Oliver Kuhn – CEO and Board Member, Selectchemie



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Oliver Kuhn, CEO of Selectchemie, has had a diverse career spanning various sectors, starting in the financial industry before transitioning to healthcare. Under his leadership, Selectchemie has sharpened its strong focus on high-quality APIs, excipients, as well as own dossiers and finished-dose-formulations, setting itself apart through a tailored service that connects mid-sized suppliers with clients in Europe, Middle East and Africa, and Latin America. With a global footprint, the company emphasises partnerships with strong local producers and specialises in hard-to-make products.

Can you tell us a bit about your background and what brought you to your current role at Selectchemie?

Despite having lived and worked on all five continents, I am 100 percent Swiss including serving 2 years as an officer in the Swiss Military. I grew up in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and finished my studies with a Ph.D. in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. I then began my career with Zurich Insurance in financial services but shifted to the healthcare business for good in 2001.

I started with Novartis in Switzerland in marketing and sales, before moving to broader roles in Europe and then in Sub-Saharan Africa. That was a fascinating yet challenging experience, especially while raising two small children, given the security challenges in places like Nigeria with 24h armed security. After that, I returned to Basel to work in a global marketing role at Novartis

HQ, but eventually, after more than 10 years at one of the major players in the pharmaceutical market, I sought something smaller and joined Stallergenes – which later became Stallergenes Greer – as their GM for Switzerland and Austria for three years, before moving to Otsuka in the DACH-region in a similar role for another four years.

Right after the first wave of the pandemic, I decided to transition to Selectchemie, where I have already been on the board for the last 16 years. I have always had an interest in generics, and having worked with originator companies at the same time, I bring this unique dual perspective to the pharma business. My transition to the CEO role at Selectchemie came somewhat unexpectedly, after an immediate need for a new CEO. Despite initially agreeing to take on the role temporarily for six months, it has been over three and a half years now, and I have enjoyed the challenges and opportunities that have come with it, shaping the Selectchemie team to the power house that it is today.

What is Selectchemie's approach to the generics business and the commercialization of your products, particularly regarding the dossiers and final product packaging?

At Selectchemie, we trade both, the active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) and Excipients, as well as develop dossiers of Generics and "virtually" produce our own finished-dose-formulations (FDFs) with our long-time trusted partners. Our FDFs are tailored made for our partners, ready to sell in their markets and their branding. We don't handle the commercialization ourselves but instead focus on providing all regulatory needs to have the marketing authorisations granted for our partners. These licencing schemes can be regular to semi-exclusive to fully exclusive.

These possibilities to have the full comfort service package, including stock-keeping services for our partners, is a key part of our FDF business offering. One of our flagship products in the FDF space are the fungines, where we offer all three molecules. Selectchemie was the first company worldwide to offer all three generic fungines.

Could you provide an overview of how the business is divided in terms of revenue generation across the different units, and what differentiates Selectchemie from other players in the market?

In terms of revenue breakdown, roughly two thirds of our business comes from APIs and excipients. The FDF as well as our nutrition department, SelectNutrition, accounts for the other third. The

services we offer, including full product sourcing, regulatory and quality support, as well as our seamless supply-chain services, add another layer to our value proposition.

What really sets us apart from other players in the market, particularly those focused on mass molecules or simple shipping, is our commitment to sourcing specialty products. We mainly work with strong local producers who lack the capability to source complex products from regions like China or India. Our team has built a strong network in these regions, enabling us to partner with top-tier producers who can meet European standards of quality. It is not just about delivering the product; we ensure it comes with all the necessary documentation, so our clients have a seamless experience. This full-service approach is a significant differentiator for us.

In terms of markets, our primary focus is Europe, with additional significant presence in Turkey, Middle East and Africa (MEA), and Latin America. However, we are currently not involved with the US market and, notably, have made the strategic decision to avoid dealing with Russia, due to the long ongoing geopolitical situation.

You mentioned that your clients are primarily strong local producers, but it sounds like there may be a variety of client profiles that Selectchemie works with. Could you provide more detail on this and how your company's global footprint supports these diverse needs?

