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From the Front Lines of Transformation at Clinique la Prairie

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Some business transformations are fundamental changes in what a company does and how it does it.

But sometimes, as in the case of the Swiss-based Clinique la Prairie, a business transformation can involve the enormous challenge of taking something you have done for nearly a century in one place and exporting it to the world.

Located in the resort town of Montreux on the shores of breathtaking Lake Léman, Clinique la Prairie has long been one of Europe's most exclusive spas, specializing in a wide variety of medical, aesthetic and wellness programs.

Anyone wanting to experience the hyper-luxury of its medical spa had to travel to the Swiss Alps. Until now.

Clinique la Prairie is in the early stages of an ambitious expansion that will see medical spas and clinics opened all over the world. The company currently has plans to open Clinique La Prairie centers in Madrid as well as several cities in Asia. The company is also considering other destinations with an eye towards spreading the company's innovative products and services globally.

According to CEO Simone Gibertoni, Clinique la Prairie's global expansion is less about replicating medical and wellness services in a cookie-cutter fashion and more about exporting a unique business culture.

"When you are managing a company that is more than 90 years old, you have to create a culture where there is a balance between innovation and heritage," Gibertoni said. "As we look towards our expansion, our challenge is to ensure that there is consistency in that culture wherever we are. A consistency between what is said and what is done."

That is a challenge that many other organizations would find daunting, particularly with a business that is so particular about how it serves its customers, in an industry that is rapidly growing around the world.

The luxury wellness resort—which combines the amenities of a five-star hotel and

the scope of services offered at a private medical clinic—is as competitive now as it is exclusive.



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SIMON GIBERTONI CEO, CLINIQUE LA PRAIRIE

At the main clinic and spa in Montreux, a staff of more than 350 attends to the health needs of about 50 clients at any given time, Gibertoni said. Those clients are not just found among the ranks of the extremely wealthy; increasingly, business organizations are using health-oriented resorts to care for their most senior decision makers who are not just looking for a product—they are looking for a unique experience.

“It is easy to export a product,” Gibertoni said. “You develop the products and then sell them in a new market. But when you are trying to export an experience, it's very complicated. We are trying to export a culture and that is a difficult thing.”

After deciding to transform from a single facility to a network of centers and clinics around the world, there was an extended period of planning where company executives had to dig deep into what made Clinique la Prairie unique in the first place.

The company's history, which began in 1931 with Prof. Paul Niehans' research into the unique benefits of cell therapy, suggests a founding focus on innovation and experimentation. Gibertoni said Clinique la Prairie attempts to maintain this emphasis by always looking for new products, technology and services that open up

new frontiers in wellness.

That spirit of innovation continues today through annual meetings with innovators in the longevity field who come to Clinique la Prairie to pitch new ideas, technologies and products to be included in the wellness treatment regime.

“Wellness is a very competitive field now, and there is a lot of work related to DNA, genetic profiling and stem cell research. That is opening up entirely new areas for us as we attempt to help our clients become more balanced in their lives,” Gibertoni said.

However, Gibertoni noted that it is essential to remember that too much change, or change that compromises the essence of the Clinique la Prairie culture, can be a destructive force.

Some have suggested Clinique la Prairie stop catering strictly to hyper-exclusive clientele and look at ways of opening larger, more mass-market facilities. “We cannot try to be something different than what we are good at doing,” he said. “Everyone is pressuring us to be more mass-market. No. We have to service our clients the way we always have. We must maintain that as our brand.”

As the company opens new facilities in other countries, it is important to plan carefully to export and sustain the Clinique la Prairie culture, Gibertoni said.

Ultimately, it would be preferable to have senior managers from the countries in which the new facilities are located; at first, however, Clinique la Prairie will be assigning a leader trained in Switzerland to oversee the opening of a new site. That means putting in writing many things about the company’s culture that were understood but not necessarily codified, he added.

“We realized there were a lot of things about our company that were transmitted

orally from employee to employee,” he said. “We realized we needed to codify these things, and then translate them into different languages so that the essence of who we are would be understood. This is how we plan to immerse people into this new venture.”

The future will be exciting, Gibertoni said, because with a transformation like the one Clinique la Prairie is currently experiencing, you’re never entirely sure what type of challenges you may face.

“Our vision is to grow to new places and new products but always, always by being consistent with who we are and the experience we create.”

