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Switzerland's nation branding initiative to foster science and technology, higher education and innovation: A case study

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Type of article: Case Study

Switzerland's Nation Branding Initiative to Foster Science and Technology, Higher Education and Innovation

Abstract

This article presents a case study about Switzerland's initiative to promote its science and technology, higher education and innovation environment. This is accomplished through a worldwide network of science and technology outposts run by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education and Research in cooperation with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. In this article, we specifically discuss the outpost located in Boston. *swissnex* Boston acts as a physical and virtual environment to foster closer ties between Switzerland and the Boston region in various fields of interest to academia, industry, business and society. We present the history and mission of *swissnex* Boston, its role and organizational structure, and a benchmarking analysis of other nations' initiatives. We further discuss the required leadership and performance measurement of *swissnex* Boston and the main challenges it has surmounted in its ten years of operation.

Keywords

Nation Branding, Science and Technology, Higher Education, Innovation

1. Introduction

In an increasingly linked and competitive world, not only companies but also countries are engaged in competition for the limited resources available. As Anhholt (2002) states, “globalization is turning the world into a gigantic supermarket” (p. 234) where countries compete against each other to stimulate their exports and attract the limited pool of tourism, foreign direct investment (FDI) and talents. Governments are turning to marketing and branding techniques to differentiate their countries on the global stage in order to establish a competitive edge over rival countries (Sanches and Sekles, 2008). As competition increases, nations need to develop distinctive brands. This need to be different translates into investments in more than just a logo, symbol or advertising campaign (Mihailovich, 2006). Nevertheless, nation branding is a multi-year process that is complex in nature and highly politicized since it encompasses multiple levels, dimensions and disciplines beyond conventional branding (Johnson, 2008). A positive nation brand can “act as a catalyst for sustainable development and competitive parity” (Favre 2008, p. 242) since it may restore flawed international credibility, increase international political influence and stimulate stronger international partnerships (De Chernatony, 2008; Yan, 2008). As many countries have gained awareness of the importance of managing their brands, they have adopted nation branding projects and initiatives. A few have even enacted laws to promote their brands and establish special organizations charged with coordinating private-public partnerships.

Switzerland, for example, has an organization, Presence Switzerland (www.image-switzerland.ch), that coordinates different public-private entities (e.g., OSEC Business Networks, Swiss Business Hub, *swissnex*) (Pasquier, 2008). Presence Switzerland works with a variety of organizations within the federal administration and with third parties in the field of communication abroad, as well as with Swiss companies. Each of those organizations has specific objectives and distinctive strategies. In the case of *swissnex*, it takes the form of a network of science and technology outposts representing a key component of Switzerland’s strategic policy in promoting its science and technology, higher education, research and innovation.

2. Importance of Science and Technology, Higher Education, and Innovation

The determinants of national competitiveness are many and complex. The attempt to define competitiveness ranges from the early works of Adam Smith that focus on specialization and the division of labor, to neoclassical economists' emphasis on investment in physical capital and infrastructure, as well as in macroeconomic stability, good governance, the rule of law and transparency (Schwab, 2009, p. 4). More recently, competitiveness has also been cited as encompassing technological progress, higher education, and innovation. We briefly discuss these latter ones on how they influence the competitiveness of nations.

Science and Technology. This is about the agility with which a country adopts existing science and technologies to enhance the productivity of its industries and underlying firms. Science and technology has become an important driver of firm and country competitiveness. Specifically, access and usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have critical spillover effects to other industries of a given nation. No matter where the technology has been developed, the key is that firms operating in a country have access to and can use those ICTs. Providing an environment fostering science and technology research and investments into a nation's information and technology infrastructure are crucial for a nation's competitiveness (Porter, 1990).

Higher Education. It is believed that basic education increases the efficiency of workers. People who have received little education can carry out only simple, manual work and find it difficult to adapt to more advanced production processes and techniques (Schwab, 2009, p. 4). Education and training are crucial for economies that want to move up the value chain beyond simple production processes and products (Porter, 1990).

