

Baselworld 2017 Opens with 13% Fewer Exhibitors

MARCH 23, 2017

Source: National Jeweler

Basel, Switzerland--The message from executives who spoke at the Baselworld opening press conference on Wednesday was clear: We know the situation is bad, and we don't really want to talk about it.

The annual watch and jewelry trade show kicks off in Switzerland amid a backdrop of lagging watch sales and geopolitical and economic uncertainties.

Swiss watch exports dropped 10 percent in value terms last year following a 3 percent decline in 2015. So far this year, they're down 8 percent, according to figures from the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry.

Baselworld has seen attendance slide for the past three years, and the number of exhibitors at this year's show is down 13 percent year-over-year, from 1,500 to 1,300.

Bremont and Shinola are among the notable watch companies absent from this year's fair, as are Kering Group brands Girard-Perregaux and Ulyssee Nardin, both of which exhibited at SIHH earlier this year.

But rather than focusing on the struggles the industry is facing, show organizers opted to put a positive spin on the opening of Baselworld 2017 and the changes that have been made to the show.

"There is no need to dwell at length on the past 12 months," Baselworld Managing Director Sylvie Ritter said at Wednesday's pre-show press conference.

She said fair organizers are instead looking to the future and recognize that Baselworld "needs to be transformed to reflect the world market."

Transformations undertaken this year include a new space in Hall 1 for independent watchmakers and a Design Lab to showcase more unique, avant-garde pieces.

Ritter and François Thiébaud, president of the Swiss Exhibitors Committee, also mentioned several times the show's focus on "quality over quantity" and its rejection of a number of potential exhibitors that were "not in line" with the show's concept and did not meet its criteria, though they declined to outline specifics when asked by journalists.

Thiébaud said they rejected exhibitors "without legitimacy," later clarifying his remarks to state that he meant fashion brands that treated watches like an accessory, not companies that produce smartwatches.

"I believe these people did not obtain the (sales) results they had planned and have given up producing such products. It (the show's rejection of exhibitors) has nothing to do with smartwatches or connected watches," he said.

Though show organizers acknowledged the need for Baselworld to evolve, the press conference became tense when they were asked about the possibility of making major changes to the show, such as holding it every other year or moving the dates to align it with SIHH, which takes place every January in Geneva.

"It would be totally absurd to have Baselworld only every two years," Thiébaud said.

Ritter also rejected both ideas, noting that the purpose of Baselworld is to introduce the "novelties" in watch and jewelry making each year, in the spring in Basel.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the show that gave birth to Baselworld.

The first Basler Mustermesse (sample fair) took place in April 1917 and featured exhibitors from five different Swiss industries: cheese making, clock and watchmaking, textiles, farming, and machine tools.

The show eventually came to include jewelry as well, and in 1984, watches and jewelry split from the broader fair to become their own show.

Ritter said at Wednesday's press conference that no special events are planned to mark the anniversary because organizers did not want a celebration to "disturb" the business being done at show.

Baselworld 2017 begins today and continues through Thursday, March 30.