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WINTER 2024/2025

"I am dedicated to causes that support the hotel industry, as building greater desirability for hospitality is crucial."

HOSPITALITY
TALK
BY DR CAROLE
ACKERMANN



Creating sanctuary-like spaces

Carole Ackermann interviews Nathalie Seiler-Hayez,
Managing Director Swiss Deluxe Hotels

Nathalie Seiler-Hayez is an emphatic leader and great communicator with more than 20 years of international experience in leading position in luxury hospitality with a focus on strong execution. She stands for the highest ethical standards to drive quality and consistency of return in top multinational hotel groups, for private owners and family-run businesses. All this has led to several prestigious nominations: top independent hotelier of the year by HOTELS Magazine, hotelier of the year by SonntagsZeitung, Best Swiss Hotel 2016–2022 by Bilanz and Best Hotel of the Year by Gault & Millau.

PHOTO: ANOUSHABRAR

Nathalie Seiler-Hayez, do you remember your first holiday in a hotel (or first visit to a hotel)?

In 1950, my father founded the Hotel & Travel Index, which became a leading international guide for hotels. I grew up in this environment and vividly remember our first family trip to New York City, staying at the Carlyle. The service and atmosphere were extraordinary, and it opened my eyes to the importance of creating a sanctuary-like space. The staff's genuine passion to delight guests left a lasting impression on me. I also fondly recall my first solo room at the Dolder Grand in Zurich, where I felt like a princess. The details of that stay remain with me to this day.

You started your career in sales and marketing before you took over executive and general management positions in hotels. Did this experience help you in fast climbing the ladder towards the top?

Starting in sales and marketing helped me to understand where the revenue was coming from: who are your guests, what are their needs and what kind of products and services you should offer to fulfil their needs. It also helped me to build a wonderful international network, which I found essential for my career.

You are a graduate from the hospitality business school in Lausanne. What did you learn for life back then?

EHL is a school of life, where I could build a wonderful network. It gave me the opportunity to develop my soft skills together with the academic part. You have all the tools to face the professional world from your very first job.

After more than 20 years of operative leadership, you accepted the job as managing director of Swiss Deluxe hotels. What motivated you to make this step?

It was time for me to step away from hotel operations and contribute to the luxury hotel industry in a new way. Swiss Deluxe Hotels provided the perfect opportunity.

The organisation showcases the excellence of Swiss luxury hospitality, with a collection of 42 top-tier hotels. We add value and enhance visibility for our members through bespoke events, platforms for exchange and partnerships with luxury brands. In a rapidly evolving society, adapting and refining our models is essential. Our mission is to offer solutions and leverage the power of collective intelligence.

What are the topics and challenges you want to tackle and why?

We face many challenges, but the most significant one, in my opinion, is the lack of desirability in our professions. We are struggling with a serious issue of quality in the workforce. The pandemic has exacerbated this problem. We need to rethink our HR models, which are often far too bureaucratic.

Any more?

Sustainability, innovation and new technologies are also central topics we are focusing on. Luxury hotels must stay attuned to global trends, whether in design, gastronomy or services. This allows them to remain relevant and meet the changing expectations of their clients. To do this, it is essential to be able to take a step back and gain perspective.

Or to collaborate with others? This issue's topic is the Maker Movement, which could lead to shared projects among Swiss Deluxe members. Is this in the making?

Clients are increasingly engaged through workshops in areas like culinary arts, mixology and floral design, providing exclusive and personalised experiences that make them active participants in creating luxury services. Many hotels also offer behind-the-scenes access to the craftsmanship of prestigious brands, such as watchmaking. With the introduction of new technologies like virtual reality and smart, customisable rooms, this trend is poised for significant growth, and our organisation should support its development in our hotels.

You recently accepted different mandates in tourism such as Lausanne Tourism, Vaud Promotion or with the Swiss Tourism Policy Monitoring Group. Why do you engage in these non-profit entities and rather political bodies?

I am dedicated to causes that support the hotel industry, and I believe that engaging with the political sphere is essential. In Switzerland, politics plays a significant role, and having a voice in this arena allows us to drive progress and make meaningful changes.

You mention on your résumé the NYC marathon. Are sports still a big focus in your life or which other topics are currently most interesting for you?

Sports are essential to my well-being, both physically and mentally. I especially love practising it outdoors, in places that resonate with me ... Otherwise, I enjoy travelling, discovering new places, hotels 😊, and also sharing these experiences with the people I love.

The hospitality community is a very male one. Also, in top management women are still rare. Do you see enough female talents interested in a hospitality career and what do you recommend to them?

I see a growing interest among women in pursuing careers in hospitality. My advice is to be confident, seek leadership opportunities early, and build a strong network of mentors and peers. Continuing education and specialised training can also help in advancing in this competitive field. It's crucial to be proactive, take initiative and not shy away from breaking through the glass ceiling.

What do you do when you're on your own?

Time is the new luxury; it is precious. I love spending moments with family or friends, and if I can combine that with a beautiful hike in the mountains, it's even better. I also need time just for myself to recharge, and I often find that through sports. I always have a thirst for learning, and I only wish I had more time to read.

DR CAROLE ACKERMANN

is CEO and co-founder of the company Diamondscull AG, which invests in start-up companies. She is President of EHL Group (founded as Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne), the global reference in hospitality education, a member of the Board of Directors of Allianz Switzerland, BKW, BNP Paribas Suisse, BVZ Holding, and the Swiss Food & Nutrition Valley (SFNV).

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