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The Wonderful Swiss Touch

by C. Naseer Ahmad

Famous Swiss chocolate brands like Toblerone and Lindt are hard to miss because modern consumers will find them at checkout counters, airport gift shops and so many places. Likewise Swiss cheese products adorn the grocery store shelves in the United States. While many people might be familiar with some Swiss products they might not have a good understanding about what Switzerland is about in the modern world. This is because a few products or nuggets of information cannot really tell the whole story about a country. For example, those consuming Jack Daniels Whisky overseas might be familiar with the taste of a beverage originating from a southern state Tennessee but their understanding about America would be incomplete.

To meet the challenging task of presenting the national story or message in a cohesive manner, the Swiss Embassy in the United States has come up with a brilliant way to share the country’s message.
via the Swiss Touch. It is an information dissemination campaign that communicates the message in a beautiful way covering a host of topics ranging from drones, 3D printing, performing arts, sports to cyber security. This effort is “at the heart of the public diplomacy” in US, says Sarah Shafik, Swiss Touch, Project Manager.

On May 3, 2019, a Swiss Touch campaign event titled “Swiss Touch in Aerial Futures” was held at the home of Switzerland’s Ambassador to the United States. The discussion in this event focused on the drone technology. This event brought together leaders and pioneers in drone technology and its adaptation. Each speaker had something interesting to share and their input validated the key point that Switzerland has in fact, through the policies and business climate, become the home of the drones.

There were a number of takeaways from the discussion on drones and aerial futures. The first point is that the world has seen more than a century of aviation with ever more powerful planes taking increasingly large numbers of people with longer non-stop flights to the far corners of the earth. The second point is that approximately a half century has passed since humans set foot on the Moon. The third point is that many people might not know that Switzerland—the tiny alpine country has been making increasingly important contributions to aviation as well as space exploration.

The speakers and their views helped those with familial, business or intellectual connections to Switzerland cement their attachment to the Alpine country, while also getting educated about the drone technology—its challenges as well as opportunities. For instance, one learned that drones in Switzerland have been used to deliver critical and life-saving things such as blood for patients in need.

1 Christian Simm, Chief Executive Officer, swissnex Boston/New York; Lisa Ellman, Co-Founder, Commercial Drone Alliance; David Hose, Chief Executive Officer, AirMap; Reinaldo Negron, Head of UTM, Wing; Andreas Raptopoulos, Chief Executive Officer Matternet; Klaus Meier, Chief Information Officer, Skyguide; Francine Zimmermann, Head of Strategy, Policy & International Affairs, Federal Office of Civil Aviation of Switzerland; Dr. John Langford, Chief Executive Officer, Aurora Flight Sciences.
Swiss Touch at Matterhorn—Climate Change discussion in Zermatt, Switzerland.

To familiarize the audience with the Swiss Touch campaign, during the welcoming remarks, at the “Swiss Touch in Aerial Futures” event at his residence Ambassador Martin Dahinden shared some personal anecdotes and mentioned some of the landmark events.

He said that the first event\(^2\) took place around January 2017 in the commanding but frigid heights in famous winter skiing resort Zermatt near the Matterhorn. He mentioned that the discussion at the Swiss Touch Table in Zermatt was about climate change and the effects of this phenomenon on the business or daily lives of people in the area.

As Ambassador Dahinden talked about the Swiss Touch opening event in Zermatt in the context of climate change, it brought back some personal memories. I started my professional career in 1974 with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency with Mobile Sources Enforcement Division. My work involved enforcement of environmental laws, which brought about the unleaded gasoline at the fuel pumps across the United States. I had arrived two years earlier as a foreign student

\(^2\) Swiss Touch Campaign; YouTube link published February 3, 2017 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onaY6FZspDY

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and was very fortunate to have a very kind supervisor named Jim Sakolosky. He and his lovely wife Dixie would often invite me to dinner at their house. At one such dinner, the Sakoloskys told me about skiing in Zermatt. Those remarks by Ambassador Dahinden took me back to the ski slopes in Zermatt, even though I was still sitting in his beautiful residence in Washington. I feel that these remarks might have touched other members in the audience as well.

Ambassador Dahinden then mentioned that in the United States, this campaign started from the iconic surroundings near the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall on a bright sunny day on May 15, 2017. People from different walks of life came up to the Swiss Touch table to converse with H.E. Ambassador Martin Dahinden about whatever question they could think of at the moment. For those people, who might have travelled to Switzerland or might have a family connection, the Lincoln Memorial event would have been evocative.

Using two identical tables known as the Swiss Touch tables as vehicles for discussion, the campaign embodies the “duality of con-
temporary Switzerland as a nation that embodies tradition and a fertile ground for innovation.” This sets the stage for a “neutral ground for free discussion.”

These tables are made of aged wood from the old Hörnlihütte at the foot of the Matterhorn. Skilled Swiss product designers handcrafted these tables of the material from the Swiss ash tree and are sustainable—as defined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.4

Built with quintessential Swiss innovative methods, these tables serve as a medium to both tell the Swiss story as well as having a meaningful and stimulating conversation. These tables can project images and live stream content enabling the wood surface to act as a touch screen thereby encouraging interaction from users both online and offline. Under the banner, “One table, countless ideas,”5 the Swiss Touch tables cover enormous ground.

