

Interview: Daniela Suter CEO, Gen Suisse, Switzerland



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In the year of Gen Suisse's 25th anniversary, CEO Daniela Suter talks supporting dialogue between scientists and politicians on life sciences in Switzerland, educating the general population, the attractiveness of the Swiss community for scientists, and her goals for the future.

Could you give our international viewers an overview of Gen Suisse and its 25th anniversary?

Gen Suisse was founded in 1991, a time in which there was little information on gene technology and it was often misunderstood. Gen Suisse's goal was to build a connection between key influencers: politicians, scientists, and the public. We therefore publicized an emotional campaign on posters and billboards, using the tagline: "if you had cancer would you be for or against gene technology?" It was used to change public perception and educate the population. In the year of the Genschutz initiative in 1998, scientists rallied and had heated debates with the community and politicians in order to stand up for gene technology. Gen Suisse significantly contributed to the positive result of the election that was rejected by 67 percent of voters. Afterwards Gen Suisse was able to expand its focus from gene technology to life sciences. We started to publish two brochures on gene-dialogue for contemporary topics in life sciences and Science Aktuell for future-oriented topics in life sciences that are distributed to 5000 people in and outside Switzerland, used mostly to educate students. It has interviews with key experts that explain specific life science topics and how gene technology works.

You mentioned how Gen Suisse branched out from gene technology to life sciences. Could you tell us more about the public perception of this field?

With the exception of green gene technology, life sciences and gene technology are well perceived in the public eye in Switzerland. People know that if they are used to produce insulin and useful drugs.

Could you tell us some of the key priorities and achievements you have had since you were the elected CEO of Gen Suisse?

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One of my key priorities was a strategic realignment that also involved a statute change in order to develop Gen Suisse as a trendsetting opinion leader in life sciences. This also involved the recruitment of new board members.

My goal was to involve more politicians on our board. We have a board of 20 members that includes top global scientists, but there were fewer politicians involved. In Switzerland we have elections every four years, and this gave us the opportunity to gain fresh minds. We wanted to have members from all the parties regardless of their views on gene technology. This keeps the discussion strong. We had six new politicians before the elections; we've since lost two as one member was elected to the Federal Council and one was not elected anymore. But the improvement was successful.

I also wanted to gain scientists from hot topic areas. We included a scientist from the bio-informatics side, and another scientist who combined engineering with stem cell research who has made some interesting progress which through force that boosts the ability of cells to become stem cells.

Switzerland's research is ranked second globally in terms of impact, what makes this such an attractive place for research? What do you think it is about Switzerland or the environment that makes research so cutting edge?

Switzerland has a very international environment, and there is also a lot of funding. We always look to engage the best scientists from around the world, and this makes it very attractive. Scientists like to exchange information with each other and that community helps. The countryside helps as well; it is a lovely country to live in. I personally found that the environment was less hierarchical than when I worked in Germany. The reputation of our universities is also high, and in general it is a very attractive place to be.

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Could you tell us about your relationship with some of the universities, and the pharmaceutical industry?

We do not have direct contact with the pharmaceutical industry, but in terms of universities, we have close collaboration due to the scientists on our board. We have cut back recently on some events with universities, mostly because they have organized similar ones on their own. Every two months we publish a researchers' profile and we link one to two Swiss research highlights on our website every week.

One initiative that we started was a roadshow where we went to schools and used Hollywood films to explain the difference between science and fiction. This initiative has been particularly well perceived.

This week you are celebrating 25 years of Gen Suisse, what do you foresee for the next 25 years?

I think it is necessary to inform the public and communicate with politicians. Some future topics of focus include cellular replacement therapies, precision medicine, to microbiomes. On Saturday we will launch a new science brochure on a powerful new gene-editing technology called CRISPR (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats) that will start its first clinical studies at the end of the year. Now people can learn how it works and about the benefits.

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