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A Matter of Gravity, Petzl Turns the Vertical Environment Into Bold Opportunity.

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When Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were standing on the summit of Everest in 1953, Fernand Petzl was descending into the deepest cave in the world. A tool and dye maker by trade, Petzl was a talented inventor of caving equipment, and he designed and built gear for himself and his friends. Many of his designs-such the Croll ascender-are still used today.



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Since the 1970s, Petzl equipment has played a part in every major mountaineering, climbing and caving achievement. This is no surprise, considering the companys fanatical dedication to safety in the vertical world. From revolutionary caving equipment to the ubiquitous Grigri self-breaking belay device, Petzl is synonymous with the quality that climbers, cavers, rescue personnel and industrial workers have come to expect.

Petzl is based in Crolles, France-an area near Grenoble known as the “French Silicon Valley.” This year, to complement its already extensive R&D facilities, Petzl launched V.axess, a program and facility dedicated to exploration, education and research into the vertical environment. In terms of product, the company owns two brands: Charlet Moser, which was acquired in 2000 and is now referred to as Petzl Charlet, and Petzl. Much of the metal fabrication and assembly of the Grigri and the headlamp line take place in Crolles. Petzl also owns a sewing plant and a production facility, both within a 15-minute drive of its headquarters.

Petzls total annual sales are approximately \$100 million, and the company employs

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about 400 people. The company has 55 distributors worldwide, all of which are independent except for Petzl America, a wholly owned subsidiary based in Clearfield, UT. About 46 people work at the UT-based facility.

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While the companys caving roots can be traced to Fernand Petzl, in 1972, his sons, Paul and Pierre, started to work with him in their small, 75-square-meter garage. (The garage is now a bakery with a reputation for excellent bread and cakes.)



“My father was an extraordinary craftsman,” recounts Paul Petzl, president of Petzl SSA, and a university-trained engineer.

“Everything he manufactured was simple, ingenious and well-made. I learned a lot with him and thanks to him, I realized my entrepreneurial dream of establishing an international enterprise with the standards reflecting my father values.” He adds, “[The company] had many opportunities to diversify and expand the business. However, I did not accept these propositions because I want Petzl to continue to innovate and focus on our core competencies, in which there are many things to do.”

While Petzl notes that all businesses have strengths and weaknesses, he asserts that one of his companys strengths is the ability to recognize and reduce its weaknesses. Toward this end, the company hired Pascal Bonino as CEO three years ago. Bonino, an engineer and passionate mountaineer, worked in the mining and electronics industries before joining the company.

“It has been a great step to implement the updates and new organizations we needed to improve our structure,” explains Petzl. “Management with 400 employees is different than it was with 100 employees.”

Besides adapting to growth, Petzl points out that price competition forced the company to out-source some of its production to reduce costs.

“Currently, half of the production employees are in-house and the strategy is to not lose our basic business competencies,” says Petzl. He adds that hed like to bring all production back to France, which would result in the companys ability to react more efficiently to



the market and to better control the confidentiality of product development. This year, Petzl hired Anne Girard as in-house sustainability manager, charged with working to reduce the companys carbon footprint. (Petzl America is 100 percent wind-powered.)

Since Boninos arrival, explains Petzl, “My focus is on innovation and strategies for the future. I find this the most enjoyable and rewarding. Pascal is a talented businessman and he knows better than I how to manage the day-to-day operations of the company. It is a pleasure for me to pass my stress on to him.”

Petzl strongly believes in the values associated with family-run companies. He has two children—Sebastien, 30, and Olivier, 26—who are preparing to take the reigns one day.

“Its a great challenge for them and for me,” exclaims Petzl. “But my guiding principle is to teach my children to make the best choices for the long-term interest of the company and our customers. I am confident



in the future because many new ideas are in the pipeline for the moment. I hope that I will have time to see them realized.”

Petzl also runs the Petzl Foundation, which raises and contributes hundreds of thousands of dollars to educational and access programs.

In an industry in which the rule has been for family-owned operations to sell out to multi-national conglomerates, Petzl is an exception, and this could be a key to the companys success.