Innovation. Innovation is vital for a nation's competitiveness as it approaches the frontiers of knowledge. Firms from developing countries can improve their productivity by adopting existing ICT. However, for firms from developed countries to improve their productivity, they need to develop innovation that requires a business environment that allows and supports innovative activities (Porter, 1990; Schwab, 2009).

This short discussion has shown that fostering a nation's science and technology, higher education and innovation environment can make a country more competitive on the global stage. The *swissnex* network helps Switzerland to achieve those goals by promoting Switzerland as a

location to attract talents, innovative companies and FDI, moving beyond the promotion of its exports or its tourism.

3. *swissnex* Boston

3.1. History and Mission

swissnex is a network of science and technology outposts run by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) in cooperation with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). *swissnex* currently handles five knowledge outposts: *swissnex* Boston (2000), *swissnex* San Francisco (2003), *swissnex* Singapore (2004), *swissnex* Shanghai (2007) and *swissnex* Bangalore (2009.) The *swissnex* network is a key component of the Swiss strategic policy on the promotion of education, research and innovation set by the Federal Council. Apart from Europe, priority countries for bilateral cooperation include the USA, India, China, Russia and South Africa, given their proven potential for scientific and technological development.

The overall mission of *swissnex* Boston is summarized by its slogan “connecting the dots.” The seven components of this mission are:

- (1) To strengthen Switzerland’s reputation as a center for science, technology and innovation.
- (2) To set up and maintain a dense network of contacts with universities, research institutions, companies and other organizations in the host regions and in Switzerland, as well as to support Swiss scientists in the host regions.
- (3) To structure, strengthen and promote the interests of Switzerland and the presence of Swiss research, technology and know-how in the host regions.
- (4) To support the internationalization efforts of Swiss institutions in the host regions.
- (5) To coordinate the network of partner institutions and researchers to develop a tradition of scientific and technological knowledge exchange.
- (6) To strengthen brand-building and public relations in the host regions, as well as media coverage in Switzerland.
- (7) To help structure, implement and extend bilateral research cooperation programs where such programs exist.

Running each location as public-private partnerships is at the core of the *swissnex* business model. Since 2003, the network has relied on public and private funding (one-third SER, two-

thirds from other sources) for its activities. *swissnex* is now dedicated to expanding the group of sponsors and donors willing to support its services and ventures. Next to *swissnex*, SER maintains and develops a worldwide network of science and technology counselors (STC) sharing the *swissnex* mission: twelve in total working at selected Swiss Embassies.

3.2. Role of *swissnex*

swissnex Boston has been working with other organizations that pursue the interests identified as objectives of nation branding, next to attract tourism and export promotion, to attract FDI and talents.

Attract Tourism. *swissnex* Boston organizes briefings for media experts in the Boston region on the topic of sustainable tourism. It also frequently distributes brochures and other giveaways at public events.

Export promotion. *swissnex* Boston partners successfully with OSEC which helps companies from Switzerland to develop and expand their activities abroad. It also opens its doors to potential partners and clients for Swiss high-tech companies. Its business events raise awareness about the quality of Swiss products and the development of certain competencies in Switzerland (e.g., medtech, nanotech) that are useful for US manufacturers.

Attract Foreign Direct Investments. *swissnex* Boston collaborates with Location Switzerland on strategies and programs to augment the investment flow to Switzerland. In the early 2000s, it established a Swiss Nanotech platform to allow for a better exchange among experts and more visibility in this field. This initial effort has led to a permanent organization representing the interests of Swiss Nanotech organizations at various sites worldwide.

Attract Talents: *swissnex* Boston helps highly qualified people find internships or working opportunities in Switzerland. It puts together events to draw attention to opportunities in science and technology and offers individual support to the students and young professionals contemplating a move to Switzerland.

In short, by focusing on its well-defined interests in science and technology, higher education and innovation, *swissnex* Boston reinforces the missions and activities of various groups actively promoting certain aspects of Switzerland's nation branding. The brand "Switzerland" is implicit in everything the organization does and how it presents itself (e.g., logos, invitations, workspace). Yet the team does not present Switzerland as a unique element,

instead highlighting some specific aspects of the nation brand. This is in line with best practice, since creating and communicating a single image and message to different stakeholders or target audiences is a difficult undertaking (Gilmore, 2002). Although some aspects of a country can appeal to diverse stakeholders, others appeal only to specific audiences and need to be chosen carefully. Trying to be one thing to all audiences or all things to one audience might work, but being all things to all audiences renders the message meaningless. Moreover, an image that appeals to one culture or situation may not have the same effect in another (Fan, 2006).

