Interview: Alessandra Modenese Kauffmann – General Manager, Swiss Chamber of Commerce in Italy



01.12.2015

Tags: Pharma, Pharmaceuticals, Italy, Switzerland, Alessandra Modenese Kauffmann, Swiss Chamber of Commerce, Interview, Insight, International Markets, M&A, Mergers and Acquisitions

Alessandra Modenese Kauffmann, General Manager of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce, shares her insights into the relationship between Italy and Switzerland, the Chamber's efforts to foster trade between the two countries and the opportunities offered through close collaboration between Swiss and Italian companies.

Alessandra, the chamber has been active in Italy since 1919, can you tell us about the chamber's mission, and what some of its major milestones and achievements have been?

The chamber has been active in Italy for almost a century as you said, and though conditions have changed radically since then, our mission remains the same. We are a non-profit association, pursuing the goal of promoting economic relations between Switzerland and Italy. We are recognized by both Italian and Swiss authorities, and are highly integrated in both countries' systems.

A major milestone, besides the move to Milan, was the first issue of the Chamber's magazine 'La Svizzera industriale e commerciale' which has the aim of promoting Switzerland in Italy. Today it is widely distributed, and we have built on the success of this concept with our Swiss Corner project, which opened in 2012. Our aim is to have a central location where business with Switzerland can

be conducted and where people can come to enjoy themselves at the same time. Today the Swiss corner, which is both an exhibition space as well as a bistro-bar, attracts close to a thousand visitors a day. It is a new and more enjoyable way to attract attention to the close relationship between our countries.

Could you give us an overview of the membership base the Chamber has built up, and the main industries it represents?

CCSI has about four hundred members, consisting mainly of SMEs and professionals, but we also have the big international Swiss companies and many are part of our Advisory Board. The companies we represent include ABB, Alpiq, Axpo, BKW, Credit Suisse, Fastweb, Helvetia, Hupac, Lindt, Nestlè, Novartis, Repower, Roche, SBB Cargo, Schindler, Swiss, Swiss Post, Swiss Re, UBS, Vontobel and Zurich, so most of the large multinationals which call Switzerland home. In terms of industries represented, it is a broad range reaching from pharmaceuticals to food, transportation and finance, and I would not say that it is really possible to name a certain sector as our ‘main industry’.

What services does the chamber offer its four hundred members, and how does it help them form the strategic partnerships they will need in order to succeed in the Italian market?

Whilst the services traditionally offered by the Chamber such as tax, legal, administrative and market research services are still very useful to our members, and new members especially, it is undoubtedly through the opportunities for networking and communication that the chamber creates the most value for them. It is with regards to communication that our magazine ‘La Svizzera’ plays an important role in disseminating relevant information, together with social media.

I would say though that our most important contribution to mutual knowledge is offered by our meeting facilities located in the Centro Svizzero and the Swiss Corner, which in just a few years has become a significant exhibition space in Milan. We hold our own conventions in these facilities, but they are also available for use by international and Swiss companies. It is here that companies can exchange ideas, and gain a better understanding of the characteristics of Italian market from those with more experience in the country. This also helps them get an idea as to the kind of partners they will need to work with in order to succeed here.

Having been at the nexus of Italian-Swiss trade for almost two decades, how has the level of trade evolved over that period, and how do they stand today?

Economic relations between Italy and Switzerland can be defined as excellent, Swiss statistics place Italy as our third-largest trading partner and we are seventh in a ranking of countries investing in Italy. Swiss countries employ almost 80,000 people, while M&A activities are proceeding at a good pace. Recently, the signing of the tax agreement and the progressive dismantling of banking secrecy are contributing to a further improvement of relations.

One threat we see is that the referendum on free movement of people could lead to a renegotiation of the bilateral agreements with the EU as a whole, and this could have a very negative impact, in particular on the Swiss economy. Currently though, the signals are very positive and the trade relationship is strong and deeply rooted on both sides of the border.

What are some of Italy's most attractive features to Swiss investors, which lead them to set up business here through the chamber?

The internal market in Italy is very large, and this is undoubtedly one of the most attractive points for Swiss companies and investors. However, the quality of Italian employees, as well as the technical competence of many Italian companies should not be underestimated. These are often of great interest to international companies looking for innovative solutions and high-technology services, and Italy has a long history of excellence in many technical fields. Italy's economic influence and close ties with many Mediterranean countries is also a plus, and leads many companies to look to Italy as both a hub for specialized production and a natural gateway to new markets. The country has more to give though, and we believe that Italy can only unleash the full potential of both its market and its expertise through effective structural reforms which are needed.

What are some of the main opportunities you see for Swiss companies when investing in Italy, especially for SMEs?

Our chamber has believed for some time that collaboration between Italian and Swiss SMEs holds great opportunities for both parties, especially when that partnership extends to cooperating in third-party countries. We don't just mean in terms of acquisitions, but also in agreements for technical cooperation, penetration of new markets, the establishment of new networks and supply chains. In this Italy and Switzerland possess a complementary skillset, which could be very strong if combined. Working together we could create an Italian-Swiss economic engine which would be very beneficial to our two countries both for our home markets, and efforts to expand globally. Of course forming the necessary contracts and agreements is not easy, and undoubtedly a task for our Chamber will be to identify compatible companies and set up meetings with the aim of

fostering lasting partnerships.

Click here to read more articles and interviews from Italy, and to download the latest free pharma report on the country.

See more interviews