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The avec store in St-Imier is well off the beaten track, on the line from Biel to La Chaux de Fonds. The Station is, however, in a totally built-up area. The only way to get the required parking spaces was to put them underground. The entrance to the underground parking can be seen in the foreground. Photo: GeorgeHoekstra

The 15th and 16th "avec"-convenience stores recently opened up in St. Imier, on the line from Biel to La Chaux de Fonds, and Oberglatt, between Zürich and Schaffhausen. By the end of the year, about twenty of these stores will be in operation. They keep the local station "open all hours", which is to say from six in the morning till ten at night, every day of the week. For the sale of tickets, this means opening times are much longer than before the changeover. On top of that, and due to their other business operations, they give employment to another 10 to 15 people, half of them full time jobs. In the case of Oberglatt, which is near Zürich Airport, they include some people who lost their jobs in the Swissair debacle.

Similar schemes to keep abandoned station buildings occupied have been tried in many other countries, but these were seldom successful. So why does the "avec" system work? I think the key is a combination of cooperation, preparation, training and back up. The company that runs the "avec" franchises, Cevanova, is a limited company with a capital of 6 million SFr. Sole shareholders (each with

1/3) are the SBB, Migros and Kiosk, all three giants in their respective fields - travel, food retailing and news agencies - but they are not in competition with each other. Their combined knowledge of retailing would be hard to beat. The proposed station is first researched by experts and looked at from different angles to judge if an "avec"-store site can be successful. Two of the criteria, for instance, are that 3000 people must live in the area and that yearly turnover should be in the region of three million SFr. The know-how of the combined operations is then passed on to the franchisee; travel and ticketing by the SBB, food-retailing by Migros, news agency business by Kiosk and the running of the coffee shop (including snacks) by Café Spettacolo.

They are intensively trained, not only in the classroom but in-store as well. One of the first "avec" stores to open, in Schüpfen near Bern, is used for this purpose. The training does not stop with the opening of the store, it continues all during the tenure. Then there is the huge backup: for every problem, be it security, stock-control, ticketing and travel, staff, maintenance or bookkeeping, there is an

expert at hand. Not only from the big three SBB, Migros and Kiosk, but also from other specialists like Zürich and Mobiliar Insurance, BDO fiduciary, the Aarau Wine cellars (yes, the avec-shops do sell wine, unlike Migros, which does not) and quite a few others. Then there are the architects, planners and builders involved.

This, I believe, is the crucial element of their success: they do not just have a few troubleshooters from the franchising company to rely on. And if what several fast-food franchise-takers have told me is true, some of these people really seem to be shooters, rather than Mr QuickFix... The "avec" managers, on the other hand, are accompanied all the way by people from many different companies, each one having all the experience of working for one of the leaders in their field. The manager is never left out in the cold on his own. For almost everything that could happen in his store, there is an expert at hand. Another thing that comes from having big partners is, it keeps the prices low. The food prices are the same as in any Migros store. Tickets cost the same as direct from the SBB and papers, magazines, cigarettes and lottery-tickets are the same as in any Kiosk. The big boys did not see this as a chance to rip off the small guy, but as an opportunity to have a presence in a new locality. The SBB did not take

the opportunity to sell of the buildings and make a profit, but on the contrary invested quite a lot in the conversions. That the avec stores are situated in SBB stations means they are situated on federal land, where local closing laws do not apply - hence the long opening hours. Anyway, I wish them all the best and lots of customers!

For all you late travellers, here is a list of the avec stores so far; all located in the SBB stations:

- Aarburg Oftringen
- Altstätten
- Au
- Bad Ragaz
- Brugg b. Biel
- Emmenbrücke
- Eschlikon
- Gelterkinden
- La Neuveville
- Mettmenstetten
- MuttENZ
- Näfels-Mollis
- Oberglatt
- Oberrieden-Dorf
- Reiden
- Schüpfen
- Seuzach
- St-Imier

SWISS POST BUYS POSTAL VANS FROM FRENCH LA POSTE

Swiss Post is still dedicated to transport mail by train. Practically all parcels traffic travels at least part of the way by rail in special containers - you have been able to read all about it in SWISS EXPRESS! Inside the containers, the parcels are transported in smaller containers: special rolling wire-cages. In order to increase capacity, the Swiss Post has bought ten 26,40 m. long vans from La Poste, which no longer needed them, as carriage of mail by classic mail trains ended in France in December 2001. They were adapted for the carriage of small containers in 1993. These vans are the only so adapted smooth-sided ones in Europe, able to run at 160 kmh. At the moment, they are being fitted with larger doors to accommodate the slightly higher Swiss-type containers by the BLS works in Böningen. At the same time, the bogies are being strengthened. I am indebted to the French publication "La Vie du Rail", for some of the information.



One of the French La Poste vans bought by Swiss Post stands in Thun yard, awaiting transport to Böningen for adaptations. The outside will stay yellow, as Swiss Post vans now are also yellow, like a lot of other postal companies on the continent.

PHOTO AND TEXT: GEORGE HOEKSTRA