

Calm, Collected, and Running with Nespresso

Interviews and Profiles



A strong cup of Nestlé Nespresso coffee — with milk — is what starts the day for Manuela Bernasconi, senior legal counsel for Nestlé Suisse (Switzerland). Then a few espressos follow as her morning and afternoon progresses. And she of course likes sampling all the Nespresso varieties.

You would think that being at the hub of the world's largest food, beverage, and wellness company — combined with the Nespresso and her busy position — would fuel her to run and rush in a frenzy to get everything done. But that's not her style; Bernasconi takes a calm approach and chooses quality over quantity, so things are done correctly the first time.

“People in business usually want fast answers, but I’ve learned that it’s best to not rush, especially when there is a sensitive issue or a complicated question,” she says. “Better to take a little time, and be 100 percent correct with the answer the first time around.”

Bernasconi was raised in a small Swiss canton called Ticino, which is located in the southern part of the country and boasts a strong Mediterranean influence. The main language spoken in Ticino is Italian, and Bernasconi is fluent in this, as well as French and German, which makes up three of the four official languages of Switzerland. The fourth, Romansh, is a dialect that only a small percentage speak, and Bernasconi says it’s a language descended from Latin.

“It’s a bit difficult to describe, and a language that’s native only to Switzerland,” she says. “I don’t speak it, but my Mom does!”

Growing up in the city of Lugano, Bernasconi saw the passion her father brought to his job as a lawyer and she remembers listening to legal discussions and lawyer’s language from a very young age. It influenced her decision to pursue a similar career path, and she decided to attend Switzerland’s University of Basel. She studied a five year program there, concentrating on law, and after graduation she worked in several internship positions while preparing to take the Swiss bar exams.

“I’m happy to say that I absolutely loved my legal studies at university,” she says. “I always knew I wanted to be a lawyer but sometimes what you think you want and what you actually study are two different things — you find you don’t enjoy it as much as you thought. But that wasn’t the case for me. I enjoyed all of it.”

She’s fairly new to her current role at Nestlé Suisse, but has been with the company for eight years. She started in corporate law, before moving to work in several positions within Nestlé’s legal departments in more of an operational role for the business. She says she missed being on the business end, and when the senior legal counsel role opened up about a year ago, she went for it.

Now a typical day for Bernasconi may involve lots of meetings with clients and internal business partners; perhaps overseeing and assisting with business negotiations; handling crisis management issues; keeping an eye on new product development; and maybe even a lunchtime bike ride through the vineyards behind Nestlé Suisse’s headquarters in Vevey, a town about an hour by train from Geneva. She believes in teamwork, and says there is great value to being part of a team — even if it’s small — in providing insight to situations.

“In general, for a legal team in a market, being part of a business we are the guardians of core values, but we don’t necessarily have to reinvent the wheel,” she says. “Sometimes a team member can point out a solution to something they have had experience with before, that you yourself may not have thought of initially. It’s this exchange that makes being in a team so important.”

Bernasconi also serves on the Nespresso Switzerland executive management board, which meets once a month, and she says it gives her the opportunity to see what’s happening in Nespresso’s pipeline.

“The market for Nespresso in Switzerland is the second biggest in Europe, and a large part of my role is dealing with the professional side of the Nespresso brand,” she says. “One amazing project currently in the works at Nespresso is a big recycling initiative, and it’s the 25th year anniversary (in 2016) of our recycling program. So we’re really putting the word out there about that.”

