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Capturing History

Over the past century, thousands of iconic images have been captured through the lenses of a Leica.

Images courtesy of Leica Camera

As the industry's iconic manufacturer of digital and analog cameras, Leica is investing in the innovative spirit which has seen it thrive over the past 100 years. *The CEO Magazine* recently spoke to Alfred Schopf, CEO of Leica Camera, about what he views as the future of this remarkable company.

The CEO Magazine: As one of the longest running companies in its global field, what do you think is the secret to Leica Camera's longevity and success?

Alfred: Leica was actually the inventor of the first successful small camera with full-format, making reportage photography available 100 years ago, and it took a further 10 years until the camera was manufactured. Leica was the recording device of choice for photographers across the world for a lot of important moments in time that were captured as images.

A lot of these images are part of the world's heritage for the past 100 years. For example, one of the most distributed images in the world, the portrait shot of Che Guevara, is a Leica photo. The Vietnamese girl escaping from the napalm bombardment in the Vietnam War is a Leica photo.

The dying soldier in the Spanish Civil War is a Leica photo. A lot of these remarkable images are embedded in the global mindset and they're all thanks to Leica's photographic technology.

I think this is the reason behind Leica's longevity over the past 100 years and why we're still doing what we do.

Since becoming CEO in August 2010, how have you left your own mark on the company's impressive legacy?

There are a lot of things that we've undertaken in the past four years. You can see it on the product records. Product-wise, we were the first to do a digital full-format sensor camera with interchangeable lenses and it was the smallest on the planet. That was the very beginning and then we did a black-and-white camera and we established compact cameras with big lenses on the market. This year, we launched the first system camera with a full touch display.

Year by year, there are milestones that we achieve which put a new technology and investment into the photographic industry. It's a new input into the industry which is sometimes copied by some of our competitors.

Besides all of our product improvements, we are showing new innovations on a yearly basis, so that's one of the major footsteps that we've taken under my leadership.

How have you evolved Leica Camera's operations and strategies as the market shifts with the rise of smartphones and digital?

First of all, we have a different sales approach. We are selling through our own stores—Leica-branded stores—where we offer a totally different customer experience. Rather than going to a large merchandiser with 50 different brands and products, we offer something special which really demonstrates the real value of what we're doing.

From the very beginning, we started to establish this direct contact with the customers through our own Leica stores. We have 185 stores and boutiques across the planet where customers can enjoy a direct feeling, touch, and philosophy with the Leica cameras.

We have also established, with the 100th anniversary, our new facility here in Wetzlar with a really outstanding architectural building. This architectural value is also continued inside the >

"A lot of these remarkable images are embedded in the global mindset and they're all thanks to Leica's photographic technology."

- Alfred Schopf



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CMOSIS was started in November 2007 by a team of CMOS image sensor veterans driven by imaging technology innovation and new market opportunities. Meanwhile, this team has grown to about 70 people, most of them with many years of CMOS image sensor experience. This team, their image sensor innovations and strategic partnerships with customers and suppliers, perfectly position CMOSIS to successfully undertake the most demanding CMOS image sensor challenges on a worldwide scale. Most of CMOSIS' imagers are exported from Belgium. Major markets include Germany, Japan, the US, Canada, South Korea, and Australia.

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applications. These products feature low noise global and rolling shutter pixels, high frame rates, low power and high dynamic range operation modes, combined with high-speed digital interfaces.

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building in how we show our products, the heritage of the brand, the images that have been shot on Leica, and how different it is to shoot with a Leica.

Brand is key but by far the most important factor is the image quality. Using a Leica is like using a Stradivarius. Not everybody can play a Stradivarius but somebody who builds their know-how can create excellent music with it. It's the same with Leica. With our high-end products, not everybody can use them properly. But, if you build your knowledge then you can capture images that transcend into stunning and beautiful pictures.

For us, a camera is the enabling instrument—in the end, it's all about the image quality and its result.

*"From the beginning, the relationship with Leica Camera was a true partnership focusing on the common goal to develop and produce CMOS image sensors that support and reflect the essence of Leica Camera products, while respecting each company's business objectives and cultures."
- Lou Hermans, Executive VP Marketing and Sales, CMOSIS*



How do you encourage innovation and collaboration across the company?

We are a relatively small company with a lot of direct customer contact so we listen very carefully to what our customers tell us. There are a lot of famous photographers in this customer field. Some are famous as artists and photographers, like Bryan Adams and Lenny Kravitz, and there are also celebrities and other artists who use a Leica camera for both pleasure and professional purposes. With all of them, we have direct contact and we are listening to them.

We listen to all of our customers and photographers and try to incorporate all of their ideas into what we do. While we have a lot of serious people here, we sometimes have crazy ideas and from time to time we use them for disruptive innovation.

We also have some strategic, long-term relationships with our suppliers and partners. We source on a worldwide basis so we're collaborating across the globe. We have close relationships with a lot of strategic partners where we really rely on them.

Where do you see Leica Camera going in coming years?

Our presence is growing worldwide. Our major locations are improving, particularly in China. We are still under-represented in the Middle East but we'll enhance brand presence with our stores and boutiques. On the technical side, we're undertaking continuous improvements.

One of our major goals will be to teach smartphone users how to take better pictures. If we can convert and convince only 10 per cent of these users to purchase a camera to pursue that better image quality, then the photographic market could improve significantly. •



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