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TO THE MANAGEMENT

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Number



- 3 Editorial
- 3 Legal Notice
- 19 Books
- 50 Survey

Marketplace

- 6 SKO, student company consultants, cloud storage from Switzerland - and musician businessmen

SME of the Month

- 10 Stadler Form merges design and technology for better home and climate appliances

Business case

- 16 Revolutionary system for hand washing

Special topic

- 20 How digitalization influences the development of SMEs

Expert knowledge

- 26 Effective takeover of General Terms and Conditions into the contract

- 29 Success factors for SMEs
- 32 Neglected company culture
- 35 How conflict management helps an SME
- 38 Digital brand management by NPOs
- 41 Qualified leads through online marketing

In conversation

- 44 How do many SMEs deal with currency problems?

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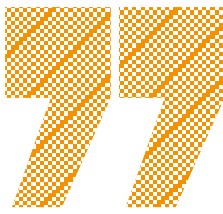




"We prefer to sit with the end customers at a table"

Currency problems are still a major challenge for many SMEs. A conversation among entrepreneurs on innovation, digitization and bilateral agreements - with Eva Jaisli from PB Swiss Tools as well as Adrian Tschanz and Hans Balmer from swissconsultants.ch.

RECORDED BY THEO MARTIN



"To be able to be innovative requires vocational training as a foundation."

BLICKPUNKT KMU Mrs Jaisli, what is your biggest problem at the moment?

EVA JAISLI It is still the currency problem. We achieve more than 50% of our sales in euros and the problem has increased. That worries us. What are we going to have to prepare for? The currency problem is linked to globalization, which is also an opportunity for PB Swiss Tools to expand its markets. We always ask ourselves what the potential is - in the existing markets as well as in new geographical areas. We usually go to where our customers are carrying out production. At the moment, Eastern Europe, as well as emerging markets, such as Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, are the focus of the manufacturing industry. We try to find a local partner as soon as possible in order to reliably serve those companies that are already working with our tools.

How are you dealing with the strong Swiss franc?

JAISLI As early as January 15, 2015, we decided upon a location. We immediately realized that we could lose market shares since our prices were not attractive. In addition, our domestic market, which still contributes a third of our sales, could become more attractively priced for competitors from the eurozone. Our higher wages are now even more important. We then quickly agreed with the works commission on a 42-hour week. In addition, we negotiated hard with our suppliers and gave our customers a EuroBonus. With this bundle of measures, we successfully found a balance. As a result, neither market shares nor sales were lost - however, we had a decline in earnings.

ADRIAN TSCHANZ Have you offset the sales by selling greater numbers of items?

JAISLI Precisely. In 2016, we saw that the processes introduced in 2014 from lean management led to the first productivity increases. But before the optimizations take effect, investments are always needed first.

What are your factors for success?

JAISLI We are still well positioned. Success factors that really matter, such as the unmistakable quality of our tools, we can maintain. We

can also make investments, for example, to consistently introduce LeanManagement in all processes and to expand our range of products. In recent years, we introduced a large number of products...

TSCHANZ ...100 new products...

JAISLI ... on the market.

HANS BALMER That is enormous, the numbers are probably not too high.

JAISLI In the meantime, we have 3000 items in our product range. Since 2013, we have also been providing medical instruments. OPERACE is a solution approach for severely ingrown and difficult to detach implant screws. The instrument set was developed together with trauma surgeons and orthopedic surgeons. It is important that the surgeon be able to loosen the screw without shattering the bone; for this, the correct screw instrument is necessary. The tool, consisting of a drill, mill and rotary screws, offers a variety of solutions that meet the complexity of the situation.

TSCHANZ How did you come up with the idea of advancing into this area?

JAISLI Simply with special products. Shortly before the financial crisis, we were investigating which special products we were able to supply in recent years. In doing so, we realized the importance of implant manufacturers for us and discovered that there was a market here. In addition, we interviewed suppliers and users and saw that there was a gap in the handle and blade offerings. Because our core competency was concerned, we were able to discuss the framework conditions and the regulatory requirements in the health care system and had ourselves certified. Now we have DePuy Synthes Johnson & Johnson as exclusive partner - in sales on our website.

66% of your quality tools are exported. How do you manage that?

JAISLI We manage to do it - there is no question of that. It has also not changed from one day to the other. The question is what obstacles, such as customs regulations and import conditions, do we meet with. But these have always existed and we work together with professionals like Switzerland Global Enterprise. The big challenge is the currency problem.

TSCHANZ How does the end user notice the



quality that you mentioned? Other producers bring production back from abroad because they can not achieve the quality that they want.

