



# A bit on the side

*It may not be the sexy side of watches, but add-on sales like straps and watch winders can prove a lucrative revenue stream for jewellers, says Rachael Taylor*

**T**hose unassuming leather strips, bound in a bundle with rubber bands, hidden in drawers, can so often be an afterthought. Yet the humble watch strap – and other watch accessories – are proving to be a spot of sunshine for an industry still operating under a cloud.

Looking at the stats, the UK watch industry is experiencing a boom. According to market analyst GfK, the value of sales of watches priced at more than £1,000 was up 25% at the start of this year. However, 40% of the value of the market last year was dominated by the top three watch brands and 48% of the value of sales was made in the capital – so if you are outside the luxury London bubble, competition is tougher.

“There’s a lot of talk about the growth of luxury watches post-Brexit, but as a general rule, jewellers are reporting that it is quite quiet on the high street,” says Simon Walker, UK country manager for global watch strap behemoth Hirsch.

Despite the gloomy reports from its customers, Hirsch is enjoying its 10th consecutive year of growth in the UK, which remains one of its strongest European markets, and has added 22 new stockists this year. It would seem that uncertainty is a positive driver for components suppliers like this one.

“When times were good, they didn’t worry, but a lot are now going back to basics and becoming retail jewellers again,” says Walker. “They are waking up to the fact that offering traditional skills is a great way to get footfall.”

Piers Bolland of New Milton retailer Charles Nobel agrees. “The reason we do [watch accessories] isn’t necessarily for revenue generation, but more to get customers to return to the shop, where they can look around and hopefully see something that may catch their eye. We also offer watch repairs and servicing, which is pretty steady in terms of volume, and again draws in customers who we might not normally see,” he says.

However, not everyone should be



quick to order in a set of tools, particularly when it comes to changing batteries, says Tom McCulloch, co-founder of Atoz Distribution, which handles servicing for large watch brands as well as direct-to-consumer repairs through its online retail channels Watch Avenue and Hayward Scott. “You have to have a skilled technician,” he warns. “People think that to fit a battery you just have to take the back off, but if you don’t use the right tools, sweat can short the circuits and denigrate the seams. People always break the terminals trying to do it. There is a difference between a shoe repair place changing a battery and us changing a battery. People see it as something that’s easy, but it’s not.”

**Straps are easier** to change, however, and there is a real trend for interchangeability. Young British brand Farer has built a brand around the DIY multiple strap concept, while Hublot unveiled a new collection of watches for women at Baselworld that features its One Click strap change system. This desire for personalisation is one of the factors

driving watch strap sales and the ease of leather over more complicated bracelets is perhaps why they are outselling them at wholesaler Darlena by five to one (10 years ago, this was more like three to one, according to director James Hook). Customisation is also important to retailers, something Darlena has addressed with a free embossing service to stamp stores’ branding on the inside of straps.

Hook advises his stockists to create prominent strap displays in stores with lively colourful straps to attract attention. However, these showpiece straps will most likely be just that. Although Hirsch has released a collection of straps to tie in with the Pantone colours of the year, Walker admits that “80% of what’s sold in the UK is black and brown, and another 10% is gold-brown or tan”.

There are more adventurous collectors out there though, Adrian Hailwood, director at auction house Fellows, being one of them. “My collection of straps is insane,” he says. “I change them to match my shoes. There are a lot of people like me. I try to keep my watch collection

*“Offering traditional skills is a great way to get footfall”*

**Simon Walker**  
Hirsch



**(Above) Hirsch is enjoying growth; (right) Rapport’s watch winders are popular**