

# Georg Boonen - CEO, Max Zeller

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***It's not a passing trend, but a profound shift in how society understands health.***

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*Marking 160 years of uninterrupted evolution, Max Zeller stands at the intersection of tradition and modernity in plant-based healthcare. CEO Georg Boonen reflects on the company's continued role in shaping evidence-based phytotherapy, from pioneering prescription-grade herbal medicines in Switzerland to launching the Zeller Plus line of preventive supplements. With a focus on scientific integrity, international growth, and a deep-rooted belief in nature's therapeutic potential, Zeller is redefining what plant-based medicine can achieve.*

## **What has been your key focus since our last conversation in 2021, and how are you positioning the Zeller Plus line within your broader strategy?**

Since 2021, we have not only continued to strengthen our market position in Switzerland but have also focused on the further development of our portfolio. Our objective is to introduce new phytopharmaceuticals to the Swiss market in the next two to three years: products that align with our scientific standards and therapeutic focus.

A key step in this direction is the upcoming launch of the first product from our new Zeller Plus line, scheduled for September 2025. This strategic expansion responds to a broader global shift, a "gigatrend" or reorientation towards nature, that has been steadily gaining momentum and was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals became far more proactive in managing their health through lifestyle, nutrition, and supplementation. Consumers are no longer looking only

for treatments, but also for preventive solutions that align with a more holistic view of health.

With Zeller Plus, we aim to offer evidence-based, carefully formulated botanical food supplements that support long-term health and can be used in a preventive context. This line is not meant as an extension of our medicinal product range, but rather as a complementary offering. While phytotherapy is designed to treat diseases and is firmly rooted in the medical domain, food supplements serve to support and maintain health.

At Zeller, we are committed to contributing to the well-being of all people, providing effective treatment where needed, and scientifically grounded prevention where possible. By doing so, we want to accompany people on their journey towards better health and well-being in a holistic, trustworthy, and evidence-based way.

### **What does the 160-year milestone mean to you and your team?**

This anniversary is a moment of pride and reflection. One key point is the power of continuity and scientific integrity. Our long-standing success rests on two core pillars: control of the full value chain (“from seed to patient”) and unwavering quality. Just as crucial, however, has been our consistent commitment to attracting, empowering, and supporting outstanding people at every level of the organization. We have learnt that sustained innovation requires courage, patience, and a deep understanding of nature’s therapeutic potential: qualities that are best cultivated in a strong, dedicated team.

A particularly moving moment for all of us was receiving the Family Business Award 2024, a very special birthday gift. This award honours not just business success, but also the values that define sustainable entrepreneurship, including social and societal responsibility. Being recognized in this way reaffirmed our belief that long-term thinking, responsibility for people and the planet, and strong family values are as relevant today as they ever were and essential for future-oriented companies in Switzerland and beyond.

What is truly remarkable is the journey of phytotherapy itself. At the time that Zeller was founded, plant-based remedies were a natural and unquestioned part of everyday healthcare. Only over time were these remedies more and more replaced by chemically synthesized pharmaceuticals. And yet, across the decades, phytotherapy has continued to evolve methodically, scientifically, and resiliently. We take pride in the role Zeller has played in preserving and advancing the status of phytopharmaceuticals through all these years.

Who would have imagined that 160 years after our founding, evidence-based phytomedicine would once again stand at the forefront of global health discussions? Major societal shifts, such as the return to nature, the demand for sustainable solutions, and a holistic, self-empowered approach to health, have created powerful new momentum for plant-based therapies. Today, phytopharmaceuticals are internationally recognized not only for their natural origin, but also for their proven efficacy, safety, and relevance in modern integrative care.

A symbolic moment came in 2015, when the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was awarded for the discovery of artemisinin, a plant-derived compound that revolutionized malaria treatment. This prestigious recognition reminded the world of the immense potential still hidden in nature's pharmacy and underlined the scientific legitimacy and therapeutic value of phytomedicine, even in the most advanced fields of medicine. Zeller is also deeply committed to advancing scientific knowledge through clinical studies and preclinical research to elucidate the mechanisms of action of plant ingredients and identify their active constituents.

### **How do you see the phytopharmaceuticals sector evolving, and what regulatory developments would help unlock further innovation?**

The sector is growing, but so are the challenges. Developing evidence-based phytopharmaceuticals is becoming increasingly complex, particularly when it comes to the registration as medicinal products. The strict boundaries of current monographs limit innovation and differentiation.