3.3. Organization of *swissnex*

swissnex Boston connects the best of many worlds by bridging the knowledge, energy and expertise in science and technology, higher education and innovation between Switzerland and the Boston region. Vital financial support is provided by partners and sponsors sharing the commitment to “connecting the dots.” As a public-private organization, *swissnex* Boston has numerous stakeholders and partners. Stakeholders define the reach of the activities, while partners contribute to and benefit from what *swissnex* Boston does.

3.3.1. Stakeholders

Given that *swissnex* Boston serves as a collaboration platform, it has a wide range of stakeholders. For example, as a public organization, *swissnex* needs to maintain good relationships and visibility within some of the networks around the government, such as the media, politicians and lobbying groups. In addition, the organization needs to be in sync with the needs and strategies of companies that have a strong R&D focus, such as pharma and high-tech manufacturers. *swissnex* is part of a complex system of relationships among many organizations in science and technology and higher education, it has to operate carefully at the junction of many different disciplines, modes of thinking and fields of activities.

Swissnex network. *swissnex* Boston works closely with its “sister” organization in the US *swissnex* San Francisco, with which it maintains contacts and organizes frequent common projects.

Embassy and Consulates. *swissnex* Boston also interacts frequently with the Science Counselor at the Embassy and other Consulates across the USA. It can provide ideas or contacts

to reinforce some other projects in the USA, or the various organizations can offer several locations to Swiss guests visiting the USA for events or programs.

Presence Switzerland. Part of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs is responsible for Switzerland's image abroad. It implements the Confederation's strategy on Switzerland's global communication and imaging. In doing so, it strengthens and coordinates the presence of Switzerland abroad, conveying an authentic and vibrant image. The main goals of Presence Switzerland are to establish a network of contacts for future decision-makers, increase knowledge about Switzerland, and enhance the country's position as a competence center.

OSEC Swiss Business Hub USA. This is the Trade Commission of Switzerland to the USA: a "one-stop shop" business solutions agency for small and medium-sized companies, matching Swiss talent, innovation and quality with American marketing. Swiss Business Hub USA has seven offices around the US (Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Washington) staffed with a team of trade professionals. It offers in-depth knowledge of the American market and provides a global network of trade professionals through OSEC Business Network Switzerland. This helps companies to make informed decisions and minimize business risk in the American marketplace. Several events each year are organized by *swissnex* Boston in partnership with the Swiss Business Hub, such as a recent breakfast discussion on "Transatlantic Ventures."

3.3.2. Partners

Partners are essential to *swissnex* Boston's existence. They provide the content and financial resources needed for projects, which include:

Universities and science community. Universities such as ETH, EPFL and University of Zurich have signed collaborative agreements with *swissnex* Boston. *Swissnex* agrees to represent these universities in the Boston region and work on specific requests such as alumni management, promotion of postgraduate studies, branding and media relations. For organizations such as SNSF, CTI and OPET, *swissnex* Boston develops an individual strategy to support their members (startups, young talents and universities of applied sciences).

Other community (society & business). Several companies, associations and individuals collaborate with *swissnex* Boston on specific projects such as a workshops, study tours and

presentations. The following figure illustrates the interconnected structure of the *swissnex* Boston stakeholder and partner network.

