

# The Birth of a New Era

For the last sixty years, Swiss company Medela has carved out an impressive reputation within the healthcare sector. Now considered a leading player in mom and baby care, maternity research, drainage and the treatment of wounds, we caught up with CEO Annette Brüls to explore the intersection between business and health.

**ANNETTE BRÜLS**

CEO @ Medela

Since being founded six decades ago, Medela has witnessed and been at the forefront of huge changes within its field. While technology and other societal shifts have impacted all types of commerce, the healthcare sector has changed beyond recognition and continues to evolve at a rapid pace. In such an environment, the ability to stay ahead of the curve is crucial for success.

CEO Annette Brüls joined the company in May 2018 as the culmination of twenty years of work within the medical device industry. She previously held executive positions in major multinational companies, but despite this wealth of experience, the new CEO found herself genuinely excited by the challenges she was set to face.

“I started my career as a research engineer, focusing on the biomedical field and moved on from there,” Ms Brüls explains. “Throughout my career, I have seen the medical device industry from all sides, research, sales, marketing and so on, in all therapeutic fields. Something that really interested me was making the move from stock-listed corporations to a family-led business. It was something different, and that intrigued me.”

#### A sense of family

That link to history and Swiss heritage continues to be a prominent feature of the company’s DNA. The son of Medela’s founder is the chairman of the board, and this gave the company a strong corporate identity with which the new CEO could identify. The family presence provided a long-term perspective and grounded everything that was done, much of which was innovative and sector-leading, in a



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sense of tradition. Alongside that, there were other characteristics which Ms Brüls found extremely appealing.

“Medela is a very diverse organization,” she states. “Most of our business is done direct-to-consumer. Mothers all over the world use our products, choosing us on Amazon and other retailers. That is one half of our business. The other half is in hospitals, where we sell our medical devices that improve clinical and economical outcomes. The commonality between those two is the medical vacuum. That’s the core competence of the company, and you can find that in breast pumps or different areas of the hospital, in the NICU or for liposuction, thoracic drainage or wound care, but that gives Medela a very particular identity.”

#### New beginnings

Despite this strong positioning, there was an opportunity to implement changes to strengthen the organization’s foothold on the future. As a result, there has been an evolution over the last five years in the way that Medela operates with a focus on transforming the Swiss-based and locally-operated business into a united, forward and outward looking global organization while placing the customer at the centre of all activities and preserving its origins and heritage.

“This was also exciting for me,” Ms Brüls recalls. “Creating a customer-centric structure was important to build on our global presence and ensure we had representation for our four regions at an executive level, while establishing a strong but small core at headquarters to fully support the regions. We further sharpened our customer approach, communication and engagement for both our B2B and B2C segments to reflect the new reality, especially post pandemic. For the B2C segment in particular, it is vital to know where our customers are and to utilise social media channels, Facebook, Tik-Tok, etc. more effectively.”

With the digital investment bearing fruit and the company’s online presence enhanced, results were immediately apparent. To build success, the new CEO devised something she describes as an “innovation pipeline.” As with many sectors, new and improved products are fundamental for staying a step or two ahead of the competition. Through this pipeline, new and exciting



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developments were introduced, including the company’s Freestyle Hands-Free Breast Pump released in November last year, as well as its category expansion into organic and vegan oil and balm to support breastfeeding parents. The results of this approach are clearly demonstrated through the figures. When Ms Brüls joined in 2018, only 17 percent of the company’s revenue was accrued through new products. Under her leadership, this has since risen to 52 percent. →



### Bringing it all together

Alongside these developments, operational streamlining with regards to logistics and the supply chain have helped to make Medela leaner and more efficient, while a new corporate mission building on the company's strength, and evolution has helped to give the global team a laser sharp focus.

"This last point is very important," the CEO states. "It's crucial to have a very cohesive team. So in 2021, when the company was celebrating its sixtieth anniversary, we recreated our mission. 'By advancing research, observing natural behaviour and listening to the customer, we turn science into care, to nurture health for generations.' That is now our guiding compass in everything we do. Since nothing starts with results and everything with people, we are strongly committed to our employees and to engaging them in our journey, with our mission lying at the heart of it all."

Ms Brüls' approach has attracted a great deal of admiration and attention with Medela consistently recognised for its leadership. As a result of employee feedback, the company is currently listed as one of the best for women, for diversity and for the overall quality of its leadership.

### Continuing growth

Notwithstanding some difficulties during the COVID era, which impacted all business sectors, all of this has contributed to a highly successful five-year period under Ms Brüls' leadership. It is natural, of course, with that in hand, that thoughts have now turned to the future. As might be expected, ambitious plans are already in place.

"On the B2C side of the business," explains the CEO, "we are constantly working on expanding the basket of products available to the customer. That's very important for us because birth rates are going down. We need to provide everything that each mother needs to be successful on her



**"Our mission drives everything that we do and tells the world who we are."**

**"As a supplier of Medela, we work very closely together and appreciate the trusted relationship for more than 35 years. This working atmosphere guarantees high quality plastic part production and increases efficiency which ensures our both growing wings."**

**VALERIE STEINER, CEO**  
SKS AG Kunststoffe + Werkzeugbau

breastfeeding journey. So we have expanded our portfolio and have nursing bras and pads, support products, breast milk storage bags, nipple cream and so on. Meanwhile, on the B2B side, we have a few other interesting innovations. We are growing on the cardio-thoracic side and are creating a new system for neo-natal intensive care units with new feeding systems too."

It's a compelling projection that promises to build on recent successes and cement Medela's position as a leading name in this niche category. Above all, however, Ms Brüls is keen to bring the conversation back to the company's core purpose. Success is not only measured financially but in the improvements they can create in the lives of customers.

"For us, it's all about that," she concludes. "Our mission drives everything that we do and tells the world who we are. This is what Medela means."



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