

Vatorex

Last month, Swiss Entrepreneurs Media founder Angelyne Larcher sat down with Vatorex CEO and co-founder Pascal Brunner, Switzerland's bee superhero.

The Winterthur startup is helping to keep Europe's bee populations alive and healthy through patented heat technology they have developed to fight the infamous Varroa mite. As a finalist of Venture Kick, they were awarded 130,000 CHF and their 8-strong team is acquiring an ever-growing number of clients from Switzerland and beyond.

Angelyne: Pascal, thanks for coming today. Please introduce yourself to our audience.

Pascal: My name is Pascal. I am the CEO of Vatorex. The project has been running now for three years and what we actually do is – well, we care about honey bees. So, we save the honey bees by killing the Varroa mite, which is mainly responsible for honey bee losses. We do this in a natural way with heat – a heat treatment that kills the mites and, so, the bees survive.

Angelyne: So, Pascal, tell us, when did you found Vatorex and who are your co-founders? Tell us a little bit about your company.

Pascal: Sure, the idea of this project was actually born by my father in 2013/2014; he has been a hobby beekeeper for many years now. By the end of 2014, we started this project and we went into it 100%. Firstly, I founded an association with my father and an engineer called Renato, and the three of us began the project by carrying out field trials. About a year later, we founded the company. So, the company was founded 18 months ago.

Angelyne: For somebody who is a beekeeper, who doesn't know your services, could you tell us exactly what services you offer beekeepers from the beginning to the end?

Pascal: Sure, well, as a beekeeper, you don't need have to care about Varroa anymore. We treat this mite, which is the number one pain point of beekeepers. The mite is the biggest

issue [of beekeeping]; so, we save beekeepers a lot of time and a lot of energy. Our system also gives beekeepers peace of mind in knowing that their colonies will be much stronger and produce more honey.

Angelyne: Do you own bee farms, or do you keep the bees by yourself? Do you visit other beekeepers? Please tell us about your business model?

Pascal: We have seven bee houses all around Winterthur, which is where we live, and it is these bee houses that we use to do our field trials and to study our products. From the perspective of our business model, there is little change; we sell our products to beekeepers and then we visit them and install the systems which they are happy to work with.

Angelyne: Who are your customers?

Pascal: Our customer is clearly the beekeepers. There are about 18,000 beekeepers in Switzerland alone. When you talk about Europe – there are about 1.1 million beekeepers. So, we have a great base of potential customers and we sell our system to these beekeepers, so they can install it in their own beehives and have bees that are more vital and produce more honey.

Angelyne: You are a young entrepreneur. What made you choose beekeeping? Why were you interested in your father's business?

Pascal: Well, actually it was quite opportunistic. I had knowledge about beekeeping from a child when I helped my grandfather and father, so I knew what a bee house looks like. Then, my father came up with this idea and I just thought it is a brilliant idea and that we should go for it. So yes, it was just from a table talk with my father and we decided, "Well, let's go for it!" So, the idea was born.

Angelyne: What are the challenges facing you as a beekeeper?

Pascal: I wouldn't say that I am facing any big

challenges as a beekeeper but from the perspective of the business there are certainly some challenges. How do you manage a company that grows? How do you manage people growing? Right now, we have a team of eight which I can manage, but what if the team goes up to 20? It is somehow different to manage. I think these are the big challenges we have to face.

Angelyne: How long did it take you to start making a profit?

Pascal: It was quite slow at the beginning. We had some customers very early on but then ramping it up took quite a while. Today, I am pretty happy that we continue to have an increase in sales and an increase in turnover, which is very good.

Angelyne: What makes you stand out against other providers who provide services for beekeepers? What is special about your company?

Pascal: This means looking a little more into the details of being a beekeeper. You need to know that Hyperthermic – the heat treatment – has been known for 30 years and has been scientifically proven; however, up until now, none of our competitors has reached the level we are currently at. We now have the efficiency and the usability for beekeeping. And that's mainly due to the one fact: we switch the heating coil used in the heating process. Up until now, the beehive was heated from the outside and you can imagine this has the effect of a huge air conditioning machine. The bees cool down when you bring warmth from the outside and, so, it didn't work properly. We heat the beehive via a coil inserted directly into the wax; bees build up their cells in the wax and, so, we can bring the warmth directly to the inside to the cells, therefore avoiding thermal regulation of the bees.

Angelyne: So, Pascal, as we all know, due to environmental challenges, the number of bees is declining. What measures do you take to support the bees and to make sure they are protected so in the future we will see a larger bee population?

Pascal: Actually, Albert Einstein once said that if the bees disappear from the world, man would only have four years left to live. And I think this is quite dramatic. Together with our product, we work to save the bees and we work to contribute to this ecosystem. There is both an emotional aspect and an economical aspect of this with bee pollination being worth hundreds of millions per year. So, we contribute by making beekeeping better beekeeping.

Angelyne: Where do you see your company in five years?

Pascal: There is a huge, huge market, especially in Europe and America. So, I personally believe that in five years we will be the market leader in Hyperthermic treatments. From a more holistic view of beekeeping, we realise that we have a lot more value that we can deliver to customers. We have some other product ideas in mind that are quite promising, and I hope in five years we will have some other products on the market as well.

Angelyne: Your last thoughts – have you got anything you want to share with us?

Pascal: I really support the whole eco-system here in Switzerland and I think if someone out there has an idea they should start doing it, but they should start doing it with the right team – that is quite important. I've had 20 ideas since I started Vatorex and I could start 20 different startups I guess! But the most crucial thing is to have the right team on the idea because execution is everything.

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Pascal Brunner

About Vatorex



Starting capital
600'000 CHF



Employees
8



Clients
50