While our primary focus is on quality local producers who are strong in their respective regional markets, we do indeed serve a range of client profiles. These producers are usually leaders in their local markets but may not have the resources or capabilities to source specialty products internationally, particularly from regions like China and India. This is where Selectchemie comes in, helping them access high-quality APIs and excipients while also managing the associated complexities, such as the ever more demanding regulatory paperwork, or act as our clients outsourced sourcing department.

To serve our clients effectively, we have established a global footprint with 18 locations worldwide. This is critical for staying close to our clients and being responsive to their needs. We have 2 sourcing offices in India and China, but we also have sales offices spread across various regions. For instance, we have significant hubs in Serbia, Turkey, and Brazil. These locations play a key role in serving Eastern Europe, MEA, and Latin America. Additionally, our headquarters in Switzerland leads our operations in Western Europe.

In terms of company size, Selectchemie employs around 130 people globally, with close to 80 of them based here in Switzerland. The remaining team is spread across our international offices, with some locations having as many as eight staff members to manage operations in their respective regions. This global presence enables us to effectively support our diverse clientele with tailored solutions across both sourcing and sales.

The API market is highly competitive, especially in regions like India and China with abundant suppliers. What sets Selectchemie apart, and what unique value do you offer to your clients?

What truly differentiates Selectchemie in the API market is our deep, personal connections with carefully selected suppliers. We don’t work with the largest, most ubiquitous suppliers—those who already have their own extensive sales teams and can reach global markets independently. Instead, we focus on mid-sized suppliers who may not have the capability to sell their products abroad. These suppliers often have high-quality offerings but lack the sales and quality infrastructure to access global markets effectively.

We have built strong relationships with these suppliers by visiting their facilities, understanding their operations, and ensuring that they meet the high-quality standards required by our clients, particularly in Europe. This hands-on, personal approach allows us to act as a bridge between these quality-focused, mid-sized suppliers and our clients, many of whom are similarly mid-sized, local producers with specific needs.

This is where our value proposition lies: we offer a tailored service that the mass-market players can’t provide. While the larger companies in the API space may dominate the bulk market, there is a significant gap for companies like ours, who specialise in sourcing and delivering high-quality, niche products to clients who need a more personalised, hands-on service. Essentially, we are connecting the right suppliers with the right clients, facilitating a level of quality and service that larger, more generic players or the small mom and pop traders simply can’t offer.

How do you attract new clients and partners, especially in a market where some may not be familiar with Selectchemie? Do you have a proactive strategy in place to seek out new opportunities?

We are very proactive in seeking out new clients and partners. While we have built a solid reputation over our 55 years of experience, which provides us with a strong base of clients and recognition in the industry, we don't rely solely on inbound requests. We actively go out and seek opportunities. For example, we regularly attend events like CPHI Europe in Frankfurt/Milan or CPHI Shanghai, where we can connect with potential clients and suppliers. For those looking for a high-quality service, we are well-known, but we also make sure to keep our presence felt by attending such industry-leading events.

In addition to trade shows, we have dedicated sourcing offices that help us identify potential suppliers, particularly smaller, niche ones who may not have the capability to go global themselves. On the client side, our local sales representatives, who know their markets well, actively look for specific molecules that require a high level of expertise. We don't focus on commodity products like simple pain killers, which are readily available on the internet. Instead, we seek out harder-to-manufacture molecules, where quality is critical—this is where we add value.

Additionally, we pay particular attention to excipients, which can sometimes be as crucial as the API itself. We have exclusivity agreements with certain excipient suppliers, which allow our highly trained technical sales experts to create unique, tailored solutions. This targeted approach allows us to make valuable matches that go beyond standard offerings, helping us to distinguish ourselves in the market and attract new clients.

How do you decide which molecules to work with, and do you focus on a broad range of them or are you more selective?

We are quite selective in the molecules we work with in the future. We don't pursue a broad range of products but instead focus on a relatively short list of molecules where we have reliable suppliers. We then aim to match the quality and pricing expectations of our clients. For example, European quality standards are very high, so prices tend to be higher, whereas in other regions, such as some parts In Latam, the quality expectations may be lower and the market is more price-driven. This strategic approach ensures that we are delivering products that meet the needs of our clients without overextending our focus.