Despite this, we have demonstrated what is possible. Our St. John's Wort extract Ze 117, with its low hyperforin content, has led some regulatory authorities, such as Swissmedic, to lift the mandatory interaction warnings. This is a major recognition of our preclinical and clinical research supporting the product's safety profile.

The low hyperforin content is particularly relevant, as it effectively minimizes the risk of clinically significant pharmacokinetic drug interactions, which have historically posed challenges for the concomitant use of St. John's Wort with other medications. With St. John's Wort extract Ze 117, we are redefining what is possible in the CNS field, scientifically, therapeutically, and from a regulatory perspective.

In our Ze 117-research, we are shifting the paradigm: from treating depression to potentially preventing it in high-stress individuals. Similarly, in the field of menopause, we view symptoms through a metabolic lens. Our Cimicifuga extract Ze 450 has shown promising effects on visceral

fat development, independent of hormonal status, as demonstrated in recent studies conducted at the Philipps University of Marburg and at the German Sport University in Cologne.

**What role do you envision for Max Zeller in this growing market, both in Switzerland and internationally?**

We aim to be a global standard-bearer for clinically proven plant-based medicines. In Switzerland, we have already succeeded in moving from a niche provider to a standard of care across key indications such as menopause, PMS, and sleep disorders. Our strategy is to replicate this success internationally, with partners who share our values and long-term vision.

At the same time, we are expanding our portfolio beyond registered phytopharmaceuticals with the launch of the Zeller Plus line of evidence-based botanical food supplements. This strategic addition allows us to address the growing demand for preventive health solutions and self-empowered wellbeing, while maintaining our uncompromising focus on scientific credibility, product quality, and plant-based efficacy. Together, our medicinal products and our new supplement line form a coherent, complementary portfolio that reflects both the evolution of phytotherapy and the needs of today's health-conscious consumers.

**Could you provide an update on your current portfolio strategy?**

Our key focus areas remain CNS, gynaecology, and allergy. The CNS portfolio has expanded, particularly due to increased demand during and after the pandemic. Gynaecology continues to be a strong pillar, especially through the sustained success of our Cimicifuga and Agnus products.

One of the most exciting growth drivers is our science-based development of new indications and treatment paradigms, as demonstrated by St. John's Wort extract Ze 117 in the CNS field and Cimicifuga extract Ze 450 in the metabolic dimension of menopause. Beyond that, we are actively working on the development of new phytopharmaceuticals that align thematically with our existing indications, products that are intended to strengthen and deepen our therapeutic portfolio.

As always, this is a long-term endeavour. After extensive research and development phases, these innovations must undergo rigorous regulatory procedures before reaching the market. However, we believe this investment of time and resources is essential to ensure the clinical relevance, safety, and regulatory acceptance of our future phytomedicines. Importantly, the perception of

phytopharmaceuticals has shifted significantly among healthcare professionals. Whereas physicians were once surprised to see clinical data supporting herbal medicines, today they expect it, reinforcing our strategy to maintain a focused portfolio and invest deeply in the scientific validation of each product we bring forward.

### **How is Max Zeller contributing to educate and raise awareness around phytotherapy?**

In Switzerland, we prioritize scientific symposia, congresses, and trade shows to share the latest insights into our products and research. One of the most effective ways to convert sceptics is to invite them to our headquarters in Romanshorn. Health professionals who visit us are often genuinely surprised by the depth of our scientific expertise, the rigor of our quality standards, and the level of innovation behind our phytopharmaceuticals.

We also place great importance on transparency and scientific communication. Our research and development results are regularly published in peer-reviewed journals, and our scientists are active on the international stage, giving lectures at leading conferences and congresses to provide insight into our latest findings and development strategies.

Unfortunately, academic training in phytotherapy and pharmacognosy is in decline, even in pharmaceutical curricula. This makes our educational commitment even more vital: not only to support healthcare professionals in clinical practice, but also to inspire a new generation of experts to engage with the immense potential of medicinal plants.

### **How are you integrating sustainability into your operations?**

Our response is the “seed to patient” approach. We manage the entire value chain from the genetic selection of plants to the finished product, ensuring quality, traceability, and sustainability at every step. Our subsidiary VitaPlant in Kenya cultivates more than 200 hectares of medicinal plants under controlled, GACP-compliant conditions. Additionally, we maintain a worldwide network of cultivation partnerships across various differing climatic regions to support biodiversity and resilience.

