

“I’m a bit more free than others to say what I think”



Eric Cantona, the new face of watchmaker Hautlence, met with *Swissquote* Magazine to discuss how he protects his image and his relationships with sponsors.

Interview by Serge Maillard

For its recent report on sponsoring (N° 2/2014), “Swissquote Magazine” interviewed experts and brands about this growingly popular form of advertising. This time, we were able to go through the looking glass to discuss it with the frontman of one of these sponsorship campaigns. And not just any man. Eric Cantona, “King Eric”, venerated both past and present in Manchester... and the rest of the planet. The Marseille native recently stopped through Neuchâtel to promote the Swiss watchmaking brand Hautlence as its new ambassador.

Nike, Sharp, Pepsi, Bic and Renault have already engaged his services for campaigns which were characteristically injected with a good dose of humour and provocation – in the image of their model. But with Hautlence (an anagram of Neuchâtel), whose least expensive watches are priced at about 20,000 Swiss francs, Eric Cantona makes his debut in the elite world of ultra-

luxury. Odd choice, as these high-end brands remain fairly conventional in their advertising approach. And this star is anything but conventional.

So, is it a culture clash? “A cook said that he wanted to make warm ice cream,” says the former Red Devil, with his typically elusive sense of humour. These days, the Olympian-sized “King Ubu” – another royal nickname from his dabblings in theatre – embraces the chance to dedicate himself passionately to projects sometimes light years away from football. And this collaboration went far beyond a photo shoot. Eric Cantona worked with Hautlence in designing the “Invictus”, a model from the Morphos limited edition of timepieces featuring a blue butterfly pattern. Interview.

You are no doubt highly in demand for sponsorship campaigns. How do you protect your own brand image?

With my family. When I get an offer, I review it with my two brothers. We’ve been working together for a long time. We’re very complementary. I probably go more with my feeling. They’re more reasonable, more strategic. But they also have that touch of madness. We have to feel love, passion, energy!

How do you decide whether or not to work with a brand?

You can’t accept just any offer because it’s whatever brand. We base our decisions first on who does what. Next, on what they’re offering us to do. Then we talk about money. It has to be a brand that we like and respect. We have to like the script. It has to be powerful, offbeat. Not fake. Otherwise, even if it’s a major brand, we won’t do it. Even if it’s for a lot of money, we won’t do it. We’d be destroying years of work.

Has your approach to sponsoring evolved since your first TV commercials in the 1990s?

Now I see it more as a collaboration. That's how it is with Hautlence. We've always emphasised the importance of the script. But now it goes a step further, because they're giving me the opportunity to create something. I have an idea, and it becomes possible. There's a whole team of craftsmen who are there to assist me. Who wouldn't dream of creating their own work? It's like painting. It's extraordinary.

The luxury sector is rather conventional.
It's not the only one.

Your image is that of a rebel...

No, I don't have the image of a rebel, I have the image of myself!

Hautlence contacted you for a "Gentlemen Rebels Club".

Yes, because I have a

certain degree of freedom. I'm a bit more free than others to say what I think. But I don't always say what I think. And that's a good thing.

A few years ago, you said that withdrawing money from banks would put power in the hands of citizens. Is that anti-globalisation...

Wait, I'm not anti-globalisation. I know what you're going to say, "You're anti-globalisation, and you do commercials." Right?

Isn't that in conflict with the world of luxury?

If a company makes 60 billion in profits but makes 20 people redundant because its earnings are slightly lower than another company, that bothers me. But I'm not at all against the system. For people to have jobs, you have to have people that create jobs. At the same time, people who are in a position of weakness have to find ways to gain respect. That's where the idea came from. If you want to be heard, you have a deterrent. Unless you live in a commune.

Didn't the affair get out of hand? It was an interview in a local paper, and

it ended up creating a buzz that spread everywhere.

Good. It's important to say things sometimes that spark a debate. If you can inform people while creating a debate across all channels, and not just certain elitist channels, that's a good thing. I actually think it's a great thing. I do what it takes to set off the debate. That's where my role stops. I don't even have a "role", in fact. I do what I want. I say what I want. Politicians started meddling. They had to make me look stupid, the one who seemed to have opened everyone's eyes.

Did they succeed in tarnishing your image?

No. It's no coincidence that it became such a big deal and was talked about in 50 countries across the world. Ministers got involved. That means it wasn't so stupid after all. The difference is that we're not here to bring the system down. That's what they wanted people to think. Being able to do it to be heard, that's called a deterrent.

You're very popular in Europe. Hautlence wants to move into the Far East. Do you also have fans in Asia?

Asians love English football. I've been there several times. It's the most frequently watched championship, and Manchester United is a very popular club, ever since George Best. I was lucky to be in a great period, in a great club, with a great coach. ▲