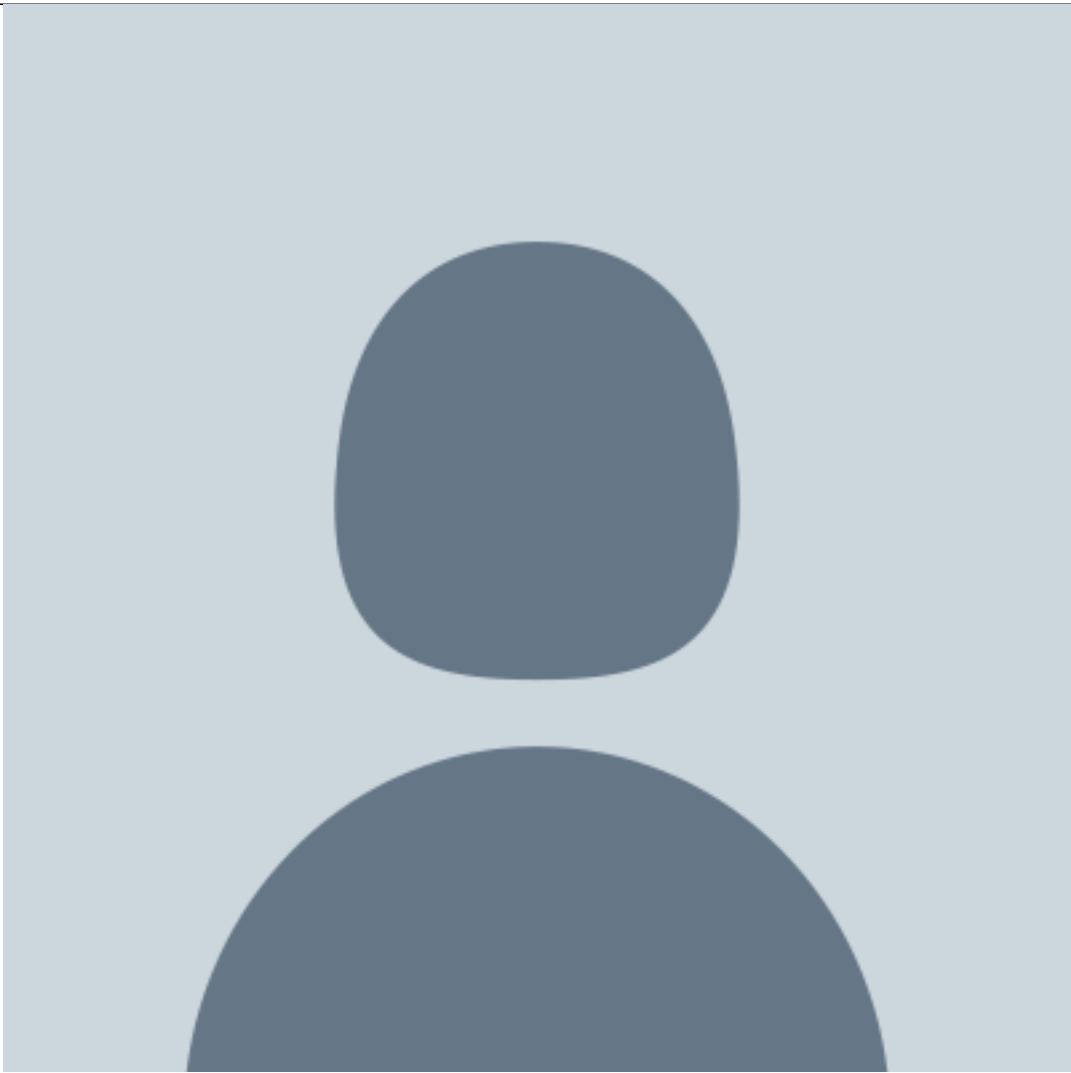
Although it's a small country, there is tremendous cultural diversity in Suisse, says Bernasconi. Being so centrally located in Europe, it's a mix of cuisines and people, scenery and industries. She says no, not everyone in Switzerland loves to ski — she personally prefers bike riding and swimming — and there are actually palm trees and lake front cafes as much as there are mountains and snow. But it's this kind of mix that makes it so attractive, she says.

“Switzerland is a country that has a fantastic quality of life, and our Nestlé offices at Vevey are celebrating 150 years — if it's been in the same location for that long, it says something. We were founded here, and we are still here. Hopefully that's something that will not change.”

Getting to know Manuela Bernasconi:

- Two things I would recommend to an aspiring lawyer — learn about finance and accounting, no matter what area of law you choose. That way you'll be ahead of the game instead of learning it on the job.
- Always be honest and open and don't be afraid of taking your time to get something done well. Communicate, communicate, communicate! People you work with will respect you for it.
- I have been using Daylong sunscreen since I was a baby — a Nestlé brand! I also love San Pellegrino sparkling water, another Nestlé brand.

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