

Can't the Swiss be nice?

A plea for a new service mentality

Those who want to survive successfully in today's global competition could take a lesson from English and American companies. Some formerly Swiss traditional model companies such as Bally and Feldschlösschen have put more effort in cultivating their corporate identity rather than their corporate culture – but with often fatal consequences.

by Philippe Welti*

Friendliness and service readiness towards current and potential customers seems to have become increasingly rare in this country. The sad thing about this is that most locals no longer even notice it; they are resigned to the fact and take it for granted. But with the increasing internationalization of the Swiss economy, the number of Anglo-Saxon companies finding their way into Switzerland has steadily risen, thus setting new standards concerning friendliness and service readiness. The consequence is that local – yet internationally active – companies are increasingly coming under a similar compulsion in their home market.

A friendly charm – not typical Swiss behaviour

Even though the Swiss funds market is regarded as one of the most developed in the world, foreign providers often manage to establish themselves successfully in the market within a short period of time. British investment fund consultants from Forsyth Partners are a prime example: with respect to the competence and integrity expected from an internationally active house, their success and power of persuasion is also due to their friendly charm, the famous “British understatement” and the relaxed way they deal with investors and partners. This is not typical Swiss behaviour.

Those moving in an international environment realize today that Switzerland is in many areas a service desert. This is particularly unfortunate as the gross domestic product of this country is increasingly fed by the service sector rather than classic industry. When taking a glimpse over the border into the Anglo-Saxon world one does not believe their eyes. How do the Anglo-Saxons manage to spread this

friendliness seemingly without any effort? And what happened to those “Swiss virtues”, the very same which brought this country the reputation of being an island of good values? Is Switzerland really the land of the boors? Measured by the global standards set by the Anglo-Saxons, the answer, unfortunately, is yes.

Corporate culture vs. corporate identity

Over the past 20 years, many Swiss companies have begun implementing and building up “corporate identity” programmes. Because the build-up did not coincide with the development of the “corporate culture”, however, the money invested could – or at least two thirds of it – be written off.

One of the more prominent examples of this development is the build-up of the corporate identity of the Credit Suisse group. Under the leadership of Rainer Gut and Lukas Mühleman, the enterprise drew up a budget of one billion Swiss Francs with the aim of refurbishing the visual identity of this world-renowned Swiss bank. At the same time, however, the bank went through several efficiency and culture shocks, with the result that the money was lost without having the desired effect.

The same faith in this ill-guided dogma overtook hundreds of other Swiss companies, who set more value on their appearance rather than on their commitments to the customer and the underlying value of a well-established “corporate culture” environment.

Rethink – before it’s too late

The “anni mirabili” of the Swiss economy are over for most people; Switzerland has lost its head start in many areas. In respect of the friendliness of its inhabitants, the fabled cradle of modern tourism has today a bad image. The country – in which the middle class is becoming increasingly impoverished – is now struggling in the wake of globalization to maintain its competitive edge in Europe.

It is time to rethink. The key to a change for the better – and a return to the traditional virtues of Switzerland – lies in communication. Swiss companies must extend their understanding of a “service culture”. And they must communicate this understanding to every single employee. It must be made clear to every employee – via communication and sales training programmes – that success only comes if every one of them does his or her part.

Friendliness is one of the foundations of a successful business and it is up to management to transmit this service willingness positively to each and every employee and customer. It is management who should set an example. One Swiss entrepreneur who lives by this motto is Stefan Bichsel. As a US- and Swiss-educated manager with a high social competence, he managed to weld together the heterogeneous Cantonal Bank’s subsidiary Swissca (today Swisscanto) into a successful “fund factory”. He is currently doing the same on an international level as a member of the executive board of globally active Dutch Robeco Group in Rotterdam. Another example is Harry Groenert, director of Swiss operations for the

independent British Fund Rating and Financial Services Group Forsyth Partners—the firm that manages to break the resistance of its customers against hedge funds with Anglo-Saxon charm.

Another area where the motto “service is the rule” should belong to the past is in the tourism sector. What precisely does this imply? For one, among many others, anticipating the guest’s every wish. Here, fortunately, Swiss hotel managers are making some progress. They are beginning to think – and act – more as hosts rather than simply managers. Examples can be found with two successful hotelkeepers and gastronomes, Shasta Aardema of the Zurich Opera House Gastronomy and Robert Frisch, director of the Arabella Sheraton Hotel “Neues Schloss”. For these professionals, their profession is their passion; they are available for their customers around the clock – and always with a smile. Guests who have visited their establishments happily acknowledge that the golden rule of hospitality is carefully followed and achieved in them.

Follow the Anglo-Saxon example

The traditional image of Switzerland as the perfect “island” within Europe is at risk today. The country is instead wrongly depicted as the money-grabbing profiteer of Europe. This image can only be changed – and corrected – by enterprises (particularly management), the state and, last but not least, the political organizations. The establishment of a crisis-proof image through communication on the inside, as well as to the outside world, is a must if the country is to continue to prosper.

An important step in this direction is to develop a friendly and helpful attitude when dealing with customers and guests. In far too many Swiss establishments, the capacity of remembering is very much underestimated. Let us follow the Anglo-Saxon’s example – and make our customers, guests and visitors happy!

**Philippe Welti is a Senior Consultant at Klaus J Stöhlker AG, Zollikon-Zurich.*