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The Swiss Circle booth at EXPO REAL

A Window to the World

Promoting Swiss business interests internationally is what the organizers of the Swiss Circle Club have been doing for the last ten years. Each year, their booth offers various Swiss companies the opportunity to present themselves to the world at the two big real estate trade shows EXPO REAL in Munich and MIPIM in Cannes. The concept is very clear: strength through unity.

When Karin Eichenberger and Felix Westermann started the representation of Switzerland at EXPO REAL, their Swiss Circle booth spanned a mere two square meters. Over time, the two initiators of the organization managed to arouse the interest of an increasing number of Swiss companies in the project and gradually expanded their booth. Today, after nine years, Swiss Circle represents fourteen Swiss business development organizations and companies from the real estate

sector on an area of 150 sqm. The concept of a joint appearance of Swiss companies is an integral part of the organization's aim to strengthen the presence of the Swiss business environment at the two most important European real estate trade shows.

Ideal conditions for Swiss companies

The participating partners enjoy many advantages through their membership at Swiss Circle. For a reasonable financial

effort, the exhibitors and booth partners are guaranteed optimal conditions at the fairs, including a perfectly positioned site and valuable support in terms of organization and PR, with the chance to benefit from profound know-how and a useful network. "We offer Swiss real estate companies and related organizations a window to the world," says Roman H. Bolliger from the Marketing Department. The Swiss Circle Club – the latest development – offers a flexible membership

scheme, enabling each club member to choose from three different membership packages. Depending on the membership level, packages contain online marketing tools and various newsletters, as well as the possibility to display objects and pamphlets in the booth. Another very attractive feature of a membership are definitely the reduced exhibition costs, which is a major comfortable synergy effect of the joint booth concept. However, the club members do not only reap benefits at the trade shows, but also get the opportunity to visit briefings before the events. These seminars are held by competent experts of law and real estate marketing and ensure an ideal preparation of the exhibitors for the upcoming fair. The members are closely informed about the current legal framework for foreign investors in Switzerland, so they will be able to deal with potential clients in a competent manner. Other topics include the use of possible marketing tools and efficient campaigns to attract a high number of visitors and, thus, contacts. Finally, specific details about the organization and presentation of the Swiss Circle booth are discussed. The aim is to raise the chances of actual business deals by increasing the pool of contacts and presenting thorough, up-to-date information on crucial aspects of the business environment in Switzerland.

A changing environment

The opening of the Swiss real estate market makes new demands on involved companies and regional business development organizations. At the beginning of the sixties, the acquisition of property by foreign nationals was effectively prohibited in Switzerland due to a series of laws. Later, the legislation repeatedly changed, but it was not until 2002 that the market considerably opened itself. "Finding the way abroad is difficult," Bolliger explains. "Until a few years ago, there was virtually no market for Swiss real estate at an international level. Consequently, the real estate sector today has only little knowledge about the international market. Particularly as regards marketing, Swiss organizations show an immense lack of experience, know-how and strategic tools compared to their foreign colleagues. Even in the domestic market, marketing has never been a big deal until today. We seri-

ously need to catch up in this field. Now, Lex Koller is due to be abolished, meaning that international investors will be able to easily acquire Swiss property in the near future, but only a few companies and organizations have seriously dealt with this changing environment to this day."

Given the new situation on the market, real estate companies and regional business development organizations are equally facing the need to establish contacts with foreign investors and firms. For this purpose, international real estate trade shows are increasingly appreciated as a major opportunity for business and many international firms have realized the importance of such events, as the rising growth rates of MIPIM and EXPO REAL document. Andreas Hämmerli, director of D4 Business Center and booth partner of Swiss Circle, confirms that "The EXPO REAL in Munich has proven to be an international platform for the property market, related services and business sites. Particularly the German market," he continues, "which is of utmost importance for Switzerland, is entirely present. In the course of our constant search for international clients, the regular participation at the Swiss Circle booth is a fixed date on our agenda every year."

Expressing swissness

"Together we are stronger," the slogan of Swiss Circle goes. The Swiss booth offers the booth partners a perfect presentation within a modern surrounding on a decent 150 sqm. The design of the construction is attractive and eye-catching, expressing unity through a homogenous setting with thoughtfully chosen, pleasant colors and an intelligent placement of the exhibitors. The concept of a joint appearance is intended to reinforce the visitor's perception of each individual exhibitor in an overall Swiss context and to link the products and services to the feeling of "swissness." And what does swissness stand for? "Swissness expresses all the associations that people have with Switzerland," Bolliger explains. "The design of our joint booth creates an atmosphere which suggests typical Swiss values, such as security, excellence, monetary stability, high-quality real estate with low risk, reliability and solidity, for example." To enhance the ambience, there is also a convenient lounge

and a well equipped bar where visitors and exhibitors can linger for a while. "Exhibitors especially appreciate the synergetic effects that result from a joint booth," Felix Westermann mentions. "Visitors stay longer to get a better insight into the range of offers in Switzerland, and they enjoy the coherent ambience. Our long-term goal is to represent the entire market environment including sites, banking institutes, insurance companies, property funds and so forth."

Potential for growth

Despite the success of Swiss Circle, there is no denying that in a general comparison at the trade shows, the booth has a rather moderate size. Small countries like Luxembourg have a larger representation than Switzerland, as does the city of London. Partly, this is due to the fact that certain Swiss regions and institutions run their own booths separately. But many important players, such as the Swiss Federation, do not participate in the EXPO REAL at all. "We cannot talk about an overall representation of Switzerland yet," Karin Eichenberger says. "At the MIPIM, many people were surprised and asked why important regions were not represented at the Swiss booth. Also, there is a growing demand for financial institutions." Westermann traces these circumstances back to a misperception of the fairs in Switzerland. "More than just displaying something," he suggests, "trade shows are suitable venues to communicate with potential investors. Their importance is often underestimated."

"Fact is," Roman Bolliger points out, "Swiss real estate companies and location promoters need to understand that constant marketing throughout the year is required in order to maintain a high quality of international contacts." He suggests that companies and organizations would be well advised to pool together their marketing budgets and participate in the joint Swiss representation, so they achieve a more distinctive, striking appearance in the international real estate market. "The Swiss booth still possesses much potential for growth," Bolliger states, "but we are on the right path." ■

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