



FAR LEFT: 'Aster' with blush leather case

LEFT: Ignacio Germade of British smartphone brand Vertu

OPPOSITE, TOP: A screen for a 'Signature' phone undergoes inspection

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Each smartphone is assembled by a single craftsperson at Vertu's base in Hampshire



## Smarter thinking

*With a more subtle, yet still beautifully made handset now available, Vertu is refocusing its smartphone branding on craftsmanship. ALTO goes behind the scenes at its HQ, which is part factory, part laboratory / By Nick Scott*

It's almost an insult to employ the word 'factory' to describe the highly sophisticated production facility where luxury mobile phone brand Vertu assembles the most stylish handsets on the market. It's really more of a high-tech laboratory, one in which white-coated artisans go about their meticulous craft with Zen-like dedication. Take a tour of the place – and any bona fide technophile would give their right arm for a Willy Wonka-style golden ticket – and you'll find it more akin to a Swiss watch-makers than a mass-production assembly line.

Which is appropriate, because when you pick up a Vertu phone – examine it, pore over its finer details – it has much in common with a reassuringly bulky, beautifully engineered IWC Schaffhausen chronograph. Put this delectable object down and pick up a common-or-garden smartphone and it feels like a flimsy, stainless-steel stocking-filler plucked from a Perspex box using a mechanical grabbing claw in an amusement arcade.

"Tactility is everything for us," says Ignacio Germade, head of total product offering at Vertu. "The first thing you

notice picking up a Vertu phone is the weight, the density – within half a second, it feels like something that is high quality in your hand. You know it won't break or get scratched. The human brain processes so much information via the senses very quickly, and we want our smartphones to delight immediately."

From its founding in 2002, and for a further decade, Vertu was the luxury arm of Nokia. When the Finnish firm sold it in 2012 to private equity group EQT VI for a reported \$200m, far from feeling cut adrift from a stable mothership Vertu insiders instantly felt their creative shackles being removed and embraced their newfound autonomy. "The first decision we made was to embrace and celebrate our Englishness, and the idea of craftsmanship that comes with that," says Germade. "If you make a strong English brand, you will be admired all over the world."

This Anglophilia is particularly evident, he says, in the company's latest and most stylish model to date, the 'Aster' – seven of which are carefully arranged in a fan formation on a silver tray on the table in front of him on the day of our >



*'Aster' with lagoon calf-leather case*



*'Aster' with tangerine snakeskin case*



*'Aster' with caviar snakeskin case*

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*“ASKING, ‘HOW HAS THIS BEEN BUILT?’ MAKES AN OBJECT LESS ABSTRACT AND GIVES THE USER A SENSE OF ROMANCE”*  
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conversation. He picks one out, and runs an index finger down the rich, scarlet-dyed, natural grain calfskin covering. “With a Vertu, you can envisage an actual person wrapping this leather strip around the body, then screwing these components into place, then securing this brushed titanium frame into place and so on. We want to celebrate the craftsmanship with the design.”

So what makes that particularly British? “A good comparison is a Triumph motorbike,” he says. “You look at it, and you can imagine a guy actually welding every tiny part together, using manual tools to make this beautiful piece of engineering happen. Asking, ‘How has this thing been built?’ makes an object less abstract and gives the user a sense of romance.”

It’s to this end that each and every Vertu handset is assembled, from start to finish, by a single craftsperson. “Originally, we only did this with the ‘Signature’ model, but staff said they found it much more satisfying, so we opened out the scheme to

the whole production line,” says Germade. “It’s the sense of ownership that comes with the creative process. It’s really hard, when you’re part of a chain adding just one element of a product, to have the same level of pride.” Regular Vertu customers also love this idea of one craftsperson creating their phone, and even choose to have their model made by a particular member of the team, sometimes visiting them during the production process.

Another major aspect of Vertu’s post-independence revolution was bringing its technological faculties into line with the products’ material quality and aesthetic beauty. Once, Vertu was big on diamond-studded bling but didn’t pack much of a technological punch. The Aster – with its 13 megapixel camera, 4.7-inch full HD display, virtually unscratchable 5.1-inch sapphire crystal cover, a further 2.1-megapixel front-facing camera and 64GB of storage – is proof that these gaps have been addressed with gusto. Vertu is no slouch on the sound front either, now,

thanks to the audio experience provided by the Dolby Digital Plus virtual surround sound employed for each model.

Germade describes packing such technological prowess and astounding functionality into a handset of such aesthetic beauty as “the most complicated game of Tetris you could ever imagine – always a conflict, never a compromise.” It’s no surprise that it takes an average of a year-and-a-half to bring a new Vertu handset to the market – and, once you know exactly what goes into one, the price tags (the relatively affordable Aster starts at £4,200) cease to hike one’s eyebrow quite so high.

A handset of this quality is not some frivolity whereby the customer pays way above the odds (and the status that comes with that) as an end in itself. As Germade puts it, “The price of these phones is not the driver of the craftsmanship and quality of materials – it’s the result of it.” ■

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