

[ START ]

WE ARE SWEEPING through the hedgerow-fringed country lanes of Hampshire — rich farming land in England’s home counties. “We” being five journalists in a convoy of sleek, dark sedans — Mercedes limousines, in fact — that would normally indicate to the casual observer that someone of Great Importance was being escorted somewhere Terribly Exclusive. They’d have been right. Up to a point. Well, technically, half right. We were going somewhere terribly exclusive — the “manufactory” (factory being far too common in these rarefied circles) where super-luxe English mobile phone company Vertu handcrafts its superb units that have become so beloved of the super-elite. We just weren’t very important. Despite the fact that I had checked out of my suite at the Ritz, London, just half an hour earlier.

Gaining access to the “manufactory” — an otherwise nondescript industrial unit surrounded by countryside — involves a fair degree of security, with airport-style scanners before one is admitted to the workshops. Given that the entry-level price for one of these beautifully crafted pieces is £4,200, it doesn’t do to be too cavalier about leaving phones lying around the place.

We have an introductory presentation in the boardroom from Vertu’s boyishly youthful “head of concept creation and design” ‘Hutch’ Hutchinson (“I put it down to a lifetime of yoga”, he smiles bashfully) who gives us the backstory. In the Nineties, Hutchinson and some other senior designers at then omnipotent Nokia (how times have changed...) hit upon the idea of a luxury phone. Says Hutchinson: “A guy stepped out

[ CAPTION ]

opposite: more of a carefully crafted accessory than a business tool, Vertu’s latest smartphone, the Aster, features luxury materials, a 5.1 inch sapphire crystal screen and a Hasselblad certified camera.

of the latest AMG Mercedes, with a bespoke suit, a £400k watch — and a blue plastic Alcatel. It was a no-brainer; the market was begging to be filled.”

Nokia made Vertu its luxury division and Hutchinson came on board as head of design in 1999. In 2002, Vertu launched its first product, the Vertu Signature. With 400 individually sourced pieces, it is a triumph of engineering. It has to be stressed that the process is far more akin to jewellery making or horology than communications manufacture, with individual screws being sourced from Cartier, for instance, and then there is the famous solid sapphire crystal screen. Throw in rubies, ceramics, a wide range of luxurious leather casing and the solid engineering that ensures a satisfying click every time the user presses a key, and you can see why Vertu has a cult following.

The other point about the phones is that they are handcrafted by engineers who ▶



## VERTUAL REALITY

A Vertu phone is the height of luxury, being handcrafted from only the finest and most expensive parts, says Eugene Costello. And to underscore the point that its customers come from the global elite, Vertu’s concierge service is really rather special as well...

## PRECISION

this page top right: the limited edition Vertu for Bentley is swathed in quilted calf leather, in the classic Bentley shade of Newmarket tan and stitched with a diamond pattern.

this page below: the careful and considered assembly of Vertu phones is more akin to those of fine watches than smartphones.

opposite page: head of concept creation and design, Hutch Hutchinson.

