Scaling New Heights

Smith & Wesson CEO and NRA Golden Ring of Freedom member James Debney
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Whether it’s leading an iconic firearms brand, joining the NRA’s Golden Ring of Freedom or scaling mountain peaks, Smith & Wesson CEO James Debney is getting used to the view from the top.

By Steven M. Brown
The last couple of years have been an exciting, adventurous time for James Debney. He has taken the helm as CEO of one of the world’s most iconic firearms brands, Smith & Wesson, and led the company to record sales growth. He and the company he leads have not only joined the ranks of the National Rifle Association’s premier donor recognition society, the NRA Ring of Freedom, but have ascended to its upper echelon, the Golden Ring of Freedom, with gifts well in excess of $1 million.

Oh, and by the way, he also found time to climb Africa’s second-highest peak: Mount Kenya.

“Some of my friends back in England decided we were getting a bit old and that we were going to run out of opportunities to do some of the really adventurous stuff,” Debney said. “So they had the bright idea of climbing Mount Kenya.”

Upon receiving the invitation to join his friends on their mountain-scaling expedition, Debney said it took him all of a few minutes to respond in the affirmative.

“Anything that’s a challenge or an adventure, I’m all in,” he said. After a period of rigorous training, which Debney admits he may not have followed quite to the letter, up the mountain he and his friends went.
Right: In just his second year as president and CEO of Smith & Wesson, James Debney has refocused the company on its vision to be the world’s leading firearms manufacturer. Above: The entrance to Smith & Wesson headquarters in Springfield, Mass.
Up, up and up—ultimately to an altitude of 16,000-plus feet.

“It was the most physically and mentally challenging thing I’ve ever undertaken,” Debney said. “As you approach that summit, you are exhausted, but I have to say, the view is worth it.”

Debney could just as easily have been talking about the view from atop the firearms industry. A relative newcomer to the industry, Debney brought his background as an executive in a consumer products company to Smith & Wesson in 2009. He originally joined the company as president of its firearms division and within two years was promoted to president and chief executive officer in September 2011. He admits that as one new to the industry it is humbling at times to work for such an iconic brand with such a rich and storied history, but as was the case with his trek up Mount Kenya, Debney is “all in” for the challenge.

Established in 1852 from the partnership of two men with backgrounds in gunsmithing, Horace Smith & Daniel B. Wesson, Smith & Wesson built its fame around the revolver. The company found a particular niche within the law enforcement sector with its production of one of the most famous revolvers in the world, the Model 10. In continual production since 1899, the Model 10 has been used by virtually every police agency and military force in the world.

Any history of the revolver or discussion of the evolution of the modern handgun must necessarily be filled with references to Smith & Wesson. The company introduced the first Magnum revolver, the .357 Magnum, in 1935. Twenty years later, Smith & Wesson brought forth the first American-made double-action auto-loading pistol, the Model 39. In 1956, the company introduced a handgun that would be made
world-famous on the silver screen a little over a decade later, the Model 29 chambered in .44 Magnum: Dirty Harry’s gun. With its 160-plus year tradition of innovation and excellence, Smith & Wesson enjoys the kind of name recognition and customer loyalty of which few firearms makers in the world can boast.

But when Debney joined the company in 2009, Smith & Wesson was in the midst of something of a diversification strategy, extending its reach into products and businesses outside its core competency in gunmaking, including the acquisition of a perimeter security business. Smith & Wesson has divested itself of the non-core security business and under Debney’s leadership has renewed its focus entirely on the firm foundation of firearms manufacture that made the company’s name.

Focus. Simplify. Execute. These are the words Debney uses in describing Smith & Wesson’s strategy going forward. Debney is determined to meet the company’s primary vision: to be the leading firearms manufacturer. He is deeply analytical, focusing on a market-driven approach to learning exactly who buys Smith & Wesson’s firearms and why.

It is that user-centric approach, backed by a tremendous amount of market research, that has led a company so well-known for its revolvers to focus its current efforts intently on building high-tech polymer pistols for the consumer market—namely through its M&P line. First introduced in 2006, the M&P semi-automatic pistol line features a number of models chambered in 9 mm, .40 S&W, .45 ACP. The M&P line even includes a .22-caliber model introduced in 2011 and a concealed-carry model, the M&P Shield, introduced last year. Lending credence to the value of the market research Debney has placed such emphasis on is the fact that consumers are purchasing the various M&P pistol models as fast as—and often faster than—the company can produce and send them out from its Springfield, Massachusetts, factory.

