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Ada Polla Tray: The Long View

Alumnus Ada Polla, President of Alchimie Forever LLC, shows that joining the family business and finding a unique career path for yourself are not always mutually exclusive.

by Marie Paro, Alumni Program Manager



I always learn a great deal from talking to DiamondCluster alumni.

For example, before talking to former DiamondCluster Associate Ada Polla (Boston and Barcelona offices), it had never occurred to me that barbecue sauce and luxury skincare products have much in common. But apparently the Spring 2002 Current article about alumnus Jamel Richardson and his fledgling mail-order barbecue sauce business had reminded Ada of some of the challenges her parents faced when they began their skincare product line. As she pointed out, "You have to choose the right ingredients. You have to develop product formulae, or recipes. You have to be able to produce the products in bulk, which is different than producing small quantities... There's a lot of chemistry involved."

An entrepreneurial heritage

But I should back up a bit and describe the Polla family business – or businesses, to be exact. Both of her parents are MDs from French-speaking Geneva, Switzerland. The two met when they were in medical school in Geneva. Ada's father, Luigi, is a cosmetic dermatologist specializing in laser therapy. Her mother, Barbara, is a researcher specializing in heat shock proteins (HSPs), oxygen free radicals, and antioxidants.

In 1997 the couple founded their own medical spa in Geneva called the Forever Laser Institut, which was focused on healthy, natural, preventive skincare solutions. It was the first fully-integrated medical spa in Europe. A second facility was opened in the same city in May 2003.

They have also managed to combine these spas with another great passion of theirs – modern art. The Pollas had already opened an avant-garde art gallery back in the early 1990s* and their medical spas are now a combination of health services and display space.

Finally, in 2000, the Polla husband and wife team launched Alchimie Forever, their own medically-formulated, rejuvenating skincare product line based on powerful natural antioxidants. As its promotional literature points out, Alchimie Forever products blend the Pollas' varied interests in skin aging (the products are filled with age defying antioxidants), lasers (the products are named after laser-related terms), and art (the packaging and brochure are designed by contemporary artists).

* The story goes that Ada's father had made a very large art purchase in Israel when he was there for a medical conference, and it finally convinced the couple that they should perhaps find a way to become professional art purveyors rather than just collectors. Their "Analix Forever Gallery" opened in Geneva in 1991.

Alchimie Forever continues to add new products to its line. In September 2005, it introduced the Excimer purifying facial cleanser and the Superpulse rejuvenating eye balm (left).

Ada's father still sees dermatology patients, while her mother has stopped research work and runs the management and financial aspects of their business. In addition, Barbara Polla has also been involved in Swiss politics. She served first in Geneva's city government in the early 1990s and then in the National House of Representatives from 1999 to 2003.

Proudly boasting of her parent's achievements and talents comes easily to Ada. In fact, I suspect that even the briefest conversation about her professional aspirations would include a healthy dose of her family story. This isn't a result of her trying to "measure up," or feeling a need to follow in their professional footsteps. Rather, she has clearly been inspired by her parents to aim for success and fulfillment in whatever path she chooses, to find her own passions and then strive to integrate them into how she makes a living. While Ada is now in fact working in the "family business," our conversation revealed a more fundamental inheritance – expecting excellence, embracing change, thinking globally while remaining proud of her Swiss roots, and maintaining the long view of her career. She conveys great affection for her mother and father, and clearly sees them as role-models.

Ada has three younger sisters: 25-year old Cyrille, who is the director of Analix Forever gallery after having obtained a degree in anthropology at Cambridge University; 23-year old Rachel who studies international relations at Geneva University and works part-time at both spas. (Rachel has taken over temporarily for both spa directors when they were on month-long vacations, and she has shown an interest in becoming more involved in the spa business.); and 16-year old, Roxane, whose current passion is not business but horse-back riding -- she competes at the national level in Switzerland. As luck would have it, the Polla girls are all finding their individual niches.



lights on



lights off

Left: Lights On / Lights Off by Martin Creed

Alchimie Forever's Lights On and Lights Off moisturizers were named in honor of the work of Scottish artist Martin Creed; he in turn participated in the products' packaging design. Creed is another well-known artist originally "discovered" by Analix Forever.

