



Dynasty Building

By Kerry Blessing

Writing this on the day after Super Bowl 39 has got me thinking about dynasties: What it takes to build one, and what it takes to keep one going.

I think it's safe to say, in the case of the Patriots, that their dynasty was not built by resting on their laurels. Entering the playoffs with a 14–2 record, they had every reason to believe that they would not only make it to the Big Game, but win it. Yet Coach Belichick, when asked about that record as the team was taking the field for their second playoff game, said that they approached every game as if it were the first of the season, and their record was still 0–0.

There is a dynasty in the world of high-end audio that takes much the same approach. B&W Bowers & Wilkins, is a remarkable company not just for what they have achieved in the past 33 years, but also for the way in which they continue to push the limits of technology, achieving breakthrough after breakthrough, and then finding ways to extend those new technologies downward through their line.

This is a company with laurels to spare. They have a huge share of the global market for high-end loudspeakers. Their products are used by the world's most renowned recording studios, including Abbey Road and Deutsche Gramophone. A whopping 80

percent of all classical music recorded in the world is recorded using their speakers. Yet they continually reinvent the wheel.

The latest example: The redesign of their famous 800 Series Nautilus loudspeakers. Even if you don't know the name, you'd remember if you'd ever seen them. The head unit sits atop a gorgeous wood cabinet, looking like the huge, glossy shell of some elegant sea creature. (Or, like a Darth Vader helmet, depending how you look at the world.) These speakers have long been the gold standard in high-end audio speakers, sought after by consumers, and selling just as hot as ever after 12 years on the market.

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So why did B&W go and change them? Because they found a way to make them better. Get this: diamond domed tweeters.

The engineers at B&W have found a way to use a technology called Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD) to grow synthetic diamonds in an incredibly thin and even layer, formed into complex shapes ...like tweeter domes. They describe the process as something like frosting a window. Gases are heated in a plasma to super-hot temperatures; out of the gases, a “carbon frost” (diamond crystals) forms over a dome-shaped mold, and the perfect (or near-perfect) tweeter is born.

The hypothetical perfect tweeter would be one of infinite stiffness (for precision of movement) and zero mass (so that it could be moved by the tiniest electrical impulse). It’s a practical impossibility, but the diamond dome tweeter comes far closer than anything yet devised.

I listened to the new 800 Series at the product debut in New York, and damned if they didn’t sound even better than the ones I’ve known and loved for years.

What makes the technological advancement at B&W significant for the broader market, is that the company has a calling to extend new technologies throughout their product line, down to their lower-cost products (call it the “Trickle Down Theory” of audio design). This is a company that makes a full-range of speakers and subwoofers, including many install and lifestyle products that might be appropriate for your next project. And while the diamond dome tweeters aren’t likely to show up in their in-wall speakers in the next year, you can be sure that the in-walls from B&W, as well as their flat-panel monitor series and on-wall speakers, benefit from the same technological horizon-stretching as their high-end counterparts. For example, B&W’s patented use of Kevlar as a driver material was originally used solely in their 801 speakers when the innovation debuted in 1979; today it can be found throughout the line, including their \$300 in-wall speakers.

Companies like B&W, who have made news by continually pushing the envelope, have tremendous brand equity with consumers. Your clients know the name, and they respect it. They might not think they can afford it. It’s our job, as the experts, to know that these products are no more expensive than lesser-performing brands you may have turned to in the past. It’s not only easier to sell something consumers know. In this case, it’s also smarter. Maybe even a way to start a little dynasty-building of your own.

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