You became CEO in 2021 during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. How did this experience shape Selectchemie's direction, and what were the key achievements during

that challenging time?

Taking on the CEO role during the COVID-19 pandemic certainly presented unique challenges. Initially, everything was done remotely, as we had to send employees home. Despite the difficulties, it was a time when demand was high across the board. Our advantage was having our own warehouses – two in Switzerland, one in Hamburg and just recently another one in the Netherlands, which allowed us to be flexible and deliver quickly to our clients. We were able to handle urgent demands and supply a wide range of products, even facilitating shipments from China with private caterers and airplanes.

However, as the pandemic progressed, the situation changed. Once the emergency orders dropped, we found ourselves with full warehouses and fewer orders coming in. This forced us to reassess our strategy and refine our offerings. We had to focus on delivering products that met the specific needs of our clients, rather than just responding to the broad demand we saw during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, many countries began focusing on self-sufficiency in the supply of APIs, especially in emerging markets. What is your take on this trend, and how does it affect your business?

While we understand the desire for greater independence in these regions, it often comes down to a willingness to pay for the premium prices associated with high-quality APIs. If countries are not willing to invest in higher-priced ingredients, they can find themselves left behind when the demand spikes, as others are able to secure the supply.

For us, it is about maintaining the quality of our products and being able to offer a specialized range of APIs and excipients that we can stock and supply reliably. Our business model focuses on niche products, not a full range of offerings, so we are not competing directly with the mass market.

Are you looking into GLP-1 as an opportunity given its recent rise in popularity?

We have considered it, of course, but since everyone else is already focused on it, we prefer to look at less obvious opportunities. While GLP-1 is complex, it is not the most challenging molecule, and many players are already investing in it. We choose molecules that are more specialized, complex,

and not as widely pursued, where we see a potential for profitability, even if the market size is not huge.

If we have access to a good source of GLP-1, we would still consider selling it, but we prefer to stick to our strategy and focus on what differentiates us in the market.

How do you ensure your brand is viewed as a trusted partner, and how significant is brand recognition to your success?

As a Swiss company with over five decades of experience, trust and reliability are at the core of our culture and everything we do. Our long-standing team is recognized across the industry, reflecting our core value: quality. We don’t just connect products to customers—we connect needs to expertise. In a crowded market, our strength lies in delivering what others don’t: tailored solutions, unmatched service, and a commitment to excellence that sets us apart. Trust and quality are at the heart of everything we do. In a margin-driven market, our customers can rely on us for more than just products: high-quality service and dependable delivery. That reputation didn’t happen overnight; we’ve earned it, and it’s a clear differentiator. Switzerland itself offers an advantage because of the country’s strong reputation for quality and precision. At the same time, operating here does come with its challenges, particularly in terms of high salary costs compared to the countries where we do most of our business. While Switzerland is our base, it’s not our main battleground. We see the real opportunities abroad, even though we are a small player in the generics market here, which is dominated by just a few large companies.

Looking forward, we are adapting to changes, especially with new legislation coming into play. This is something that will evolve over time, but we are well-prepared and focused on building long-term, trusted relationships with both our partners and customers. As for the direction of the company, we are determined to keep innovating, stay committed to high-quality service, and maintain a strong position in markets that value trust and expertise.

Looking ahead, are there any new areas or strategies that you are looking to explore or expand into?

We are always looking for ways to grow and adapt. Our traditional role in the industry is primarily that of an intermediary, but there are several avenues we are considering for the future. One potential area is backward integration—developing even stronger relationships with our suppliers

or possibly even acquiring companies to bring more control into the process. Another direction is forward integration, where we could act as an outsourced sourcing department for generic companies. These companies often don’t want to deal with the complexities of procurement and supply chain management, so we could take on that responsibility for them, providing reliable service while they focus on their core business.

The idea is to become an even more integral partner, not just a supplier, and to offer services that reduce the operational burden for our clients. We are already working in both of these areas, and while it is still early days, these are clear directions we are exploring. There is a great deal of potential, and as we build these relationships, we are confident it will lead to new opportunities.

