trend, he highly recommends a Ted Talk by Sir Ken Robinson about the topic ([https://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity](https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity))



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