While Debney views the M&P pistol line as the key to growing Smith & Wesson market share and achieving the company goal of being the leading firearms manufacturer, Smith & Wesson is no one-trick pony. The company still places an emphasis on...
Historically known for its revolvers, Smith & Wesson now sees its market share growing due to the success of its M&P line of semi-automatic polymer pistols. Shown here is the newest entry to the M&P line: the M&P Shield; cell coordinator Waleska Wick; machine operator Randy Elder, Sr.; assembler Jamie Santiago.
innovation in the revolver category, with recent introductions such as the concealable Bodyguard in .38 Special and the versatile Governor with its ability to carry .45 ACP, .45 Colt or .410 shotshells, either alone or in combination.

The hunting segment is well represented under the company’s Thompson/Center brand with its traditional hunting rifles, and modern sporting rifle enthusiasts are served via Smith & Wesson’s popular M&P rifle line.

It is indeed a diverse product line, but Debney is committed to disciplined growth. He listens to what Smith & Wesson’s users in the consumer and professional segments need and then gives his employees the necessary resources to design, produce and market firearms to fill those needs.

As sensitive an ear as Debney has for users, he is just as focused on hearing and communicating with his company’s employees. Every quarter, or more often should the need arise, he takes time to communicate with all his employees—shift by shift, team by team—in town hall-type meetings so that everyone involved in the company understands the corporate direction. Debney is an immensely approachable CEO.

“We have many employees with 30, 40, even some with 50-plus years of service,” Debney said. “Smith & Wesson is near and dear to them. It’s in their blood, and they want to see it succeed. They want to know the direction of the business and they want to understand why that’s the right direction for the business.

“It’s not by luck that we’ve been successful. It’s really by working together as a team.”

Less than two years into his role at the helm of Smith & Wesson, Debney’s strategy has proved sound. In the first fiscal quarter of 2013, the company achieved record net sales and income from continuing operations. Net sales in 2013’s first quarter, in fact, were up nearly 50 percent compared with 2012’s first quarter. Debney credits the increase to strong sales of the M&P product line.

Just as Debney has returned Smith & Wesson’s focus to the firearm and producing
the type of firearms the market demands, he also has sharpened and renewed the company’s focus on the protection of the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms through generous support of the National Rifle Association.

“We looked back at the support we had given the NRA over time and decided, really quite honestly, that it wasn’t enough,” he said.

Unhappy with what he saw as a deficiency, Debney went into action. Under his leadership, the company has recently donated well in excess of $1 million to various NRA programs, including the Voice of Freedom program, the NRA Life of Duty program and the NRA Women’s Network. During a ceremony at the 2013 NRA Annual Meetings & Exhibits in Houston, Debney donned the trademark gold jacket of the NRA’s Golden Ring of Freedom and officially joined the ranks of the Second Amendment’s most loyal, steadfast and fierce defenders.

“It is imperative that we hold fast to the freedoms that the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights provide our citizens,” Debney said. “Those freedoms cannot and must not be negotiated. So, I think it’s more important than ever that we come together in support of the NRA.

“The efforts of the NRA are critical to the future of the country,” he continued. “And our sponsorship of numerous NRA programs reflects our commitment to those efforts.”

With its rich history in supplying firearms to the military and police markets, it made perfect sense for Smith & Wesson to lend its financial support to the NRA Life of Duty Network. Specifically, Smith & Wesson sponsors the NRA Life of Duty’s Patriot Profiles documentary series, which is dedicated to telling the stories of the heroism, courage and honor displayed by the brave men and women who defend American freedoms at home and abroad as military, police and first responders.
Debney and engraver David Misiaszek look over Misiaszek’s custom-engraving work on a beautiful stainless-steel SW1911 E-series pistol. The one-of-a-kind pistol commemorates Smith & Wesson’s 100-year history of semi-automatic pistol production. The engraving on one side of the pistol reads: “Smith & Wesson: Where Innovation is Automatic.” The other side reads: “1913-2013 – 100 Years of Semi-Auto Leadership.”
“The efforts of the NRA are critical to the future of the country.”

Even more recently, Smith & Wesson has become the presenting sponsor of the NRA Women’s Network, an online network devoted to producing engaging content for women shooters and hunters.

“Women are enjoying the shooting sports in record numbers, and they have never had a resource like this,” Debney said. “We’re proud to play a significant role in growing that resource for them. We believe that women who have been shooting their whole lives and women who are new to firearms will want to get involved with this community.”

Debney said that people can expect to see Smith & Wesson more involved in programs such as these in the future. Even as a relative newcomer to the firearms industry, hunting and the shooting sports, Debney understands full well the challenges that firearms owners face from a growing contingent of those opposed to the Second Amendment. As a strong leader both within his company and within the NRA Ring of Freedom community, Debney is up to facing the challenge, no matter how high its peak.