

micro:
**Pint-sized
Scooter is a**

WORLDWIDE



Hit

Wim Ouboter's micro scooters have revolutionised urban life worldwide. Now he's thinking about an electric bubble car for city travel, and he wants to improve urban mobility by mounting a guerrilla campaign to drop scooters in various city locations.

 Oliver Klaffke  micro

I am a person who likes to be fairly comfortable," says Wim Ouboter. "No more than necessary" is one of the winning formulas behind his products. Swiss-born Ouboter is the king of the kickbike world: he re-invented it as the micro scooter, kept on improving it and eventually distributed it across the globe. So far, more than ten million of them have been produced.

It was Ouboter's liking for comfort that gave birth to the idea of the micro scooter at the end of the 1990s. The route from his office to a sausage stand in Zurich's city centre was what he terms a typical "micro-distance": "Too far to walk, but too near to get the bike out of the basement just for one trip." So Ouboter (who is now 55) set about improving a child's scooter in his workshop; he fashioned what was actually a toy into a means of transport for himself. It might have been somewhat socially unacceptable for a grown man to arrive on a scooter at a restaurant where he regularly joined his colleagues for a glass of wine, so he made the scooter's handlebar collapsible. When folded away, it fitted discreetly into a large shopping bag. "Back then, it would still have been highly embarrassing to park the scooter by the coat rack," he points out.

A project without a future?

Brimming with enthusiasm for his new means of locomotion, Ouboter considered turning it into a commercial venture, so he asked three friends for their opinions. "They shot me down in flames." They questioned his sanity and advised him against it. Such a hopeless project would only lose money. So Ouboter started walking to the sausage stand again, and micro scooter number one ended up in a corner of the underground garage.

Some children from the neighbourhood were thrilled when they discovered the prototype. With its thick tyres and heavy steel structure, the micro scooter was very different from the usual children's

models. Normal children's scooters have a long board (the "deck") on which the rider stands. On Ouboter's version, the deck was short. The tyres on normal children's scooters are filled with air, whereas Ouboter's model travelled on fast inline skate rollers. "Riding

micro scooters are now to be seen zipping along streets all over the world.

my scooter was simply more fun." So it was no wonder that children were queuing up in the basement garage to race around on the scooter.

When Wim Ouboter saw how enthusiastic the children were about his scooter, he consulted his wife. Would she object if her husband were to earn his money from something as embarrassing as a scooter? She replied that there was no reason for her to cringe at such a prospect, and gave her approval. From then on, the micro scooter story really began to roll: nowadays, people are using them to zip along streets all over the world. They have brought about a change in the concept of urban mobility. Fifteen years ago, almost no adult would want to have been seen arriving at work on a scooter. "But it's entirely acceptable nowadays," Wim Ouboter notes.

Catching the spirit of the times

Ouboter organised production in China, and won over distribution partners and dealers. The nimble, versatile micro caught the spirit of the times – without any planning and not the faintest inkling that such a simple idea as an improved scooter could trigger such huge demand. Over 80,000 micro scooters were produced every day by 9,000 employees in three ..

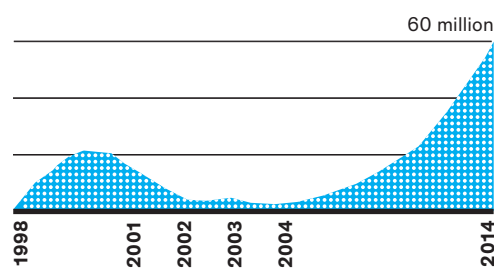


All around the world - starting out from Zurich

These are some of the milestones in micro's conquest of markets across the globe. The brand is supported by the right distribution channels - right, because they match the brand. The key factor in the brand's success is that micro adapts to consumers' preferences in each of the markets.

Steady growth ...

micro has sold over 10 million scooters to date. In 2014, the company posted turnover in excess of CHF 60 million. Almost 30 people now work at the corporate headquarters in Küssnacht near Zurich.