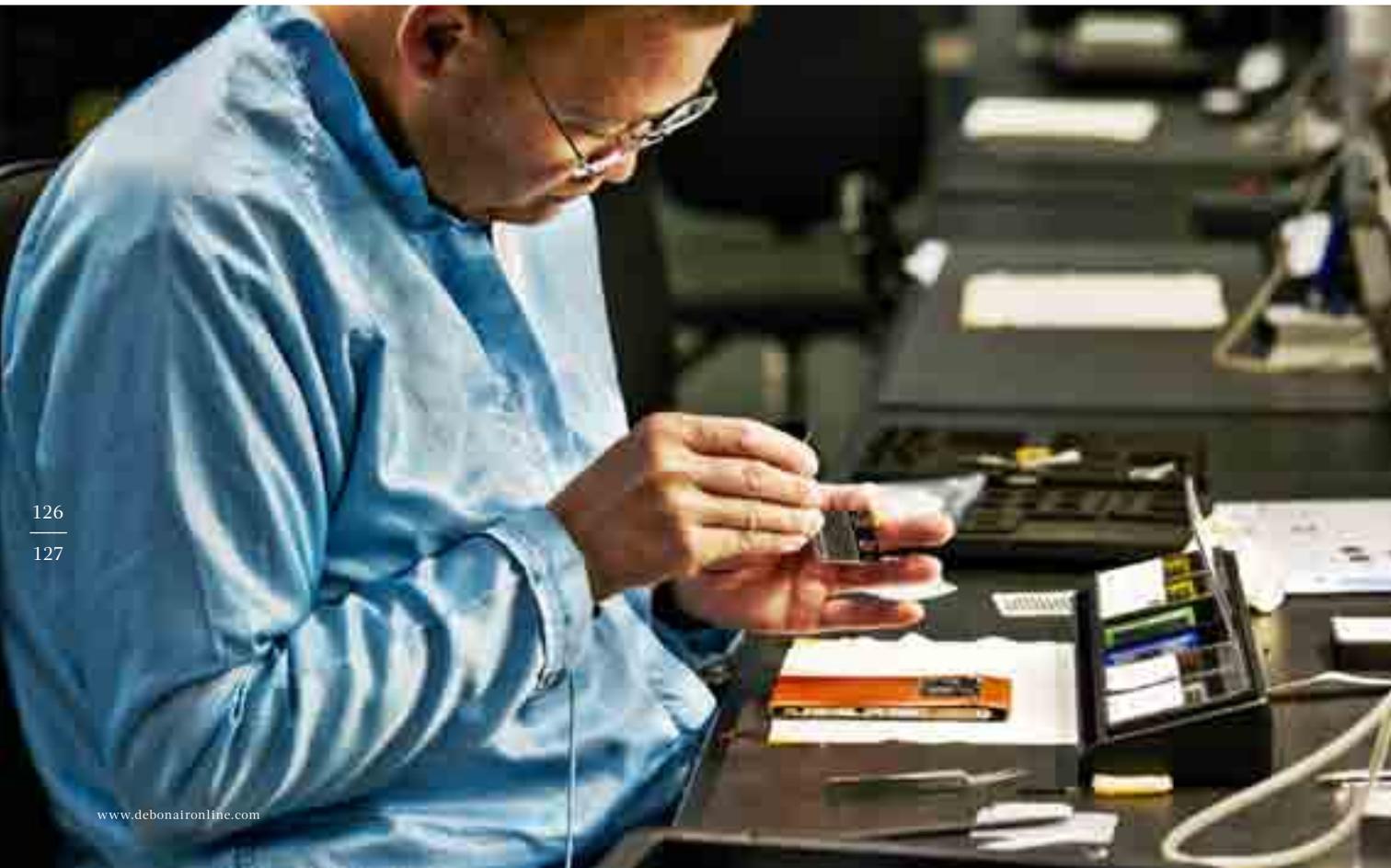


► work on each phone from start to finish. There are no deadlines, no production-line schedule — each phone takes as long as it takes to assemble, and the same craftsman will engrave his or her name on the finished product, along with any other requests for engraving from the client.

Says Hutchinson: “Many of our clients actually come to visit us here because they want to meet and shake hands with the person who built their phone for them, and whose name is on it.”

And that element of personalisation is at the heart of the Vertu philosophy. Clients can even have their phone made to measure, deciding on build, look and feel. But there is another level of service that emphasises the fact that Vertu users are, to borrow Tom ►





[ CAPTION ]

► Wolfe’s phrase from *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, ‘masters of the universe’.

Wolfram Wildhagen, head of services and partnerships for Vertu, is — like Vertu CEO Massimiliano Pogliani — an adapted southwest Londoner, meaning he and his family get to enjoy the benefits of being in the capital while having a comfortable motorway commute in the mornings.

Says Wildhagen: “Vertu Concierge comes free of charge with the phone for a complimentary period, depending on the model and contract, but let’s say for a year. The core principle behind the service is to make members’ lives easier, to make living effortless.”

He points to personalisation as one of the key principles championed by Pogliani, and explains that, in their top tier of service, a member will have a dedicated lifestyle manager who will always be available for that client, and who will — over the course of the relationship — learn that client’s preferences and tastes.

As well as being able to use this insight to offer extra value, it allows lifestyle managers to use their initiative. So if your lifestyle manager happens to know you are a big Kate Bush or Fleetwood Mac fan, he or she will start to source tickets if they know you are likely to be overlapping in a city when they are live.

“When you buy a Vertu phone,” says Wildhagen, “within 20 minutes you will get a call from a concierge, welcoming you to Vertu World. They will arrange a ‘fitting call’ with you, much as a tailor would on your first visit to discuss a bespoke suit, to ensure you get the most out of the service.”

Many extend their concierge periods by signing up for another subscription period (it is £4,000pa for this top tier of services), and many receive another complimentary period because they are buying another handset, incredible though that may seem. “Our customer base is incredibly loyal, and when we bring out a new model, there is a level among them that wishes to have the latest.”

Many such clients have access to other concierge services through their bank account and credit card — what makes Vertu different?

Says Wildhagen: “I would say that we excel where other concierge services might struggle, in achieving the extraordinary, in delivering the things that money can’t buy. For instance, we had a member who wanted to replace the strap on his Louis Vuitton watch, but unfortunately this strap was no longer in production. He contacted regional dealers, but to no avail. So we got on the case and, through hard work, we managed to track down the only known surviving strap that was lying in a drawer somewhere at head office.

“Another common logistical task for us is to arrange shipping of supercars, sometimes simply within countries and other times across continents. One customer wanted to ship his Lamborghini from Asia to Europe at short notice, and contacted various freight specialists. The problem was that none of them could do it within five days, as per his request, so he turned to us. In the end, we found someone that could do it not only more cheaply, but also within three days.”

Vertu, then, has found ways to inhabit those spaces where desire becomes so esoteric that few others can find value in inhabiting that space to economic profit. As Wildhagen summarises, “We are not in the business of selling phones. We are in the business of delivering a lifestyle that is the best that it possibly can be to our clients.”

And it is to savour a taste of that lifestyle that I am being feted. As well as the suite (and epicurean dinner) at the Ritz and the limousine to Hampshire, my carriage once again was awaiting without. This time to whisk me away to the superb Four Seasons Hampshire, where I would enjoy a superb dinner of (locally harvested) fiery watercress soup, followed by a superb piece of fillet steak with the finest trimmings using local produce. But not before the lessons in falconry and archery on the hotel lawns that Vertu had arranged for me. They were determined that I should get a taste of the enviable lifestyle of one of its concierge clients.

If felt as though I were to the manner born. Could it really be that in 12 hours’ time I would ensconced in the back of a Rolls-Royce being chauffeured back to St Pancras station in London? Damn — I was sure going to miss the Vertual reality...

opposite page: the assembly of the Aster in Vertu’s factory in Hampshire. “In Aster we looked to create a handset that was not only engineered to perform to the highest standard, but one that would complement our customers’ lifestyles in its capacity as a fashionable accessory.”

[ END ]