These tables travel across the United States for events organized by the network of Swiss Diplomats meeting and discussing various topics with experts in different fields. Sometimes these events are hosted by quasi-governmental organizations like SwissNex.

During March through June 2019, in San Francisco the campaign showcases “Swiss Touch Builds a House.”6 This interesting effort provides “a visual journey through research on the digital transformation of architecture and construction”. Through a very informative video, the Swiss Touch tells us how to build a house with “architectural research in the digital age.” Dr. Dillengburger, Chair, Digital Building Technologies, ETH Zurich explained that currently the computer can serve as a drafting tool but “future designers can solve problems we cannot solve problems without computers anymore.” Mary Ellen Johnson, Head of Exhibtions, SwissNex Boston tells us that the “de-fab house exhibition recreates the site of construction.” These experts communicate the simple but powerful ideas coming to us through the Swiss Touch table.

4 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300
5 https://www.swisstouchusa.org/one-table
6 How to Build a House: Architectural Research in the Digital Age; YouTube Link published April 1, 2019 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twyMlmLguY4
We live in an era when digitalization is rapidly redefining the world of journalism. Costly print media survival is becoming doubtful when the push technology is distributing breaking news notifications almost instantaneously from mobile phones. To understand their perspective, the Embassy of Switzerland and International Arts and Artists at Hillyer in Washington D.C. welcomed, in March 2019, the co-creators of Immersions for a journey to French-speaking Switzerland, a place that cherishes its traditions while ceaselessly innovating. Through this illuminating exchange, the audience received an understanding about their views and motivations in producing a 180-page biannual printed magazine about Switzerland. Maxime Fayet said that “by introducing those different formats and mixing the different genres, we hope to bring something special into the world of journalism.” Delphine Riand mentioned that “another thing is that there are no advertisements in our magazine. We do not want to break the content by advertising something, but rather have our content flow. It is sort of an uninterrupted journey and story for our readers.”

On December 7, 2018, United States and Switzerland signed a Memorandum of Understanding strengthening their cooperation in the Apprenticeship field in the USA. As part of the Swiss Touch campaign, the Consulate General of Switzerland in New York City stated that “Switzerland’s Vocational Education and Training System ensures a sustainable and skilled talent pool, and also allows both companies and workers to flourish.” Earlier in the same year on June 6, 2018, sitting at the Swiss Touch table, René Steiner, CEO Bühler North America explained how his company is implementing this program. Matt Schweizer, a Bühler employee was drawn to this program with the idea of “earn while you learn” and the “easy transition from the classroom to the jobsite.” Virginia Pearson learned about the apprenticeship program from a friend and so she applied for a position. The beauty of the apprenticeship programs is that it allows the students to further their education or even change their occupational fields, when desirable or appropriate.

7 https://medium.com/@SwitzerlandUSA/interview-with-the-cocreators-of-immersions-255001ef65ab
8 https://www.facebook.com/swissconsulatenewyork/videos/1180668308740620/
Interview with Chef Daniel Humm at Stable DC.

Courtesy: Embassy of Switzerland.

On October 24, 2018, the Consulate General of Switzerland in Atlanta held an interesting Swiss Touch event on “Building sustainable cities” at the Center for Civil and Human Rights. A distinguished panel of experts including Dr. Tina K. Reuter, Ciannat Howett, Nadine Allal, and Reese McCranie shared their views—seated around the Swiss Touch table—on building sustainable cities that address social justice, economic opportunities, and other important goals outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

A conversation held on September 12, 2018, under the Swiss Touch campaign that gastronomes would love to know about was the one with Chef Daniel Humm, who spoke about his passion and his four fundamentals for creating a dish:

“Number one is the dish has to be delicious. And that sounds very obvious, but it’s not always that obvious. Secondly, it has to be beautiful. For me, beautiful is minimal. It’s also effortless, not forced. Number three, it has to be cre-

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9 https://www.facebook.com/SwissConsulateAtlanta/videos/2390519844298467/

10 Chef Humm is the Chef of the New York City restaurant called “Eleven Madison Park,” which rated the best restaurant in the world in that year.
ative. Every dish has to add something to the conversation. It could be an element of surprise; it could be a new flavor combination; it could be a new technique, but something that’s not been done before. And then, number four, is it needs to have intention. Every dish needs to have a story.”

And, through Swiss culinary history and with people like Chef Humm, the Swiss Touch campaign tells a wonderful story about food.

Quite different from the frigid heights near the Matterhorn is the Ashokan Reservoir, elevation 585 feet above sea level, New York State. Ambassador André Schaller, Swiss Consul General New York invited experts for an important discussion on sustainable water management. Seated at the Swiss Touch table were Paul Rush, Deputy Commissioner of New York City’s Bureau of Water Supply and Kristopher McNeill, Professor of Environmental Chemistry at ETH Zurich at Ashokan Reservoir in Upstate New York. Oliver Haugen from Swiss-


Swiss Touch presents: Sustainable Water Management in Switzerland and the U.S.; YouTube link published August 21, 2017 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ivT3InBx80
nex New York Outpost moderated the discussion which was looking into the future. Innovative, multifaceted projects which lower the level of pathogens were among the topics of discussion.