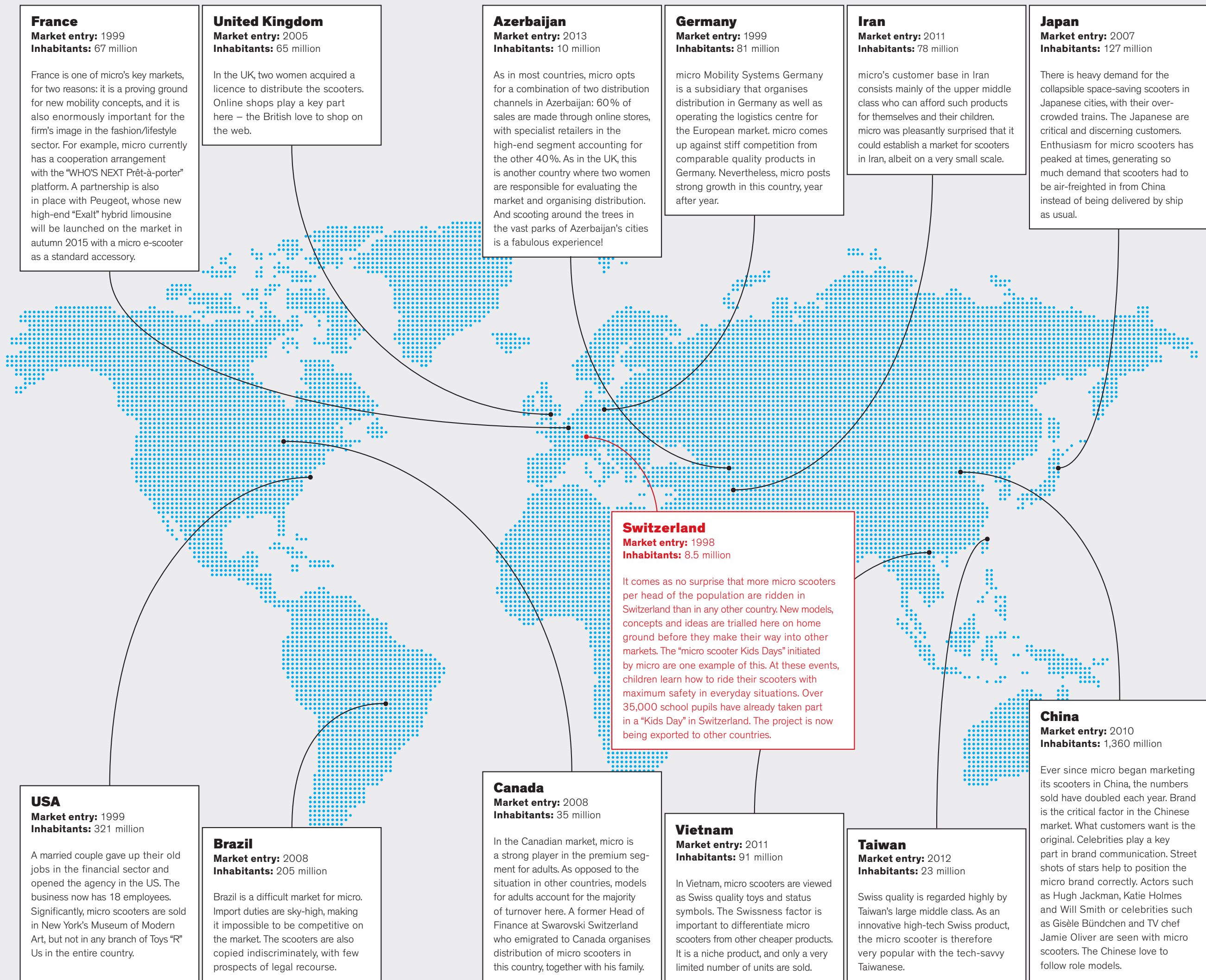


... with some stumbling blocks

Even during the initial scooter boom at the turn of the millennium, micro had to fight off imitators who were seriously damaging the company. When the dotcom bubble burst, there was a sudden downturn in demand for this modish means of transport.

Sales slumped: what did micro do?

Wim Ouboter put his faith in innovation, celebrities, PoS displays and joint ventures with global corporations such as Peugeot, K2 and Samsonite. These steps strengthened the brand and reinforced the product's branding as the original scooter.



- factories in China. Ouboter was only able to finance production because he agreed on a fourteen-day payment period with his customers but was able to pay the manufacturers after four weeks.

micro's scooters had barely been launched on the market when products from imitators appeared on the scene. Scooters of every size – made of metal or plastic, in garish colours or business-like grey. Within a few months, an entire scooter industry had materialised in China, with manufacturers who wanted to line their own pockets from brazenly pirated copies and models that closely resembled the micro scooter.

Branding is the best form of protection against pirates.

“Incredible!” Ouboter exclaims, as he pushes an industrial catalogue of plagiarised scooters across the conference table. Dozens of Chinese manufacturers offer their scooters to importers all over the world. “The copies appear at the speed of lightning.” A few weeks previously, micro launched a pink infants’ scooter on the market. Ouboter shows the product offered by a Chinese manufacturer, which looks exactly like micro’s latest model. “No matter what you do, you get copied,” he adds. Intellectual property rights are stolen shamelessly. “Although in China, that’s supposed to be one of the highest compliments you can pay.”

People want the original

Fighting off infringements through the courts is usually a pointless venture that requires a lot of time, hordes of attorneys and – worst of all – deep pockets. “The most effective remedy is to maintain the brand and keep developing it consistently,” Ouboter comments. Branding is the best form of protection against pirates. “What people want is the original.” micro’s good brand image is based on values such as Swissness, high quality, innovation and sustainability, and it is backed up by facts: for example, spare parts are available for a period of ten years. As the market leader, micro has the know-how and the enthusiasm to keep on developing its product range.