JAISLI How the user senses the quality is precisely the decisive question. Optimizations and new developments aim directly at the end consumers. There are two decisive questions: Do the tools fit into the screws? And are they consistent? Absolute precision is necessary, especially at the end of a blade. Durability is particularly noticeable to the user. Again and again, we have inquiries from the police



Eva Jaisli is the co-owner and CEO of PB Swiss Tools AG; her husband is the CTO. This SME from Wasen in the Emmental is the leader for screwdriving and impact tools (12 million units/year). Jaisli is strongly committed to the economic and political environment. Among other things, she is the Vice President of Switzerland Global Enterprise, a member of the Executive Committee of Swissmem and on the Board of Directors of BEKB, Concordia and the Emmental regional hospital (President). Jaisli studied psychology and social work and, later



Adrian Tschanz is the Managing Director and owner of Tschanz Treuhand AG and R+H Treuhand AG in Lyss, as well as a partner in the auditing company Revitas AG, which has offices in Lyss, Bern and Hünenberg/Zug. Since 2014, he has been the President of Swissconsultants.ch, an interdisciplinary network of owner-managed, qualified member companies. Swissconsultants.ch is the widest network for business contacts in Switzerland. It is



Hans Balmer is the head of media at Swissconsultants.ch. He heads the communications agency Dr. Hans Balmer AG in Olten and is the publisher of the "Clinicum" hospital magazine, the leading magazine in the Swiss health care market. Balmer specializes in communications consultation for supervisory boards and company management, lobbying, setting up and

as to when a certain screwdriver left the factory, because it was used for a burglary. There are specialists who use the same screwdriver, from training to retirement.

So your tools are indestructible?

JAISLI Precisely, professionals know how to handle them. We have been pouring the raw material into our own recipes for decades. In the selection of the raw material and in every production process, the aim is to make the unmistakable quality possible. The fact that more and more tools are necessary is a result

of the innovations. We can grow by expanding our product range as well as by constantly meeting new requirements. There are also trends to keep in mind, for example, by adapting the material and design of the handles. The production method for the impact-resistant and clear handle was invented by my father-in-law after the war years. At that time, the injection molding process was not yet known in Europe. With the village school teacher, he translated books from America and discovered that the runnerless molding process produces an optimal handle. It is a material that works in heat, in the cold and also with oil-smearred hands.

BALMER Is it patented?

JAISLI My father-in-law did not have anything patented, but wanted to pass on his knowledge. He set a standard for this in Paris. That was the best advertising campaign. Because the market noticed PB Swiss Tools as a result and we were able to export Emmental products to Europe relatively quickly.

What constitutes 100% Swiss Made for you?

JAISLI That is very important, we carry out every process here in-house. Only raw materials and packaging materials are purchased. In addition to automated production, everything is also developed here in-house. We have a large network of experts that we draw upon for development. There are specialists from universities and technical colleges as well as suppliers; there are also specialists for robotics and universal design. It is very important to us that a tool is manufactured competitively and fits in every hand - whether the hand is small, big or even an office hand. As a rule, it is a multitool that can withstand universal use and high demands.

Suppose the bilateral agreements are canceled. Do you have scenarios for this?

JAISLI Then it becomes very difficult - but not only for us, but for a lot of export-oriented companies in Switzerland. You must not forget that, thanks to bilateral trade agreements, we can successfully sell abroad as well as receive support for innovative development processes. This is important for us; we need the best experts - and sometimes we need an institute in Germany as well as a Swiss university. I am thinking of the agreement on technical trade barriers, which inclu-

des the mutual recognition of conformity assessments for industrial products between Switzerland and the EU. If we cancel the bilateral agreements, we have to fulfill quite a lot of additional requirements - in addition, the risk that we are not competitive increases. We must also assume that access to certain markets will not be maintained.

TSCHANZ Do you also engage in this question?

JAISLI I am not bound by party politics, but, as a member of the Executive Committee of Swissmem, I am very engaged in these issues. 75% of all jobs are now covered by SMEs. To a prospering mix, we also need the manufacturing industry. It is obvious that canceling bilateral agreements is not possible - and we now have more understanding by the public. I do not have a scenario - not even in the back of my head. That must not happen. We are two-thirds dependent on exports. The Swiss market is too small as a replacement.

BALMER Is it clear to the politicians that they are playing with fire?

JAISLI Yes, in the meantime. Awareness has increased significantly during the last two years. Today, we also face a different understanding of the EU. Ultimately, even the EU depends on us a bit. Switzerland as a place of thought and work still has many advantages. When I see how we are dependent on well-qualified people to satisfy quality requirements, it is no different than arranging European and international access to genuine and high investments in research and development. With exclusively good vocational training and access to the development institutes, the latter in particular is a prerequisite for distinctive innovative performance.