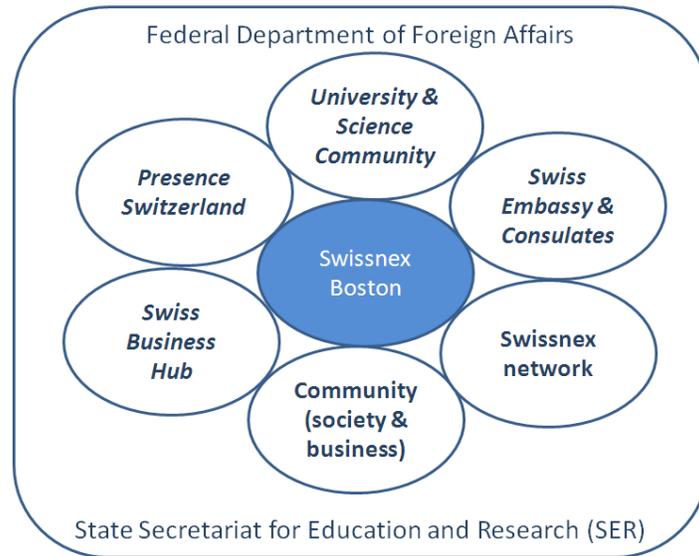


Figure 1: *swissnex* Boston network

3.4. Benchmarking

How does *swissnex* Boston compare to other foreign representations in the Boston region? The following table summarizes and compares other nation’s representation in the Boston region towards fostering science and technology, higher education or innovation.

Country	Third-party Financing	Staff in science	Staff in high tech industries	Open location	Interest in students	Office space for entrepreneurs	Career diplomat as head
France	No	3	2	No	No	No	Yes
UK	No	3	20+	Yes	No	No	Yes
Norway	Yes	0	4	No	No	Yes	No
Korea	No	1	1	No	N/A	No	Yes
Japan	No	1	1	No	N/A	No	Yes
Switzerland	Yes	7	1	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Table 1: Benchmark Analysis

France has a traditional Consulate with a three-person science and technology team. One of these persons works on a specific project (Young Entrepreneurs' Initiative) from a small office in Kendall Square (in close proximity to MIT and the biotech cluster). The *UK* has a good number of specialists in high-tech business through its Trade and Investment Team (20-plus). However, there are only three persons in its science team, and it does not actively work with students. *Norway* has an innovation center focusing mostly on helping startups get into the US market. *Korea* has recently added a science counselor (recruited locally) to its team in Boston and has plans for future programs in science and technology. In addition to one person at the Consulate, *Japan* also has a person representing JETRO (its trade and investment group). There are no specific efforts to target students.

3.5. Leadership and Performance

The success of *swissnex* Boston was enabled among others by the overall support of the Swiss State Secretariat for Education and Research and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, private donors such as Lombard Odier Darier Hentsch as well as strong leadership.

Initially in 1999, Lombard Odier Darier Hentsch made a donation to the Swiss government to purchase the current *swissnex* building in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since its inception, this truly public-private partnership has become a role model in countries around the world. In its 10 years of operation, more than 50 sponsors, donors and partners have put their trust in *swissnex* and contributed close to CHF 5 million with CHF 700,000 in 2005 alone, with the Swiss government providing approximately the same amount. Another key element in the success of *swissnex* Boston was the strong leadership in the first two years by Dr. Xavier Comtesse, then later by Christoph von Arb from 2002 to 2007, and since 2008 by Pascal Marmier.

The following table summarizes the key resources in terms of full-time equivalent (FTE) and public-private budget needed to run *swissnex* Boston. It also quantifies the impact of *swissnex* Boston's public events, projects and total overall exposure.

Year	Resources (Input)			Impact (Outcome)		
	FTE plus (Interns)	Budget in mio CHF	Third-Party Contribution	# Public Events*	Guests at <i>swissnex</i> <i>events</i>	Annual Report (pages)
2000	2	n/a	n/a	25	n/a	n/a
2001	3	n/a	n/a	35	n/a	n/a
2002	6	1.25	37%	50	3,000	12
2003	6	1.10	41%	60	4,500	21
2004	7	1.74	37%	50	5,000	25
2005	7	1.81	37%	60	5,600	25
2006	8	1.89	45%	60	6,200	32
2007	8	2.45	57%	70	7,000	30
2008	8	2.41	57%	60	7,000	42

* presentations, video-conferences, panel discussions, networking events, seminars, workshops and visits of high-level delegations.

