

Watches & Jewellery

Watchmakers fall in love with everyday heroes

Brand image Real-life achievers are replacing celebrities and film stars in advertisements as marketing moves on, reports *Syl Tang*

Breaking away from the usual practice of hiring a movie star to be the face of the brand, watchmakers such as JeanRichard, Officine Panerai and Bovet 1822 are focusing on celebrating ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

JeanRichard's 208 Second watch was created to commemorate the crash-landing of US Airways flight 1549 on the Hudson river in New York in January 2009, when the lives of all 155 people on board were saved by the skill of the pilot.

The timepiece, which marks the fifth anniversary of the event, has indicators around the dial to show the 208 seconds that it took Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and his crew to land the plane.

Captain Sullenberger, who found himself unexpectedly in the limelight five years back, says that timing is crucial in creating "ordinary" heroes. Ten years previously, he believes, his own story would not have been given as much attention.

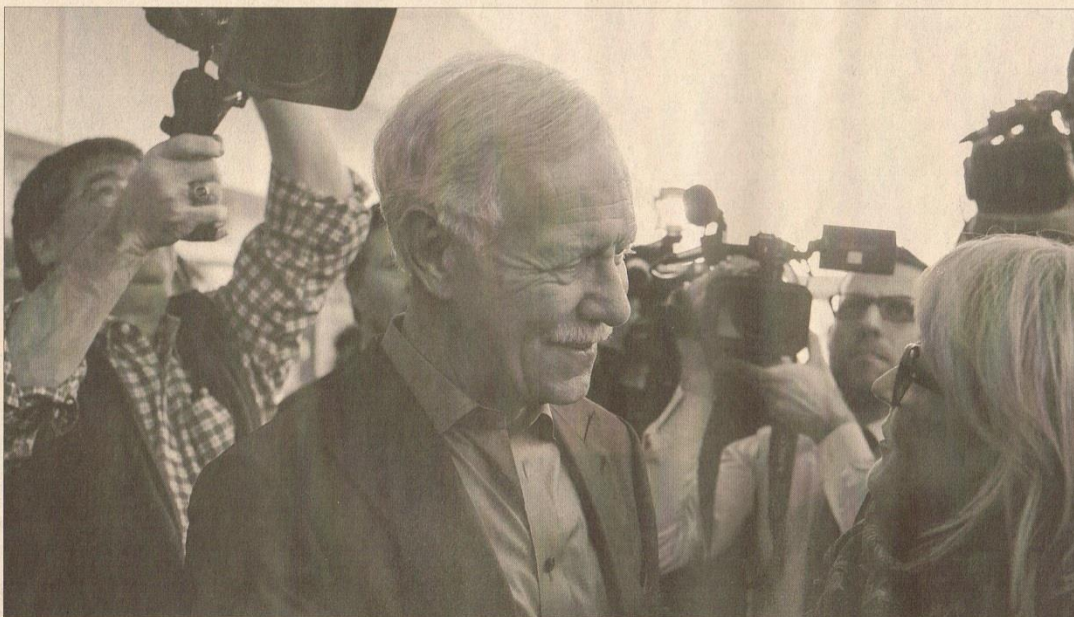
"There are many people who do notable things. They just aren't publicly tested as I was. You decide what kind of a person you're going to be long before anything like this happens to you, if it ever does. But the event gave people hope, which is why we still think of it."

There is a logical connection between pilots and timepieces.

"For a pilot, the concept of time is inherently important," says Mr Sullenberger, who as well as the 208 Second has a 1973 Rolex he received from the American Fighter Aces Association. "You have a finite amount of resources before you have to return to earth, so you have to manage these resources well – similar to managing the time we are given in life well."

"Time is a constant reminder that we never know what tomorrow may bring, and a constant reminder to prepare."