How do you recruit, retain, and develop top talent in a competitive market with high salary costs?

People are absolutely at the heart of our business. We like to think of our company as a close-knit team, and that spirit of connection and collaboration is something we truly strive to cultivate. Our challenge, especially with international offices, is making sure that all our employees, no matter where they are based, feel part of that team and share in the values of the company. While we cannot offer the highest salaries, we provide something that is equally valuable—a work environment that offers greater autonomy and the chance to make a real impact.

We also offer various perks and are committed to evolving based on employee feedback—through surveys and workshops, we continuously shape our work environment. For example, many of our offices have been redesigned to create spaces that support collaboration and make people feel comfortable and valued.

We also organise events like summer barbecues and Christmas parties, both locally and internationally, to ensure that our employees feel a strong sense of community. And crucially, we invest heavily in leadership development. We have introduced a two-year leadership programme for team leaders and directors to help them build real management skills. This is something we have recognised as essential, as we want our leaders to be well-equipped to guide their teams. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and it is helping foster a stronger team spirit across the company. These investments in our people are incredibly important for the long-term success of the business.

How have you defined your values at Selectchemie, and how do you make sure that these values are lived and embodied by your team?

When joining Selectchemie, you won’t find our values plastered over the walls – but you will feel them in how we work together. Our core values—entrepreneurship, empowerment, quality, teamwork, honesty, and reliability—are at the heart of our culture. Recently we have been more and more focused on bringing them to life through workshops where teams and individuals explore what these values mean in the daily work.

On a more personal note, what do you love most about your job and your role here at Selectchemie?

There are three things I truly love about my job. First, I love the people who work here. My role is to provide them with a safe and secure environment where they can thrive. It is incredibly rewarding to see our team grow and succeed.

Second, I greatly value our relationships with customers and suppliers. I spend a lot of time traveling to meet them, and I find these interactions exciting, rewarding, and broadening one’s own horizon. In general, I try to visit all our offices around the globe at least once a year. While this is giving me hands-on experience as well as direct feedback, it also helps building strong, personal relationships with our partners. Above all, it’s a personal opportunity for me to express genuine respect for all our employees around the world who give their best every day.

And third, while I’m Swiss at heart, I’ve always had a global mindset. I deeply appreciate Switzerland, but I also have a genuine passion for travel and connecting with people from different cultures. Over the years, I’ve picked up several languages—including German, English, French, Spanish, some Portuguese, and Italian—which helps me communicate more naturally across cultures. Feeling at home in many parts of the world has shaped a perspective I truly value.

Given your impressive background, it is interesting how you ended up where you are, being in the right place at the right time and making the right moves. How do you reflect on this journey?

I would say I probably have a Buddhist soul—I believe in fate and luck. Sometimes, things seem to happen for a reason, and looking back, I think I’ve been fortunate to be in the right place at the

right time more than once. Of course, you can steer things in a direction with knowledge, passion and a strong will, but I think it is as important to follow your heart. If you are only doing something for the money or for the reputation, then it won't work in the long run. It is the passion and dedication you bring that makes all the difference. Luck may play a part, but it is about being authentic and doing things with sincerity. That is what has guided me in my journey.

Looking back at your career and personal achievements, what are the moments you are most proud of today?

Reflecting on my entire journey, I would say the time I spent in Africa is the thing I am the proudest of. Many people might think of Africa in terms of charity, giving money, and supporting the disadvantaged, but my experience was much more hands-on. I worked directly with colleagues in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and Senegal, helping them advance their work and contribute to the development of their countries and societies. I was deeply involved in pushing things forward quite hard, and even now, years later, I still receive calls from colleagues I worked with back then, often on New Year's Eve, wishing me well and expressing gratitude that I pushed them out of their comfort zone back in the days while now they have taken over leadership positions in the local industry of their respective home countries. Those moments remind me that everyone can truly make a difference, and that, to me, is the ultimate purpose in life. This sense of fulfilment continues to shape how I lead at Selectchemie, where I am committed to empowering our team, challenging ourselves, and pushing boundaries to achieve our shared success.

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