Interview: Urs Weber – Secretary General, Swiss Chamber of Commerce in Austria



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Urs Weber, general secretary of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce in Austria, discusses the role of the chamber as a networking facilitator between Austrian and Swiss companies as well as the similarities and differences between both countries' business cultures. Furthermore, he explains what makes Austria an attractive investment destination and how this compares to other parts of Europe.

What is the role of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce in Austria?

The Swiss Chamber of Commerce (HKSÖL) is a privately organised and managed non-profit organisation founded in 1921. Back then, Swiss entrepreneurs where trying to leverage on Austria's close ties with eastern European countries. Our boards and lower board consists of CEOs and C-level executives from Swiss companies present in Austria, as well as Austrian companies present in Switzerland and Swiss companies eyeing future business opportunities in Austria.

Firstly, the most important pillar of action remains networking. The Chamber regularly organises events, the most famous being the "Top Speakers Lounge"; which has been held 17 times, mainly in Austria. These events invite reputable speakers from Switzerland, Austria and Lichtenstein.

Secondly, we offer project services. Our members ask to be put in touch with potential partners according to specific criteria. We arrange and conduct the meeting to make sure all points are clear

for both parties. Our Swiss reputation is particularly helpful when it comes to arranging these meetings as we are perceived as a reliable, neutral and trustworthy voice.

Lastly, we organise regular meetings between CEOs of our members. One of them is the annual “friends for friends” event where CEOs are able to invite a connected CEO to attend. In other cases, we have testimonial meetings where CEOs have an opportunity to showcase what their company offers to other members.

You have been with the Swiss Chamber of Austria since 1997, and you were promoted to secretary general in 2008. How have you helped shape the organisation?

The Swiss Chamber of Commerce needed a reorganisation to maintain a sound financial state. We shifted the focus of our activities towards networking rather than project servicing. When taking over as secretary general, I moved our attention to capitalize on Switzerland’s international reputation for reliability. We rethought our focus and thus far have been expanding organically and I am pleased with the results.

Which projects have you recently engaged within the pharmaceutical industry?

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The public organisation, Swiss Enterprise, which belongs to the Ministry of Economics in Switzerland, has recently produced a study aimed at Swiss companies looking to enter the Austrian pharmaceutical market. Furthermore, I am currently engaged in experts from Swiss enterprise, aiming to provide insights into conducting business in Austria.

The Swiss Chamber organised a top speaker’s lounge in collaboration with the Austrian Ministry of Health. Our main topic of discussion was the data protection laws in Austria and how they affect business. In terms of the medical sector, we discussed the implications of these data privacy laws for research and electronic health record project (ELGA); which in some cases has hindered research advancements.

Why do you believe only a few large pharmaceutical companies are your members?

I think this is the backfire of cultural similarities. Pharmaceutical companies evolving in a highly specialized market with no language problems and similar retailing partnerships structures do not need us as much as they would for networking purposes in other countries. In certain sectors, where inter-industry collaboration is important, our role to the Swiss companies in Austria is more important. Many of our members join just to be in contact with all the managers from other

industries.

What do you think of the economic environment in Austria?

All in all, the country is quite favourable to conduct business. The government and companies present in Austria are able to leverage upon the high education levels of the Austrian population. It has implications in terms of research and innovation, which in turn can only benefit Austria. Unfortunately, entrance to medical universities is overly competitive and I believe something could be done about increasing medical education capabilities across the country.

The government's initiative to put in place an R&D rebate of 14 percent as of January 2018, aligns with the nation´s intention to increase its stature as an innovative country. This has most certainly caught the eye of innovative Swiss companies and they are now more likely to take a larger step into Austria.

Additionally, I think something should be done about the current tax policy. Foreign investments largely contribute to the economic development of a country and higher tax rates in Austria, for example compared to Germany, are unfavourable to such investments. It is a pity for pharmaceutical companies, especially as Austrians are very attentive to their health.

How do international companies view Austria in comparison to other European markets?

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Austria is one of the highest gross domestic products per capita markets in Europe, and therefore is viewed as an attractive destination. Despite the Swiss´s reputation for reliability and quality it is sometimes difficult to find arguments to convince people to deal with Swiss companies due to the high price of our product. Targeting markets that can afford the products is essential to the success of Swiss companies, and Austria is one of them.

Additionally, Swiss and Austrian companies have close cultural ties, more so than with Germany. It is easier to conduct business with Austrians as a Swiss and vice-versa; there are nearly no cultural misunderstandings between the two nations.

What differences exist between the Swiss and Austrian business cultures?

Euphemistically, I would say Austrians are more pragmatic than the Swiss. They take their time to commit to a decision. Additionally, the Swiss people value the relationship with the person before considering having business with them. Unfortunately, too many international entrants ignore this, though the Swiss business conduct fits well here; Austrians have a high opinion of Swiss business

people.

Relationship building is not the same in both nations. In a professional setting, an Austrian person, telling you they would be happy to see you again should be taken for a mark of appreciation, no more. A Swiss person telling you the same means they have already committed to the idea of meeting up with you again and they have a clear idea of when it could happen.

What are your priorities for the next few years?

We want to continue engaging with policy makers and decision makers to secure a favourable economic environment in Austria. This is not a philanthropic initiative. Switzerland’s interests are tied to those of Austria due to the abundance of Swiss workers in the country as well as the strong economic ties and international trade between both parties.

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