Ouboter chose not to sell his micro scooters through discounters. He doesn’t want to see his scooters in the bargain basement because that would project the wrong quality image. In different countries, he relies on exclusive distribution partners, the retail sector and direct sales through the firm’s own online stores. This approach makes it possible to control and correctly convey the brand’s look and feel. Also, online distribution makes economic sense because it allows micro to keep control of the entire value chain – the company collects all the revenue itself.

“We are mobility”

Ouboter has consistently updated the brand over the last 16 years, and has repeatedly delivered on his claim – “We are mobility” – by offering new products that match it. “To cover short distances in cities as quickly and simply as possible – that was our vision when the firm came into being over 15 years ago,” Wim Ouboter explains. On that basis, a brand message has developed: “We offer solutions for micro mobility.” That means mobility for the urban living environment, to commute between home and work. To scoot out from the office for lunch. To reach the nearest bus stop from home, and then to travel on by bus, metro or suburban railway. The claim that things are made as simple as possible leaves sufficient scope to vary the design of the scooters, and to create new product groups that meet the differing mobility requirements of diverse target groups.

“The first scooters were very definitely vehicles for adults. Once we saw that children also liked to ride them, we designed models for them.” Scooters for children have to perform differently than versions that the boss uses to ride from the station to the office. The centre of gravity is lower, and arm and leg leverage is different for children and adults. This affects the ride characteristics, so the dimensions of a children’s micro scooter must be different from those of a

“There’s more know-how involved here than you might think at first glance.”

model for adults. “There’s more know-how involved here than you might think at first glance,” Ouboter points out. The range now includes a dozen different micro scooters, including the “lazy luggage” scooter, micro trikes for kids, interlock scooters, snowpark scooters and kickboards.

Collaborating with Peugeot

micro’s latest developments include an electrically powered scooter that is truly a double winner – in terms of technology as well as brand success. The electric drive is mounted in the rear wheel, and the flat rechargeable battery is integrated in the kickboard. You can’t tell that the e-scooter is motor-powered just by looking at it. The 250-Watt motor helps the rider to travel effortlessly through town at 25 km/h. The e-scooter has scored a huge marketing success because it is a standard accessory for the Peugeot “Exalt,” a new high-end hybrid limousine to be launched on the market in autumn 2015. When folded away, it fits



Within the next two to four years, Wim Ouboter wants to put a small electric bubble car on the market.

into the boot, where the battery is also charged. By entering into this alliance, Peugeot and micro are pursuing a joint urban mobility strategy. The design is purist and futuristic; alongside the Peugeot logo, the handlebar also displays the logotype of the scooter’s Swiss inventor – a source of particular pride to Ouboter. As micro’s boss explains: “Peugeot explicitly requested this co-branding.” In spring 2015, the micro Peugeot scooter was unveiled together with the “Exalt” limousine at the Paris Autosalon, where French President François Hollande showed particular interest in this, the first two-wheeled vehicle of its type in the world – at a trade fair for four-wheeled vehicles!

micro’s next big ideas

Ouboter continues to drive his vision of urban micro-mobility forwards. Draft designs for an electric bubble car hang on the walls of his office – a miniature spherical car with room for two people on its bench-type seat. It is inspired by the Isetta, the bubble car that was in vogue during the 1950s. The front of the car is also the door, which is lifted up to get in and out. “It’s intended to be a vehicle that women will like,” Ouboter explains. There are already enough large, powerful and showy cars for men. There still

isn’t one that is appealing, small, manoeuvrable and practical – a model that is ideal for the city. micro is determined to produce just such a car, and researchers at a Swiss university of applied sciences are now working to move this project ahead. Ouboter has already launched a search for a manufacturer in China, and he aims to have this model ready on the starting line within two to four years. micro’s bubble cars will follow the trend away from cars in cities: they are not economical enough, too costly and too uncomfortable. Driving around town in a small bubble car is a far neater solution.

Ouboter also thinks that cycles are somewhat impractical in cities. “They take up far too much parking space,” he points out. Scooters are far better for this purpose. And he envisages a free scooter hire scheme instead of the public bike stations where cycles can be rented for short periods, such as those in Paris, London and Zurich. The scheme is to be financed from advertising displayed on the handlebars. He has already entered into discussions about opening scooter stations with several cities, and in others he merely wants to “drop” a few hundred scooters in a guerrilla-like campaign. Anyone who wants a scooter grabs one, rides to their destination – a sausage stand, for instance – and just leaves it there. They won’t even have to take it into the restaurant with them. It couldn’t be more comfortable. For Wim Ouboter, the era of micro mobility has only just begun. •



Wim Ouboter

Is a self-described career changer and maverick. He began his training with a bank apprenticeship, then went on to take a degree in business economics, followed by a marketing course at the University of Boston. First, with a partner, he founded a company making technical textiles in the US. On his return to Switzerland, he worked in the real estate sector and had a seat on the board of directors of a computer retail chain. At this point, he became enthralled by the idea of inventing a useful object that would also be fun to use: and micro was born. Wim Ouboter is married with two sons and lives in Uetikon near Zurich.

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