“Most companies in the climbing industry have been created by passionate people who had good business ideas,” explains Petzl. “This is fine, but in this increasingly global industrial world, I am not confident in the future for these kinds of companies. As in every industry, there are leaders who will organize business and take over the small companies. I do not want this to happen to Petzl. There is a risk of weakening the innovative spirit because, more and more, companies are thinking in terms of market share, not in terms of tool creation to



improve safety and techniques.”

In fact, Petzl does very well in many niche markets, including arborism and fire rescue. Sales in the caving category comprise about 5 percent of Petzls overall sales. Work at height and rescue-related products are also an important part of the companys business, but the bulk of Petzls sales are dominated by climbing gear. Petzl also does business with the military, including supplying headlamps for medics and lightweight ice axes for Marines.

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According to Mark “Roody” Rasmussen, president of Petzl America, “Petzl is not specialized in rock climbing, work at height, or cavers, but creates tools for anyone who is trying to move up or down under the constraints of gravity.”

For example, Petzl recently developed a personal escape system with the New York Fire Department. Elite firefighters worked with Petzl engineers and developed a system to help firefighters escape from burning buildings.

“One thing that Petzl does better than anyone is understand the unique context of the environment in which a product is used,” explains Rasmussen. “This type of project usually takes about three years to complete, but New York insisted that it be completed in less than a year. With access to FDNYs training and testing resources, we were able to complete more than 10,000 evolutions on the new system in real-life situations in only a matter of months. The design, manufacturing and training were completed in less than a year.” The anchor system is the crux of the device, which requires a training course to use.



In the U.S., Rasmussen reports that climbing is presently “very strong” across all the companys categories—including ropes, carabiners, helmets and harnesses—earning double-digit increases 2007 as well as for 2008 to date.

Petzl is known for consistently bringing innovation to market, and in 1973 the company invented a mountaineering headlamp with batteries mounted on the band. This was followed up with the best-

selling Zoom and Tikka designs. The Grigri belay device is a category leader, as are the Elios helmet and Quark ice axe.

To further explore the challenges of vertical movement, Petzl built a new, multi-faceted training center called V.axess. According to the company, the facility is designed to “expand human understanding of the physiological, emotional and technical dimensions of the vertical environment in order to improve real-world behaviors, techniques and tools.”

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Explains program director Peter Popall, a trained physicist and UIGM mountain guide who has been with Petzl since 1984, “We believe that the key to excellence in hostile conditions is the development of appropriate reflexes and adaptive skills that reflect both the environment and the individuals physiological and emotional capabilities. Through the constant exploration of theory and experience, we will provide a forum for research, discussion and communication that will enhance open exchange of best practices and technical research in both recreational and professional pursuits.”

While Petzl has always utilized state-of-the-art testing facilities, the new 5,000-square-meter building, complete with 20-meter ceilings, will provide a better forum for exploration into the third dimension.

“It will be easier for our engineers and technicians to have first-hand understanding of our customers problems,” says Popall. “Vaxess is an excellent example of innovation in training.”

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The center will bring in experts-and even competitors-and will host speakers and workshops on an array of topics. For instance, the subject of reflexes would a focus on how the human hand works while rappelling and belaying, in conditions of wind and rain. “We can find out the best way to train, as well as equipment solutions,” says Popall. In addition, there will be programs for training, reflexes, and martial arts, with a concentration on focus and imagination.

REI climbing buyer Linda Givler appreciates Petzls innovative products as well as its strong support of retailers. “Petzl provides

high-quality climbing products and is an important vendor in the category,” she says. “They have introduced many new products into the market over the years that have been received well by our climbing customers. Petzl is a great vendor partner for us. They have a responsive customer service team and knowledgeable employees who take pride in understanding the market and responding to customer needs.”

Overall, says Petzl, “Our challenge is to keep both this vitality of innovation and the spirit of being the pioneer. Innovation has always been intoxicating for me and is the root of Petzls identity. At the same time, I want to keep strengthening our production to assure the quality and the appropriate service for our customers.”



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