Do you have enough skilled personnel in your region?

JAISLI Yes, we have few employees that have to travel more than 20 km. 10% of the workforce is made up of trainees and apprentices.

TSCHANZ Was it ever an issue for you to manufacture abroad?

JAISLI No, not to this day. And quite consciously not.

What is the significance of innovation for you as a producer of high added value tools? Do you invest a large part of your earnings into

innovation every year?

J AISLI Yes! Incredible, is not it? But we need to. New developments also include new technologies. This includes design, materials, technology and training. Infrastructural adjustments are often also necessary. And finally, certifications are needed. In sum, this represents a high proportion of investments, even if not the same every year.

Where do the innovative flashes of inspiration come from?

J AISLI We reach the most productive way when we go to the users and look over their shoulders. In conversation with them, we will find out which tools prove themselves and what is still missing - for example, because it is a new requirement. In such a case, we prefer to get together with the users first because we get the best advice from them as to which requirements the product must fulfill.

B ALMER That is also a good way to build customer loyalty.

J AISLI Precisely. Today, we communicate through many channels and so have more opportunities to engage in dialogs with the users. Of course, we have a problem because the direct customer is the sales partner and not the end customer. We have to bridge this distance over and over again - preferably with the user at the workbench. In addition, we receive a lot of information from the field representatives of the sales partners and do our own market research. Another channel consists of workshops with customers and field representatives, so that we can be sure that we are investing our money and resources properly.

Is digitization in your company also an issue?

J AISLI Today, digitization plays an important role when it comes to using data as target-oriented as possible. During production, thanks to data evaluation using intelligent processes, we have the possibility of understanding what kind of malfunctions there are. Digitization also plays an important role in marketing and sales. We have formulated an omni-channel strategy to be present on sales displays and in the marketplaces.

Are there also risks?

J AISLI Of course, I think of dealing with the data that belong to our capital. We have to carefully handle the data that we pass on and protect ourselves against hackers. As an SME, we have been attacked very often in recent months.

Does the fear of job loss also play a part?

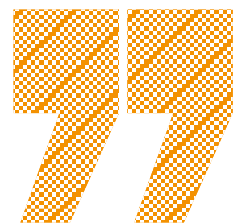
J AISLI During the financial crisis, we lost a significant number of orders from one month to the next, a total of around 30%. However, we used this phase to further develop in the field of medical instruments. Now, despite digitalization, we are not afraid - we have been using robots for decades and are also using the latest generation of robots. In this way we relieve monotonous work so that the workers can assume other tasks. We have not reduced our workforce by a single position because of digitization. PB Swiss Tools is one of the first industrial companies to use industrial robots in Switzerland.

T SCHANZ Your background did not indicate that you would be a businesswoman.

J AISLI Yes and no - the background perhaps not. However, I myself come from a family of entrepreneurs and, as a child, I have witnessed what it means and to what winds an owner-managed SME is exposed. As a teacher, I am accustomed to making myself knowledgeable in new topics and, in the process, to bringing others along with me.

T SCHANZ SME representatives are often married to the business.

J AISLI But that also has many advantages. As a result, a person



"If we cancel the bilateral agreements, it will become very difficult for many

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LÄNDLI



How do you accommodate all this?

J AISLI By having joy in everything that I can move and by sharing responsibility. I have a great job with many challenges, but there are also great people with whom I can interact. I also see that, as an entrepreneur, it is important to not only function in the narrowest system of one's own company. I therefore also assume responsibilities outside the company. So I am committed to having a good infrastructure here in the Emmental and am therefore the Chairman of the Board of the Emmental hospital. These are all issues for which commitment and entrepreneurial performance are necessary today.

T SCHANZ You are leading the company in fourth generation. Will it remain Swiss?

J AISLI Yes, we clearly intend to. We have four kids. Solutions are discussed, also in connection with the succession. The family has first priority. But, of course, other scenarios are also conceivable.

Thank you very much for this interview! ●

has agility, which leads to more competitive power.

What are your expectations regarding politics?

J AISLI It is quite clear that there is sufficient investment in vocational training and research. I also expect companies to continue to be supported in the context of the currency problem. I do not want any intervention by the state, but I do expect that SMEs will be supported indirectly. I am thinking of research and development, on the transfer of knowledge, as well as good support in foreign trade and social partnerships. But the environment and energy supply are also important prerequisites for providing SMEs with good prospects.