Table 2: Resources and Impact

These public events covered copious pertinent topics. *swissnex* Boston hosted scientific presentations on functional genomics, and seminars on science policy matters such as global branding mechanisms for academic institutions. There were community and cultural functions, too, such as rendering the Charles River swimmable again, art or science exhibits (including three at Logan Airport) and film screenings. Yet the one thing these very different events had in common was a *Swiss* component. Whether speaker, company, topic, expertise or view, each event had a distinct Swiss flavor, thus bringing the rich, diverse and creative features of Switzerland to the forefront. Owing in part to events like these, *swissnex* Boston maintains a noteworthy presence in the media. Dozens of articles have appeared in daily newspapers, magazines and television among others.

3.6. Main Challenges

Since its creation in 2000, *swissnex* Boston has faced several challenges, such as establishing credibility, measuring success, building a public-private organization, maintaining a thriving transatlantic community, and marketing and branding the organization.

Establish credibility. One of the major challenges was to gain the attention, confidence and respect of the main players in Boston's science and technology and higher educational field. After all, collaborative activities were already numerous between Switzerland and the Boston region before *swissnex* was established, especially within academic circles. The organization had to define a compelling niche and value proposition to persuade its partners. In this regard, *swissnex* had to figure out the best way to work with dissimilar stakeholders - academia, industry, business and society - and to establish productive relationships with institutes such as CTI (Innovation Promotion Agency). Consequently, as with many other "startups," *swissnex* Boston continually revises its business plan and modus operandi over the years.

Measuring success. A central question from the start was how success can be measured. Is it possible to put a dollar figure to such an initiative? Would measuring third-party contributions be a good proxy to decide on future strategies? Working closely with its headquarters and other *swissnex* offices, *swissnex* Boston was able to institute a series of metrics that reliably track the output and impact of what it does. The various indicators assess in detail the two main objectives asked of *swissnex* Boston:

1. Promotion: To measure *swissnex* Boston's impact, it closely monitors the number of visitors, guests, web visits and people on its mailing list. The team also collects feedback from the participants in its events to assess how the organization is perceived and whether its goal of broadcasting a specific message is reached.
2. Collaboration: To ensure that it efficiently connects the dots, *swissnex* Boston reports on the number of official delegations that it welcomes, the results of its "matchmaking activities," and the number and size of service agreements that it concludes with universities and other organizations supporting science and technology.

This measurement system is still a work in progress, and future models will also try to capture the economic impact of helping entrepreneurs or the value of bringing young talents into the country.

Build a “hybrid” organization. The public-private partnership model presented numerous hurdles. From running human resources and finance functions to building the right level of expertise within the team, the founders realized that there was no blueprint for such a unique organization. How does an organization balance complying with administrative rules of a public organization (as required of any government entity) while allowing the flexibility and creativity necessary to develop projects and events of private organization? Communication was another challenge. One of the most important aspects of the work is the personal interaction with participants or visitors and partners. In fact, *swissnex* Boston prefers to use the term “guests” rather than participants or visitors. Internally, significant time was spent finding people who could function in an environment requiring both rigorous project management skills and interpersonal, multi-lingual communication flair.

Building a transatlantic community. Given its focus on two countries, *swissnex* Boston has learned to establish and manage productive relationships across a spectrum of regions and disciplines. Despite the ubiquity of technologies allowing *swissnex* to connect people, the organization realized that there was no substitute to face-to-face and group gatherings to create a sense of community. Without an official representation in Switzerland to promote and organize the Swiss side of its activities, *swissnex* Boston has relied on its Swiss academic partners to spread the word and promote its services back home.

Marketing and branding. Finally there were numerous marketing and branding challenges. How much “Swissness” is enough? For every event, the organization has to decide which brand (and brand attributes) to put forward. Is it Switzerland the country, Switzerland as a tourist destination, Swiss firms, product or services, Swiss people and workers, the Swiss consulate or *swissnex* Boston or a combination? Questions arise as to whether the *swissnex* location and atmosphere adequately conveys the objectives put forward for that event. Since these events typically involve other organizations (such as ThinkSwiss, a US-wide program to promote Swiss science and innovation), *swissnex* Boston has to find ways to include other Swiss partners in the branding and marketing. In most cases, the events were co-branded. Therefore, a fine balance between *swissnex* branding and co-branding must be struck.

