

Pioneer's Club

Celebrating the entrepreneurial spirit

By Carina Scheuringer

"Entrepreneurs are pioneers who think outside the box and have a sense for market trends. When they have an idea, they work day and night until they have realised it. Work is their passion."

Adrian Liggerstorfer

Theirs is the perfect story. Twenty something years after bonding in a sandpit in Birmensdorf, childhood friends Adrian Liggerstorfer and Olivier Kündig both found themselves at the prestigious Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich in 2002. 24-year-old Liggerstorfer was a student of law, while his 23-year-old university buddy was pursuing economics. "I often sat surrounded by thick books, restless," the former recalls. "Then one day, our mutual friend Pascal Kaufmann came to us with an idea – to establish a joint business on the side." The young men were immediately intrigued – and so began an exciting story of success.

Sparking the spirit

Ready to make their mark in the world of business, the student team co-founded SiROP, a web-based tool connecting scientific institutions and students across the world by allowing them to post and search for open science positions and research projects. "After completing the formal process of registering our company, we were faced with the big question: how to go about making it a success," Liggerstorfer reveals. Yet this wasn't something a course could teach them. "I knew that the only way to learn was by 'trial and error' and so I figured the best thing I could do was to talk to already established entrepreneurs and see if I could draw insights from their experiences."

Mingling with likeminded young business hopefuls at the ETH and Zurich University, the Birmensdorfer realised quickly that his dilemma was anything but unique and that his solution may in itself be a business opportunity. His research showed that the ratio of young entrepreneurs at universities was between one and two per cent – a small target group, but big enough to build a network. "I found that there was great interest amongst my fellow students. In 2003, Olivier and I established the Pioneers' Club PCU out of the platform START Zürich [an association supporting entrepreneurship at Swiss universities] as a formal entity that would enable knowledge transfer between young entrepreneurs and their established counterparts." At the time aged 25, Liggerstorfer was already involved in two businesses, both of which would prosper to this very day.

Recipe for success

A non-profit organisation, the Pioneers' Club found its first supporter in Dr Th. von Waldkirch G. Seewer, the founder and president of Technopark and a named entrepreneur. "Mr Seewer called to say, 'I don't usually give money, but I will sponsor your first event and I will bring in my network'," Liggerstorfer remembers with a smile. This sign of faith was exactly what the start-up needed to get off the ground and not fall into the age-old 'chicken-egg' trap of not being able to secure funding due to a lack of track record. The financial injection provided the students with the necessary means to print their first business cards, launch a website and, most crucially, host the first event.

A few months later, 25 attendants gathered excitedly at the Hotel Zürichberg to share in the great wisdom of

Entrepreneur of the Year 2001 and ETH Professor, Dr Anton Gunzinger, one of 100 people named by *TIME Magazine* as a leader of the new century. "Even at this first event, there was a very special atmosphere. This elusive entrepreneurial spirit... you could feel it," the Birmensdorfer says proudly. This impressive start would set the tone for the future – and so it came that word spread quickly, attracting not only new members, but also new sponsors.

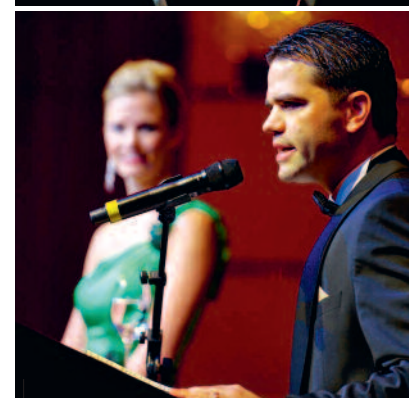
When Kündig left for London in 2004, Liggerstorfer built up today's core team of four – "all experienced entrepreneurs who were united by their entrepreneurial thinking." The rest – as they say – is history. Ten years after its foundation, the Pioneers' Club counts 700 members from a variety of industry sectors. "You can join the Club for free or become a 'premium member' for an annual fee of CHF 150," explains the founder. "We are open to anyone who fulfills the admission requirements – members must be young or experienced entrepreneurs who are founders or have substantial share capital in a company listed in the commercial register – and they have to show innovation and entrepreneurial spirit."

Leading by example, the team behind the Pioneers' Club too showed continued innovation when on 28 November 2009, they hosted their first *Unternehmerball* at Hotel Baur au Lac in Zurich. Delivering the message to a public that entrepreneurs are main drivers for prosperity, the formal annual event took off in a big way – four years later, it is now held at the prestigious Dolder Grand and is known to sell out well in advance. Amongst last year's 250 attendees was keynote speaker Adrian Locher from DeinDeal as well as famous entrepreneurs and members of the Swiss Parliament.

Building for the future

What does Liggerstorfer think constitutes the success of his business? "Entrepreneurs are pioneers who think outside the box and explore untouched ground while having a sense for market trends. When they have an idea, they work day and night wilfully until they have realised it. Work is their passion. They don't distinguish between pleasure and work," muses the 35-year-old. "They love to speak about their experiences. They remember what it was like when they first started with all the troubles and are happy to open up their networks and provide practical advice to the next generation. In return, they get something back too. We try to help them ensure that they don't lose touch with the future market, the innovation and the thinking of the leaders of tomorrow. Everybody benefits."

Liggerstorfer hopes that the Club will continue to grow – in Switzerland as well as internationally where a spin-off has already been established in Munich and Prague – and that it will continue to bring together emerging and established entrepreneurs and spark exciting conversations between them, creating new ideas. In the past ten years, many successful corporations and businesses have been born out of PCU events and Liggerstorfer himself is probably one of the greatest Ambassadors of the network and what it can achieve. There is no reason why his dream shouldn't come true.



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Pioneer's Club PCU

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A Master of Law UZH, Liggerstorfer is the President and founder of the Pioneer's Club and is also a founding partner of SiROP and of Hottinger & Associés Zürich AG, an asset management company which was sold and integrated in the Bank Hottinger & Cie AG 1786 in 2011. As well as continuing his involvement at SiROP and Pioneer's Club PCU in his free-time, Liggerstorfer is a Director at the special clients desk at Vontobel Private Banking, serving entrepreneurs and executives.