"Keeping up with Digital Information," a unique event on June 16, 2017, at the National Archives in Washington addressed the “challenge of storing, preserving, and securing mountains of record - both digital and physical.” Emphasizing the magnitude of the work involved, Archivist of the United States, David S. Ferriero mentioned that “our records start with the Oath of Allegiance signed by George Washington at Valley Forge . . . and go all the way to the tweets being created in the White House.” For this fascinating discussion the Swiss Touch table had a panel of four experts on data retention and cyber security. Each expert presented some food for thought. For instance, “how do you keep digital information safe and secure?”

13 Swiss Touch at The U.S. National Archives; YouTube link published August 3, 2017 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcB8e9Bc1yU
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sador Dahinden asked “how to collect, how to preserve and how to categorize all this information to make it useful for future generations?”

Swiss Touch table at the National Building Museum, Washington DC

To explore ideas on how to build smart communities in future, on May 17, 2017, the Swiss Touch campaign brought together experts from ETH Zurich, DC Office of Planning and the National Planning Commission at the iconic National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

To discuss Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and future of PVE, Ambassador André Schaller, Consul General of Switzerland in New York, set the stage for a conversation moderated by Karen Greenberg, Director of the Center on National Security at Fordham Law School. The panelists included Rebecca Weiner, Assistant Commissioner for Intelligence Analysis, NYPD; André Duvillard, Delegate of the Confederation and the Cantons to the Swiss Security Network; Khalid Koser, Executive Director of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, GCERF; and Eric Rosand, Director of the Prevention Project: Organizing Against Violent Extremism. A key take away from this discussion is that law enforcement is only one part of
the solution because an equally important part is community engagement and education for preventing violent extremism.

Assisting in the Swiss Touch campaign effort are “Swiss Ambassadors,” such as famous tennis players like Stan Wawrinka and Belinda Bencic as well as experts in many specific fields—such as Christophe Guberan, Industrial Designer and Developer of 3D printing technology; Amanda Mascarelli, Science Journalist, Managing Editor, SAPIENS; and Kerstin Vignarr, UN Institute of Disarmament Research and Eva Galperin, Director Cybersecurity at the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

A wide range of ideas have been explored and discussed at the Swiss Touch events throughout the United States. For instance, the Swiss Touch joined the Center for Civil and Human Rights along with the Swiss Consulate General and the UN to discuss the idea of building sustainable cities in Atlanta. “Empowering Young Voices in Foreign Policy” in New York City brought together key stakeholders to discuss how to inspire the next generation. “Humanitarian Protection in the Digital Age” in San Francisco and “Innovation and Humanitarian Aid” in New York City were great events for discussing topics that are most relevant today.

Through these series of events centered on the Swiss Touch table, the information provided is timely, useful, and is often critical. This is truly a wonderful way to reintroduce Switzerland; a country that ranks high in so many categories from top ranked universities to the happiness index of its citizens, not to mention the list of Nobel Prize winners and technical innovation. The leaders of the country recognize the lack of natural resources and coming devastating effects of climate change. And, the Swiss diplomatic team in the United States has proved to be trailblazers with the wonderful Swiss Touch campaign.

It is truly a daunting task to cover all the wonderful ideas highlighted by the Swiss Touch campaign. Many of these ideas have real impact on the lives of many people and often they strengthen bilateral

14 The concept of sustainable cities follows the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
ties between United States and Switzerland. For instance, the apprenticeship program under the auspices of Bühler North America opens the doors for economic opportunities and professional advancement for youth in America. Likewise, the sustainable water management discussed around Ashokan Reservoir in Upstate New York helps ensure clean water to the residents of the area. The innovations in the usage of drones in the efficient and timely delivery of blood or human organs will play a key role in saving lives.

In all the topics discussed through the Swiss Touch campaign, one will notice a history of cooperation between the sister republics—the United States and Switzerland. A little know fact is discovered by reading the remarks by H.E. Ambassador Dahinden at the American Swiss Foundation 74th Annual Gala Dinner when he described his personal memories:

... We meticulously observed how the two astronauts put the American flag on the moon. That picture has remained iconic to the present day and has often been used in popular culture. Decades later during a lunch, the director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., told me something I certainly was not aware of in 1969. She asked me whether I knew that there was a Swiss flag on the moon even before the stars and stripes. At first I thought she was kidding. But she wasn’t. The first item the astronauts unfolded on the moon was the solar wind panel, which was produced in Switzerland—the only foreign experiment on the Apollo 11 mission. The solar wind panel had a little Swiss flag. . . .

These memories epitomize the wonderful Swiss Touch.

~ C. Naseer Ahmad, Oakton, Virginia

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https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol55/iss2/3