

# Switzerland as a Brand

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What signifies Switzerland as a brand? Two very distinctive faces of Switzerland coexist alongside each other, attracting not only tourists but consumers of everything Switzerland has to offer.

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Ben Vautier, a French artist with Swiss roots, created a daring motto for the official Swiss Pavilion at the 1992 world's fair, Seville Expo '92: "La Suisse n'existe pas" (Switzerland does not exist). With his provocative comment, Vautier alluded to the scornful doubts which have been raised about the existence of Switzerland for one and a half centuries by questioning the concept of a state as a nation and as a homogeneous cultural space. His statement also points at the country's perception of itself as a "nation by will" as well as at its image as an "exception" amongst the other European states. Even if Switzerland does not exist as a unified nation, it certainly exists as a picture in people's minds. The questions of how Switzerland is perceived as a brand by others and how it presents and sells its brand are discussed in the following paragraphs:

## Three Brand Characteristics

The first remarkable element of Switzerland's unique branding is its reference to classical antiquity. Its official Latin name, Confoederatio Helvetica (i.e. 'Swiss Confederation', hence its abbreviation CH), which was admittedly coined as late as 1848, defines Switzerland as a federal republic (consisting of 26 cantons, with Berne as the seat of the federal authorities). A country whose name is associated with the classical period must without a doubt also distinguish itself with other elements of classical culture: a world-class education system, a multicultural and multilingual environment (Switzerland has three main cultures and four official languages), and a touch of sophistication.

Another element of Switzerland as a brand is its relationship with its obvious affluence. It is one of the world's richest countries and reports the highest wealth-per-adult ratio in the world. However, Switzerland does not evoke

the nouveaux-riche luxury of Monte Carlo or Dubai. Due to the down-to-earth mentality of the Swiss people, and to some degree also influence of the Reformation brought to various parts of the country by Zwingli, Farel, and Calvin, modesty is valued very highly in Swiss society. As a result, Switzerland stands for unostentatious wealth and understated luxury. The third important brand characteristic is identification. The Swiss have a strong sense of belonging to their country, despite the fact that they are not a nation with a common ethnicity or linguistic identity. Yet the Swiss celebrate their history, their shared values of federalism and direct democracy, and the symbolism of the Alps.

## Modern Image of Switzerland

In 2002, the author of this article conducted a study amongst strategic planners from over 30 countries, analyzing what is loved or hated about Switzerland from a global point of view. It did not come as much of a surprise that Switzerland is loved for representing a cosmopolitan lifestyle, quality, diversity, efficiency, but also effective design, cleanliness everywhere, organization skills, politeness, and a sense of safety. By contrast, what was perceived as negative about Switzerland was the impression that it is expensive, cold, and boring and that its people are too rich, too conservative, and too introverted. If it is true that strong brands tend to polarize, then these results indicate that Switzerland is a strong brand.

The interesting thing about the findings of this survey is the absence of mountains, cows, cheese, chocolate, and the other Swiss clichés. Perhaps the interviewees, due to their profession, were more reflective than the average participant. The result nonetheless underlines the fact that

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Switzerland as a brand has the ability to project a modern perspective on country and people, one that transcends the traditional Swiss world of “Heidi” (a novel about the life of a young girl in her grandfather’s care in the Swiss Alps written in 1880 by Swiss author Johanna Spyri).

The modern view of Switzerland as a brand is strongly related to world-famous companies like Nestlé, Novartis, Credit Suisse, UBS, USM, Rolex, Swatch, as well as Omega and all the other Swiss luxury watch labels. It is most likely also a result of the achievements of some of Switzerland’s distinguished ambassadors in the fields of art, science, and sports: Herzog & de Meuron, for example, the architects who built the Bird’s Nest in Beijing and the Tate Modern Gallery in London, film producer Arthur Cohn, or Kurt Wüthrich, winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2007. Others include athletes like Roger Federer, the Swiss U17 soccer team, which won the World Cup in 2009, or the team of the Alinghi, who successfully defended their title at the 2007 America’s Cup.

### Ambivalent Brand

Switzerland is a Janus-like brand, looking at two worlds. On the one hand, there is the modern reality of financial security, an outstanding infrastructure, and very high quality of life, with the three major Swiss cities of Zurich, Geneva, and Berne ranking among the world’s top ten according to the Quality of Living Survey of Mercer Consulting 2011. On the other hand, there is the Disneyland-like dramatization of a world full of folklore, clichés, and kitsch that seems to come straight from a children’s book. This Switzerland can be observed at every tourist destination of the country: Visitors get the impression that the Swiss are country folk, strong and honorable like William Tell (who may never have existed) or innocent and helpful like our beloved Heidi. They are shown to live in the mountains on picturesque farms wearing traditional national costumes, drinking healthy milk, and eating Swiss cheese. In fact, the Swiss tourism industry supports these idealized notions by emphasizing Switzerland’s unspoiled natural beauty, clean air, healthy livestock, and happy people.

Sometimes, however, the two worlds collide: Visitors arriving at Zurich Airport’s Terminal E take the Skymetro, a subterranean air cushion cableway, to the main building of the airport. Inside, they can read signposts such as “Heidi 30 Sec.” (indicating the time of the ride), watch a short movie (e.g., of the Matterhorn), and listen to the sound of cowbells, mooing cows and bleating goats over the speaker system. This is an outstanding example of a brand paradox. It can be concluded that Switzerland as a brand is positioned somewhere “in the middle of the doughnut”, which means that its image is not very distinct. According to brand theory, a brand with such ambivalent positioning cannot be successful. However, the case of Switzerland seems to be an exception to the rule and absolutely unique – just as unique as Switzerland.

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