Ada's story

Ada took what could be seen as the ultimate divergent path – neither studying medicine nor diving into an entrepreneurial venture right after college, nor even staying in Europe – and yet today she is an integral part of accomplishing the unique vision of the Polla family business.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Harvard University, Ada joined Cluster Consulting in July 1999. She was primarily based in Boston, although she did spend eight months assigned to the Barcelona office at the beginning of her tenure, working in Casablanca, Morocco. Considering her undergraduate concentration in Political Science and History of Art, it is not insignificant, she says, that her first and perhaps most useful lessons at Cluster were how to use Microsoft Excel and read an income statement. Ada has fond memories of her Cluster experience, and recognizes that the consultant skill set of articulate communications and managing customer expectations continues to serve her well.

During the time she was considering leaving consulting, with a thirst for more entrepreneurial activities, she expressed to her parents an interest in learning more about the family business. Her father's recommendation was to gain experience in the related field of laser dermatology, a critical aspect of their work. Thus, in January 2001, Ada made the purposeful move of starting to work for Candela Corporation, a leading manufacturer of lasers used in dermatology. There she gained not only inside medical device industry knowledge, but also learned about after-sales and customer service, which she says, "is what that industry is all about. I also really got confident about networking; in fact, I developed contacts that are useful today working with Alchimie Forever."

Gradually, Ada began shifting her focus to the Alchimie Forever organization and its global potential. "I started off by doing extensive market testing and competitive research, and the interest was there. I knew that my first few accounts would be test cases – they were a way for me to test my theories."

Enrolling in the MBA program at Georgetown University in Washington, DC (she graduated in May of 2004 in the top 5% of her class) didn't mean putting Alchimie's new U.S. operation on hold. During the first year in that program, she did research and wrote her business plan, and then created the company (LLC) in May 2003. She spent the summer in between her two business school years in Geneva redoing packaging, creating a website, and developing marketing materials in English, and then started selling Alchimie products and developing new accounts in the fall of 2003. Revenue was being generated from the beginning (although she says she doesn't really expect to be profitable until the end of 2006). Since her graduation, she has focused on the business full time.

Currently Alchimie Forever manufactures thirteen different products. The Pollas are working to increase their line, launching two new products at the end of this month: their Excimer purifying facial cleanser and a rejuvenating eye balm, Superpulse. Ada explained to me that the industry standard is to have a complete line. "We will probably grow to 30 products," she admitted. The line already comprises products for the face and body, as well as products formulated specifically for men's skin.

Ada's initial milestones – increasing the number of wholesale distributors the company does business with, obtaining more direct revenue via consumer sales which have better margins, and launching Alchimie Forever's e-commerce capabilities in the U.S. – have all been reached. Alchimie Forever now has about 50+ accounts in the US, including one in California, which comprise cosmetic dermatology offices, medical spas, luxury day and hotel spas, as well as independent beauty boutiques. Ada's main goals moving forward are to penetrate the national women's press in the U.S., further increase the scope of distribution, and reach profitability.

Swiss roots, American entrepreneurialism

When asked if she plans to return to Switzerland anytime soon, Ada explained to me that she is very comfortable in the United States, and expects to stay here for the foreseeable future. "And as far as the business goes, I have come to recognize that it's much easier to set up a new venture in U.S. If someone or something has potential, there are just less hurdles, and also less stigma attached to failure. In Switzerland, even the process of becoming incorporated is expensive: you have to be able to show that you have 20,000 Swiss francs (about 15,000 US dollars) in the bank ready to invest. Going bankrupt is a social stigma that makes finding another job much more difficult. And creditors have up to 20 years to come after you for any unpaid corporate debts!"

Ada now has another tie to the States. She recently married a lovely American (albeit half Swedish) man whom she met in business school.

Luckily, her business requires her to spend a week or so in Geneva every quarter. "I have a wonderful time being back there. It is the ideal combination of business and pleasure. The Swiss connection is crucial, because I'm responsible for the relationship between the [Europe-based and US-based] companies."

Because they want to take advantage of the Swiss image of quality and health, the Pollas are committed to keeping production in Geneva. That way, they can manage the whole production chain, and for example, visit with their chemist or manufacturer in person.

Like her parents, Ada is not in this business to "get rich quick" – it's a competitive industry and it takes a long time to establish a reputation. Lucky for all users of their skincare products, guests at their spas, visitors to their gallery, and the artists they promote, the Polla family takes the long view: they are committed to sustained quality, and the slow and steady development of a successful business that represents themselves and their interests.

Ada Polla can be reached at ada@alchimie-forever.com, and the Alchimie products can be viewed (and purchased) at www.alchimie-forever.com