A unique aspect of our work is that we rely on renewable, plant-based active substances, a naturally sustainable foundation. These regrowable resources form the core of our phytotherapeutic approach and fundamentally distinguish us from chemically synthesized drugs

that often depend on limited or energy-intensive raw materials.

But sustainability at Zeller goes beyond just ingredients. We are engaged in long-term, continuous programmes to reduce our carbon footprint. These include expanding photovoltaic energy generation, using Lake Constance water for efficient heating and cooling, and investing in energy-efficient building renovations at our headquarters and production sites. Through these combined efforts, we are actively working to lower our carbon footprint and align our operations with the highest environmental standards, today and for the future.

### **As CEO, what's your approach to team building?**

One of the most rewarding strategies has been to invest early and boldly in high-potential professionals, mentoring them closely and giving them room to grow. This approach has not only yielded excellent results, but has also fostered a loyal, high-performing team culture. I also strongly believe in the power of team heterogeneity. Diverse perspectives and backgrounds consistently lead to more thoughtful and innovative solutions.

I can speak from personal experience: I owe my own career at Zeller to the trust placed in me by the owning family and my predecessor, who gave me the opportunity to take on responsibility early and supported me along the way. That confidence and long-term investment profoundly shaped my professional journey within the company.

The fact that I am only the sixth CEO in Zeller's 160-year history is a powerful testament to how well this principle works: not just in theory, but in practice, continuity, and across generations.

### **What leadership insights have shaped your journey?**

I would reverse the question: my journey has shaped my leadership style. Nobody starts out as a perfect leader; your experiences, mistakes, and reflections are what refine you over time. One key insight is that leadership is a craft, not an inherent trait. It evolves, and it must remain authentic.

For me, leadership is about both head and heart. Finding the individually right approach for each team member and focusing consistently on their strengths rather than their deficits is a fundamental part of my leadership philosophy. It requires empathy, attentiveness, and a genuine interest in the potential of others.

A piece of advice my predecessor gave me has stayed with me: “If you want a good boss, you have to lead him well.” That insight reminds me daily that good leadership also means being open to the advice, concerns, and contributions of your team. True authority is not about having all the answers, it’s about creating an environment where constructive dialogue and mutual growth are not only possible but expected.

**Looking ahead, what are your strategic priorities for Max Zeller in the coming years?**

Our priority is to stay the course with our evidence-based strategy. In Switzerland, we have proven that phytopharmaceuticals can become standard of care, both in self-medication and in prescription medicine. This success gives us the confidence to expand our approach internationally, especially as global trends continue to shift in favour of natural, sustainable, and patient-centred healthcare solutions.

Looking ahead, our ambition is to ensure that Zeller continues to play a leading role in shaping the future of phytotherapy for decades to come. We are convinced that the therapeutic potential of plants is far from exhausted. As societal expectations evolve, we are witnessing an ever-growing demand for sustainable, natural, effective, and well-tolerated treatments; a demand that aligns perfectly with our core strengths and values.

To meet these needs, we will not only expand our portfolio of approved phytopharmaceuticals in indication areas close to our existing expertise but also place a new strategic focus on the preventive side of health. With the zeller plus line of evidence-based botanical food supplements, we are creating a meaningful bridge between therapy and prevention. Our goal is to support people not only in times of illness, but also in maintaining their health proactively, guided by nature and grounded in science.

This dual focus, treating and preserving health, will continue to define our long-term direction. We also see sustained international growth through trusted partnerships as a critical pillar of our future. As we expand into diverse markets, maintaining scientific rigour and local relevance will remain at the heart of our strategy.

**Do you have a final message to the international healthcare and life science community?**

Phytopharmaceuticals and plant-based supplements are no longer on the fringe; they have become a globally relevant cornerstone of modern healthcare. Around the world, consumers and healthcare professionals are increasingly seeking high-quality, well-documented, and naturally derived solutions that are both effective and well tolerated. And rightly so: the medicinal potential of plants is far from exhausted. Nature still holds the answers to many of our unanswered therapeutic questions; we simply need the courage and commitment to look more closely.

As someone who has dedicated his career to this field, I can say with deep conviction: I have never regretted devoting my heart and mind to the world of phytotherapy. It is a field that combines scientific rigor with a profound respect for nature and offers meaningful, tangible contributions to human health. I would encourage young people, scientists, pharmacists and entrepreneurs to engage with this field, to explore its depth, and to help shape its future. The opportunities are immense, both scientifically and societally.

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