

From Grindelwald to Surinam* ...

A journey back to the roots of SAUTER's international orientation today



Dr. jur. LL.M. Rudolf Merker, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Fr. SAUTER Holding AG and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors of Fr. SAUTER AG

We'd like to take a look at how things used to be. How did Friedrich SAUTER, our founder, steer the company to international success? Facts discussed this question with Dr. Rudolf Merker, the grandson of SAUTER's founder.

Facts: Dr. Merker, what kind of a man was Friedrich SAUTER?

Merker: Above all, he was a creative individual – after all, he was an inventor, of course. Throughout his life, he invented and developed the products himself. Whenever there was an opportunity, he noted down his ideas on any piece of paper he could find. But he was also a good-humoured, open-minded person.

More than anything else, a brand story is the story of the people who chart the course for the company so as to give it a visible presence. A quotation on this point from Ms Gertrud Höhler*²):
“Hiding behind products doesn't work any more; the company's success is determined by its presence. People want more than mere goods – they want to encounter people. This means that the key to market success is quality – newly defined as the quality of the people, not of the products.”

Facts: Did he have a technical education as well?

Merker: At the end of the 19th century, Grindelwald was an up-and-coming holiday resort with large numbers of foreigners, so people had to learn English and French. That's how Grindelwald came to have a secondary school, which my grandfather attended. This moved him out of the farming environment and enabled him to go on to a technical college, where he obtained two qualifications: as a mechanical technician and an electrical engineer. Electrical engineering was still a new and developing discipline at the start of the 20th century. He then worked for ten years at Brown Boveri & Cie. in Baden, starting out in the test laboratory and then as a handover engineer, managing the installation and commissioning when machines were handed over. Even at that time, this work took him to different

parts of the world – not only Europe, but also Asia Minor, Egypt, Turkey and North and South America, even as far as Chile.

Facts: And how did the establishment of Fr. SAUTER AG come about in 1910?

Merker: My grandfather started putting his ideas into practice in the basement of the house where he was born. He abandoned his highly promising career with Brown Boveri to do this. This basement was the birthplace of his first time-switch, and it was from there that he attempted to put his inventions on the market. However, Grindelwald did not prove to be ideal as a location. There were no trained workers and transportation was difficult. That is why Friedrich SAUTER brought his up-and-coming firm to Basle.

Facts: What was the motivation – or, as we would say nowadays, the vision – that drove the founder of our company?

Merker: He didn't sell the afore-mentioned time-switches just to the nearby electricity works – at a very early stage, he was also selling them abroad, in Germany, France and the Netherlands, etc. Even in those days, he recognised the importance of export markets rather than just concentrating on Switzerland.

Facts: Which products was he already able to export at that point?

Merker: One very successful product, for example, was the electric boiler, which became the first product brand or as we would say today, “generic concept”. In France, people used “Cumulus” – the product name of SAUTER's electric boiler – as the normal word for a hot water boiler.

Facts: As long ago as the 1920s, SAUTER had its own manufacturing facility in France, at Saint-Louis. How was it that branches and representative offices were set up abroad at such an early stage?

Merker: If you wanted to sell in France, you had to produce in France. Thanks

to the periods that he spent abroad for Brown Boveri, Friedrich SAUTER had a good command of French and English. Together with his good-humoured nature and his open mind, this certainly played a role that should not be underestimated in the company's success on so many export markets.

Facts: One final question: What is important for the company today? What extra benefits do you think SAUTER offers, in terms of what our company achieves?

Merker: I think it's important that SAUTER's products not only offer the customer specific benefits, such as a pleasant indoor climate, the right temperature and humidity, etc. but also play a major part in relieving pressure on our environment, for example by saving energy.

Facts: Dr. Merker, thank you for the interview.

... the path to a global brand.



Ulrich Graf, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Fr. Sauter AG and Vice-Chairman of Fr. Sauter Holding AG

Facts: Mr Graf, as Chairman of the Board of Directors of Fr. SAUTER AG, you share the responsibility for steering the company's destinies. How do you view the firm's repositioning?

Graf: Friedrich SAUTER invented the time-switch with the aim of reducing electricity costs, to give just one example. Seen in this light, energy efficiency has been the mission that has driven the company ever since it was founded. Over recent years, of course, SAUTER has increasingly placed its vast technical and specialist know-how at the service of efficiency in the use of resources and energy. This is expressed most clearly in our new product developments and our new brand presence. The path upon which we have embarked has the full support of the Board of Directors.

* “Im Surinam”, our present address in Basle, came into being in about 1800 when a Swiss couple inherited a plantation in Surinam (or Dutch Guyana as it then was) and gave the name of “Little Surinam” to their property in Basle.

*²) Management consultant, visionary, professor and doctor of literature.