

Gold for the Empress

 **Silk made from gold—the good reputation of the creations of the Wellendorff jewellery manufactory reaches as far as international noble houses. Tradition binds, but the Pforzheim company strives to make constant improvements. Working with Porsche Consulting, the concept of lean thinking has been introduced into the production process and successfully implemented among artists and individualists.**

 Christian Weiss,  Mathias Hangst, Wellendorff

A smell of metal dust and lubricants drifts through the production rooms. In this respect, the working world of the Wellendorff jewellery manufactory is almost indistinguishable from many other production sites. However, it has its own idiosyncrasies, as project manager Dietmar Kehr from Porsche Consulting immediately discovered when he started working with the traditional Pforzheim firm. He was sitting in the production rooms with a few Wellendorff employees, discussing how to optimise a production line. Kehr was passing a pencil-sized metal rod which he had found by chance on the table through his fingers. He was handling the rod carelessly until Georg Wellendorff was no longer able to watch. “Mr Kehr,” said the jewellery expert very carefully, “that is pure platinum. You are playing with 250,000 euros.”

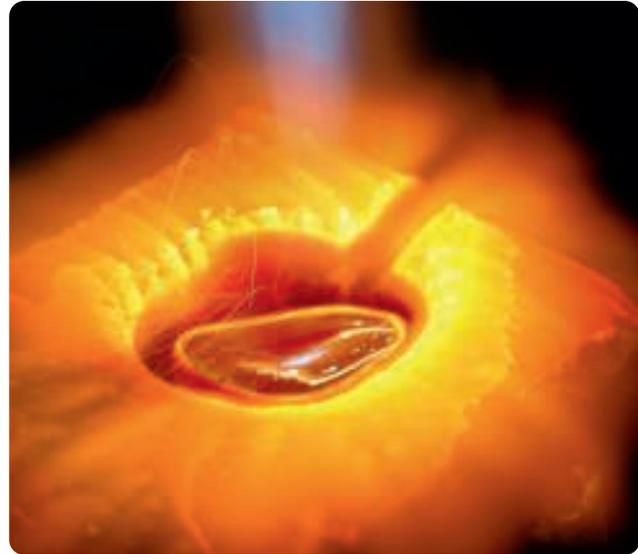
In the consultant’s words, the moral of the story is as follows: “It became clear to me that in this manufactory waste took on dimensions of its own.” Not everything which glitters is gold. Some things are even more valu-

able. No one knows this better than they do in Pforzheim, the centre of the German jewellery industry with a market share of a good 80 per cent. Wellendorff has got in on the act brilliantly. Founded in 1893 by Ernst Alexander Wellendorff, the family company’s products quickly reached the highest circles thanks to their quality and creativity. Even two world wars and the consequences of destruction were unable to stop the brand’s making its way into European royal and noble houses. The ladies of the Japanese imperial family also wear the precious jewellery which since 1972 has been marked with a golden “W”.

“Others can be loud and strident,” says Georg Wellendorff, who runs the affairs of the family firm along with his brother Christoph and father Hanspeter. “We prefer to be discreet and quiet.” Their success has justified the trio’s approach: The manufactory has operated profitably from its very first day, and Wellendorff has been recording double-figure growth rates for more than ten years. ▶



A love for details: designs for precious goods



Fire and flames: liquid 750 gold

Nevertheless, there is a desire for change. “We are constantly considering how we can improve ourselves and our products,” says Georg Wellendorff, who bears responsibility within the family for production. “Until now we have implemented innovations independently. The idea for lean production came to me when I was reading the book “Lean Thinking”. Lean thinking fascinated me—and still does.” For the self-confessed Porsche driver, the path to Porsche Consulting was obvious. “At the start of the 1990s Porsche strikingly proved that its production principles work. There is probably no better argument.”

However, in 2001 there was great scepticism when the consultants first answered the call to go to Pforzheim. “First of all, we wanted to get to know the people who were supposed to be supporting us,” says Wellendorff, “but they got started immediately. They promptly made small proposals here and there which brought about perceptible improvements only a few days later. This practical approach inspired our family.” Routes, waiting times and repeated work were analysed using spaghetti charts

and then were drastically shortened or eliminated by modifications and new workflows. The only flaw in the results of the basic application of lean production was that in this case the numbers on their own were not sufficient to convince the workers collectively of the benefits of the new methods and ways of thinking. This is the nature of the business. “A goldsmith’s shop is full of artists and individualists,” says Kehr. “We had to have a lot of discussions.”

An additional factor at Wellendorff is that, because the customers are demanding and the materials are precious, wasteful processes are unavoidable. For example, when rings have been turned and are being passed on for mounting, they must be weighed and the weight has to be noted in a log, but this has not prevented the goldsmith’s shop from adopting lean practices where possible. This has made it possible to achieve a dramatic improvement in efficiency, for example when working on high-quality watch bands. “We have never had quality problems,” says Wellendorff. “We have simply taken the time to achieve the appropriate quality.” And so delays ▶