3.7. Lessons Learned

Almost 10 years after it started and after organizing about 500 events, *swissnex* Boston is no doubt a success story. Yet it remains and must remain a work in progress. As the organization ponders on the topics of the future in a dynamic environment where change is the only constant, *swissnex* Boston must reinvent itself continuously. The following discussion presents the lessons learned.

Engaging the community. From the start, *swissnex* Boston has operated under an “open-source” model. Technology is evolving too fast for any of us to keep up, so the organization relies on its partners and contacts to frame the issues on which *swissnex* Boston should work and to better understand the hot topics in experts’ circles. *swissnex* thrives on listening to its guests and learning from the community on what would be of interest, which other groups could be partners, and which formats could best be applied for particular events. Events have been designed as two-way conversations. Avoiding the one-sided promotional pitch has allowed *swissnex* Boston to secure high-level participants and to distinguish itself from other foreign representations in the region.

Bridging different communities. What participants appreciate is the mix and quality of people as speakers or guests. While initially it was not part of the strategy, over time *swissnex* Boston attained the reputation of being “bridge builders.” The global quality of the activities already provide an element of openness, but the choice of topics and the way the events target participants of well-defined groups (academic, business, government) to share their perspectives have been key success factors.

Organizational strategies. Bringing together two entirely different systems - an official public government representation and a collaboration private platform - has proved an exemplary strategy. Over the years, the organization has learnt to design processes, hire employees and deliver projects by integrating the corporate culture and main characteristics of the two systems. There is always a tension between these extremities, but it is one that has pushed the boundaries of the model. Indeed, certain arms of the Swiss government are now looking to *swissnex* Boston as a source of ideas for their futures, and other countries are learning from the *swissnex* experience, too. What has proved most beneficial is the ability to think and act fast. At *swissnex*,

the timing from idea to execution is short and straightforward, allowing a large number of projects to be implemented successfully.

Location and environment. The location of *swissnex* Boston in the middle of Cambridge, close to leading universities and businesses, has been a winning point. Perfectly adapted to a region where the population density is high, *swissnex* Boston offers a central meeting and melting point to most of its guests. The building itself has delivered on its promise to facilitate high-level and productive discussions. Various rooms astride the open floor plan allow for all kinds of one-on-one and group interactions. Participants describe the atmosphere - the combination of Swiss service with humbled activities - as one of the main reasons why they like *swissnex* Boston.

Serendipity. As is true for all businesses and most successes, serendipity is key for *swissnex* Boston. The team never knows who will cross the door, what ideas will emerge from an event, and which project might suddenly turn in a totally different direction after meeting a new contact. The focus on networking accentuates that serendipity aspect of the work. However, the key is to identify and act quickly when such opportunities emerge.

4. CONCLUSION

The *swissnex* model is an early attempt at capitalizing on a specific niche in nation branding by fostering science and technology, higher education and innovation. While nations have a long tradition of science diplomacy, the *swissnex* model offers an “open source” approach to establishing connections between a specific country and the regions in which it maintains a knowledge outpost. As the *swissnex* network continues to grow, it is clear that each location will have its own activities, branding, connections, culture and flair, but most will have common characteristics inspired by the list of reflections above. The main reason for *swissnex*'s success thus far is that stakeholders rapidly understood its value, most of them offering the financial resources that were needed. Not only does that help to build new activities, but it also signals the value of what is being produced at *swissnex* outposts around the world. Finally, as it has to deal with the creation of knowledge, success must be evaluated in a broad, unconventional way. In this regard, headquarters for the *swissnex* network refuses to make a formal assessment of its measurement system. Innovation is so multifaceted that numbers are seldom sufficient let alone to measure a causal relationship to illustrate success. Indeed, the emerging “innovation

economy” created by the collaborative output of academia and industry is fueled by intangibles. So the value of the conversations that *swissnex* Boston triggers - conversations that lead to enduring relationships and knowledge transfer, and ultimately to the building of a transatlantic community - cannot be measured in the short term. As with any branding initiatives, the intensity of the efforts needs to be constant, but the results take many years to materialize. After all, innovation is about change, and the leadership behind *swissnex* has made the strategic decision to be flexible and opportunistic.

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