

Face-lift for the Swiss National Tourist Office : renovation or innovation?

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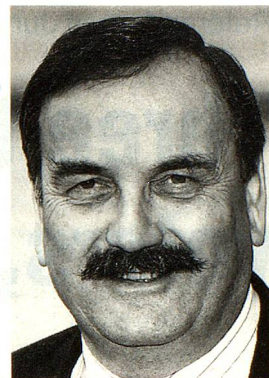
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Paul Reutlinger, the new president of the Swiss National Tourist Office, must try to improve the image of "Switzerland as a product". (Photos: Keystone/zvg)



Face-lift for the Swiss National Tourist Office

Renovation or innovation?

A new name, a new president and a new director are set to push the Swiss National Tourist Office back into the frontline. No light undertaking.

The choice of Paul Reutlinger, Swissair's marketing head, as new president of the Swiss National Tourist Office (SNTO) is probably a signal that something is finally moving in this organisation's creaking structures.

Christian Ziegler

There have been rumours for years. The SNTO's partners, local tourist offices, lost hope ages ago, and each has been going its own way. In present circumstances, the Sfr.44 million budget is enough neither to go on living nor to die. Since the federal subsidy which makes up two-thirds of expenditure is not likely to go up in the foreseeable future, something has to be done.

Effective measures, not tinkering

This will have to be something more dramatic than the touching-up process started by SNTO's management last year: this would have led to some redundancies, but staff costs would have increased by 24% – for low salary posts were cut, while high salary ones rose.

A Hayek study to identify the SNTO's weak points comes up with a bleak picture. Its structure has grown up

without planning and in small steps – many of them backwards. This has led to virtual stagnation. A 13-man management committee and 61 board members administer the 500 associations which adhere to it. Whenever the surgeon's knife has been applied, it has always been where the best yields might be expected: at offices in foreign countries.

The report written to accompany the debate on the partial revision of the SNTO's official status – which is now being pushed through with urgency – states that improved communication is now indispensable. There is talk of "a further improvement in the orientation of activities... towards the new demands of international markets... and taking account of the financial resources available". Tourism is still Switzerland's third biggest export industry, and without it many peripheral areas would be condemned to irrevocable economic decay. Jean-Luc Nordmann, director of the Federal Office for Industry and Labour, who is ultimately responsible for the SNTO, says that the restructuring is coming along nicely.

A new name ...

"Swiss Tourism", the proposed new name for the SNTO, was not found wildly attractive by those involved in the consultation process and will probably have to be changed again.

... and a new director

However, a final decision has now been made on who will head the revamped SNTO. Walter Leu, the present director,

announced his resignation at this year's Annual General Meeting with effect from January 1, 1995, so as to leave the new structures in the hands of "a new team", as he put it. Even before this, the government was apparently looking around for an alternative. At least some people in the tourism branch had been expecting staff changes and would like to see the SNTO headed by an energetic man or woman with direct operational experience.

But in his last speech as president, Jean-Jacques Cevey expressed scepticism of the high expectations which are being voiced about the reorganisation. Account will have to be taken of Switzerland's federal structure and in any case it is not only the SNTO which is fissured but the tourism branch as a whole.

Paul Reutlinger started work on May 5 with the immediate task of improving the system and working out new strategies. Guidelines on how these are to be achieved are contained in the Hayek report. But in Switzerland the process of converting plans into stark reality has often led to shipwreck. Perhaps it will be different this time. ■

"Revue" sold

One result of the SNTO's budgetary problems and restructuring has been the sale of the old-established magazine, "Revue Switzerland", to the Rothus publishing house in Soleure. This wide-ranging travel publication is in its 66th year and will maintain its old function of promoting the interests of Swiss tourism.