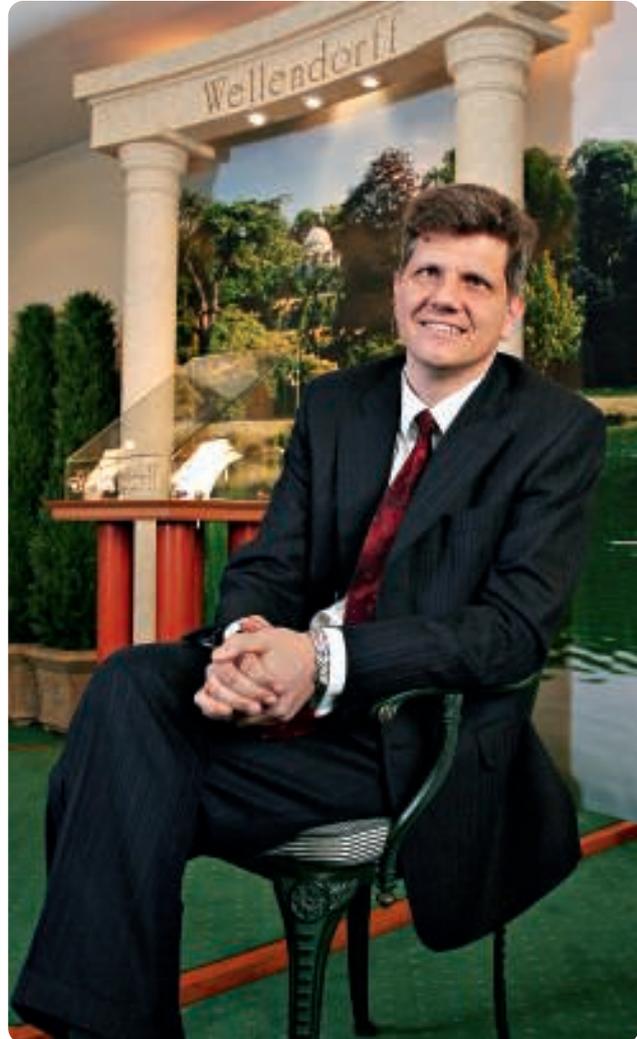
Artistic dexterity: The Wellendorff cord is plaited by hand



Trade mark: “W” for Wellendorff

in delivery were virtually part of the business. As a result of the traditional batch production, defects were only noticed at the end of the production process during the final inspection. With the help of Porsche Consulting, Wellendorff introduced modern continuous flow production. As Kehr puts it, “We implemented a one-piece flow, provided a microscope at each work station and put the customer-supplier principle into action.” The brilliant result was that defects are now noticed immediately, throughput times have halved and the need for reworking has been considerably reduced. “The customers are enthusiastic about our new adherence to delivery dates,” says Georg Wellendorff.

This also applies to such sensitive products as the world-famous Wellendorff cord. The company’s best piece is trademarked. The 18 carat wafer-thin gold wire which is worked into each necklace by hand and plaited to form a cord is more than 160 metres long. It takes a goldsmith around a week to make one necklace, which should then feel like golden silk on the skin. Outstanding comfort when worn and top quality are the maxims the artists

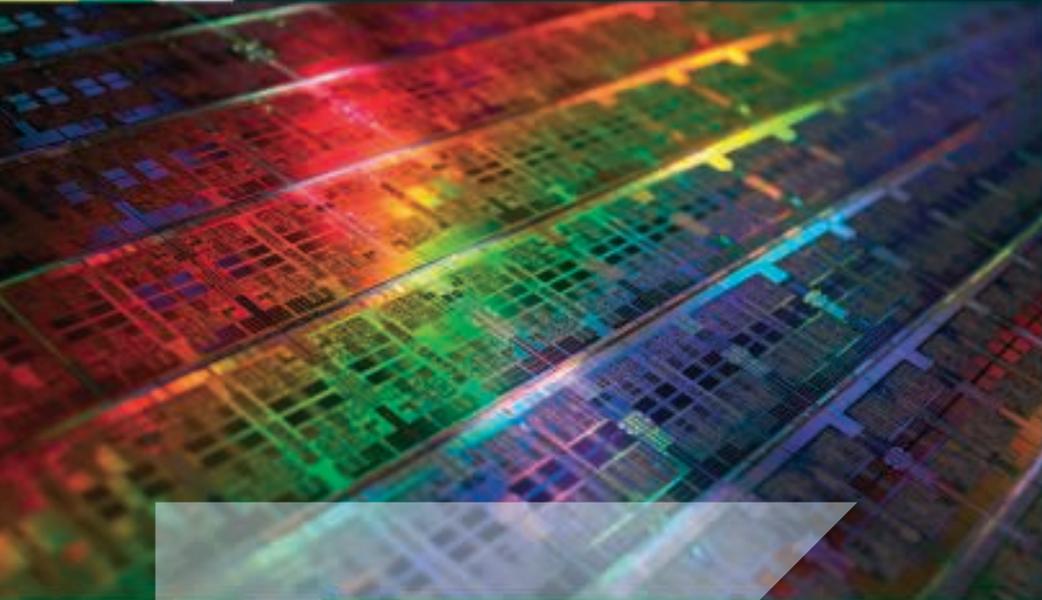


Georg Wellendorff: Enthusiastic about the practical approach

have set for themselves. Only 750 gold is melted down to make the alloys in accordance with Wellendorff’s own formula which gives Wellendorff jewellery its unique sheen. In the words of Georg Wellendorff, “The best-qualified workers, the best machines and the most exquisite materials guarantee us the most faithful customers.”

Lean production methods help them to retain their sheen. ◀

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