But can a campaign of this kind sell watches? Bruno Grande, chief executive of JeanRichard, indicates that profit is not the reason his company is focusing on good deeds. "If a brand can make someone dream, it has to be a dream they can touch, share and reach. In difficult times, people need to see that crazy dreams can become



Everyday miracle: Captain Chesley Sullenberger of the Hudson river crash-landing, marked by watchmaker JeanRichard's timepiece

reality. Selling watches wasn't the main objective – it was finding the right people to convey that message. I don't know if it's the right message, but it's our message."

Another brand celebrating extraordinary achievements by people previously unknown to the wider public is Officine Panerai, which has joined with Ari Greenburg, a Hollywood agent, in his charity work to raise awareness of autism. Its watches have no shortage of celebrity fans (such as Ryan Reynolds and Orlando Bloom) but executives were captivated by Mr Greenburg's passion for his cause after meeting him through the company's Hollywood store.

Mr Greenburg, a partner at William Morris Endeavor, and his wife, Andrea Lee, became fundraisers for

Autism Speaks after their son was diagnosed with the condition.

"For a company such as Panerai to get involved in a cause of this type draws big company money," Mr Greenburg says. "You don't associate autistic kids with luxury goods, but this is one of the fastest-growing disorders. It's an epidemic and you can't raise enough money just from individuals to have power globally."

"You need awareness and money in Washington DC to shake out federal funds to have public health initiatives. Then, instead of \$20m, you get an NIH [National Institutes of Health] bill worth a couple billion a year."

Bringing companies such as Panerai on board will, Mr Greenburg hopes, bring the kind of breakthrough for autism research that was seen in the

battle against polio. In the 1930s, research had stagnated until President Franklin D. Roosevelt's involvement led to the creation of a foundation that became known as the March of Dimes. With the money raised, the first polio vaccines were developed.

Panerai has backed other initiatives to help those living with serious medical conditions. In 2011, it extended its Classic Yachts Challenge sponsorship to Sailing Heals, run by Trisha Boisvert. Based in Bradford, Massachusetts, the charity allows cancer patients and their families to "escape for a spirit-lifting day at sea", drawing on what it sees as the healing power of being out on the ocean.

With a fan base among the sailing community, Panerai has often used glamorous regattas in its marketing.

Its charity fundraising received local coverage but did not feature heavily in the media. However, it started to draw the attention of top Panerai collectors, many of them race winners, who have donated the use of their boats and crews to Ms Boisvert and her charity.

Some may see Panerai's involvement in good causes such as these as an indication that celebrity endorsement has become tired and unconvincing as a marketing tool.

However, Karen Giberson, president of the Accessories Council, says the day-to-day struggles of ordinary life play a part in consumer spending.

"People are looking for authenticity in what they buy, what it represents and who we look up to now. People want their accessories to align with their personal values but also their daily concerns," she says.

Throwing money at fixing the world is something Bovet 1822 is also doing. In 2013, the watch brand raised \$1.8m for film-maker Paul Haggis's Artists for Peace and Justice, a charity funding education and healthcare programmes in Haiti.

Having just announced a five-year commitment to the charity, Pascal Raffy, chief executive of Bovet, says: "Sometimes, after 10 minutes conversation, you understand on the spot that you share the same values."

"This is what happened with Paul and I when he was talking about education and the goals of the children of Haiti. This is not about selling watches, but we have a chance to give with modesty and humility."

Mr Haggis confirms that Bovet's support comes with no strings attached. "With our sponsors, it was crucial that they all didn't ask for anything in return. That's why we said 'yes'. It's about shared values, dignity and passion. Now, we can sponsor a hospital and we've built a cholera clinic and so forth."

APJ, which built Haiti's first free secondary school last year, has incredibly lofty goals. "It's about giving Haitians education and the chance at taking back and running their own country," says Mr Haggis.

The days may be over when all a luxury brand needed was celebrity endorsement.

"With our sponsors, it was crucial that they didn't ask for anything in return. That's why we said 'yes'"