

IRF panel discussion in Basel with Bill Burns, ex-CEO of the Pharmaceuticals Division of Roche

About 60 people gathered for a panel discussion at Teufelhof Basel on 14 May 2014 at the invitation of IRF Communications; the title: “How strategic communications is enabling business success – Perspectives of big corporates, start-ups and venture capitalists.” The panellists Bill Burns, ex-CEO of the Pharmaceuticals Division of Roche, Vladimir Cmiljanovic, CEO of Piquor Therapeutics, and Gianni Gromo, partner at Versant Ventures, discussed how to use strategic communications to build up a strong position and attract investors.

Bill Burns, today member of the board of directors at various small and medium-sized pharmaceutical companies, emphasised that entrepreneurs should tackle the issue of positioning at the latest when they are clear about their business strategy. Burns, who spent many years in the limelight of investors and media, said the best way to engender trust was to exceed expectations. Communication played a central role in managing these expectations. Burns recommended communicating clear milestones by which business success could be measured.

Vladimir Cmiljanovic, CEO of Piquor Therapeutics AG, a start-up specialising in drugs for targeted cancer therapy, said clear, consistent positioning was important to him early on. Cmiljanovic said he strived to build up his reputation successively by making targeted appearances at congresses and by maintaining a presence in trade and public media. Cmiljanovic said these efforts helped to spark the interest of large pharmaceutical companies and investors.

One of these investors is Versant Ventures, a leading venture capital company based in San Francisco and Basel. It specialises in investments in the health care sector. As a venture partner at Versant Ventures, Gianni Gromo explained the decisive factors for determining an investment decision from the standpoint of the lender of risk capital. Gromo said communication engendered trust if it was based on realistic assumptions and did not sweep the high risks of a business idea under the table.

The lively panel discussion was moderated by Birgit Voigt, a business journalist at NZZ am Sonntag, and was not without its humorous moments. The witty repartee continued within the Roman walls of the traditional townhouse in Basel accompanied by refreshing cocktails and various culinary delights.