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Bugaboo: the pull of a cool pushchair



By Emma Jacobs



Man with a pram plan. Max Barenbrug wants substance not hype to be the reason a Bugaboo is bought by parents

On Fridays, Max Barenbrug, co-founder of Bugaboo, the maker of expensive statement strollers and prams used by Elton John, Madonna and reportedly the Duchess of Cambridge, is found at home. This time is earmarked for his two children but as they are aged 10 and 11, for the most part they are at school and he is on his own. “At home I am totally Max, which is sitting silently and thinking. I like to be alone. When I am with the children I ask the girls, ‘do your thing, don’t bother me’.”

The childcare strategy allows him freedom to ponder. “I don’t like to work extremely hard. I have never worked extremely hard.” Which is a rare statement from an entrepreneur.

His philosophy is that products are “1 per cent inspiration and 99 per cent transpiration. Transpiration can be outsourced, inspiration is where you make a difference and I focus on that. An idea should be in the head as long as possible.”

His team of designers – 35 people, but he wishes it was more – are afforded the same entitlement as the chief executive once they have a baby. It is not pure altruism, they are expected to work an extra hour the other days and it makes scheduling meetings easier if everyone has the same day off. Does an extra day with their child increase their ability to innovate products and functionality for infants generally?

“Yes and no. If you are not a [parent] you are more objective, which is a better basis for creativity.”

The Bugaboo was born out of Mr Barenbrug’s graduation project in 1994. While still a student – with no children – at Eindhoven’s prestigious Design Academy, he was inspired to create a prototype stroller after seeing parents struggling with their own.

After graduating, he and Eduard Zanen, a doctor and entrepreneur then married to Mr Barenbrug’s sister, tried and failed to sell the design to stroller manufacturers. So the two went into business together to make it themselves, finding a manufacturer in Taiwan. The first Bugaboo came on to the market in 1999.

Max Barenbrug on the role of designers

• **Designers are underrated:** “A designer should be on the board and have the final word about a product. The intelligence of designers is not used properly. They are often only used to coming up with nice-looking things, which is superficial. It is about more

Mr Barenbrug, who can be deliberately vague when he chooses, says there is “a difference of opinion” on how much Mr Zanen put in to the company. “I think he invested €150,000.” How much does Mr Zanen think it is? “Double.” Nonetheless, Mr Barenbrug insists that it is not a source of tension between them, nor is Mr Zanen’s divorce from his sister. (“They both made stupid mistakes . . . They were both to blame and we’re all human.”)

Gangly Mr Barenbrug, bouncing about his press office’s chic, white meeting room like a Labrador, thinks the idea of owning a stroller as a status symbol is mad, likening it to “skyscrapers”.

“We have a lot of ignorant consumers [who] just go for a Bugaboo because their neighbour has one,” he says.

than design, it is about concept creations, an identity.”

• **Not all customers care about design for its own sake:** “We focus on performance but many people are not interested in performance because it’s rational and they are more led by [the] emotional – the fact that the neighbour has it or friends are talking about it. Yet our difference lies in the fact that we have this substance.”

• **Designers should aspire to start their own companies:** “The biggest brands like Google, Apple, Microsoft, Mercedes are all created by designers or engineers,” says Mr Barenbrug. Most of his designers “want to create themselves, they want to own a product”, he says, but adds that “unfortunately there aren’t many who can” – they do not have the entrepreneurial ability.

The company’s top model sells for more than £1,200.

He is wary of the PR machine’s role in publicising the brand. “We give away strollers. I don’t like that . . . [It’s] hype that can easily [transfer] to another product. As a designer I try to give substance to the balloon that is created by our marketing department. You have to fill it with substance.” After all, he points out, “you don’t need to put your child in a stroller at all. You could carry it.” In fact, one of his designers does just that.

Design is everything to Mr Barenbrug.

The Bugaboo’s functionality was, he says, part of its early appeal to men. “When we were small, the early adopters were women [and] also men.” Now the brand is mainstream, he says, the male buyers have become less significant: “In general it is mommy doing the purchase and the man is smoking cigarettes outside.”

As a child, he was always making things in the garage of the family home in Haarlem, northern Holland. While still at school, he made and sold beds on stilts to students wanting to maximise space: “I bought wood, steel and welded it together, and had enough money to [pay off] the investment for the drilling machine and have a good vacation.”

His mother was a housewife and his father worked for the retailer C&A: “A very old-fashioned company, very religious. My father was very religious too. I didn’t believe in God.”

His father accepted his decision to renounce religion at the age of eight, although his mother insisted on regular church attendance. Mr Barenbrug’s first degree was in government administration, which he stopped after a year before going to the Design Academy. “Part of me came to life, which was suppressed by my upbringing.”

Referring to himself as stubborn and occasionally scary, he insists he has only once shouted at an employee. Is that person still working with him? “No, he was fired.”

Mr Barenbrug describes himself as “designer”. He is disdainful of his formal title: chief executive. “CEO is a word that is American and doesn’t mean anything to me. I am in charge of the conceptual development and make sure that all the products have excitement and are better [than their competitors].”

However, there was a period between 2009 and 2010 when he was not chief executive and was utterly miserable.

Together with Mr Zanen, he had appointed an external chief executive to relieve the pair of the day-to-day minutiae of management. “We were entrepreneurs starting from scratch, learning by doing. Then you meet this professional person and are impressed by him. But you find out he does not understand all the things you are good at – entrepreneurship, having intuition, being prepared to move fast.”

So due to his “frustration”, Mr Barenbrug quit. During this time, he focused on his house in France, his boat and his “unhappiness”. “I couldn’t let go. The company is what moves me.”

Ultimately, due to declining product quality, falling profits and increasing personal misery, he returned to the post. Key to maintaining quality, he says, is owning Bugaboo’s factory in China, calling it the “basis for our success”. Previously Bugaboo had to “stand in line . . . bigger companies were prioritised”.

Revenues in 2012 were €94m, up from €82m in 2011. The company now has eight offices, employs more than 900 people and sells to 46 countries.

Now Mr Barenbrug is working on a new product about which he is annoyingly tight-lipped, except to say it is in the area of “commuting”.

As designer-in-chief, he sets the company’s direction. As he tells his designers: “If you want to be in my chair, if you really want to create as I create you have to do it yourself because, within Bugaboo, in the end it is me that decides.”

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