



«Our skis are not for everyone.»

Francesca Kuonen
Entrepreneur
AK Ski of Switzerland

Since 2012, Francesca Kuonen and her brother Marco have been running their own company, AK Ski. Their recipe for success: cutting-edge technology, quality over quantity, and a great deal of passion.



«If I can't identify wholeheartedly with something, then I prefer not to get involved. I've always been that way. If I do something, then I do it right and invest a great deal of passion in it. It used to be rowing. As a member of the Stansstad rowing club, I regularly trained up to nine times a week. My colleagues and I enjoyed great international success at the junior level.

Today I am committed heart and soul to our company, AK Ski, which I run together with my brother Marco. AK Ski was founded almost 20 years ago by our dad, Aldo Kuonen. Like in famous computer firms, his dream also began in a garage. You see, after making a name for himself on the ski racing circuit, in 1966 he decided to start his own business in our garage in Stansstad. He wanted to make his dream come true and share his devotion to technological perfection and his passion for skiing with as many other people as possible.

A passion for the perfect ski

Just like our dad, my brother and I are now striving to make a high-performance ski that everyone can afford. We measure our success by the number of enthusiastic skiers that share our passion for snow, the slopes and perfect skis. Our skis are not for everyone. We're not into eye-catching designs or fancy adverts. AK users live for their sport – the thrill of speed, their own skill and the exhilaration of carving down a virgin slope.

AK is still very much a family affair. My brother and I do everything ourselves: from design to construction, to customer visits and processing orders. We don't just have our skis tested by others; we also strap them on ourselves and head for the slopes. We have known all our retailers for years and enjoy a close relationship with a large number of them – you could almost say we're friends. Personal contact with our retailers is hugely important to us. It's only by personally speaking to people that we can explain every last detail and show why the skis are constructed the way they are. We naturally prefer to do so directly on the slopes as you

can feel the difference the minute you stand on our skis. We view marketing as: seeing, experiencing and believing.

AK skis have a constantly growing fan base that is a bit like one big family. Seeing another AK user has become a badge of community and an open invitation to get to know one another. We get lots of direct feedback from those who use our skis. Which not only makes us very happy, it also helps us to further develop the skis. We not only know how and where we need to make improvements, but also for whom and why.

Blind faith in the team

Of course, people often ask me what it's like to work with my brother. We simply get along really well together. The fact that we had both gained experience in other companies certainly plays a role. Maybe that's why we now appreciate the fact that we can rely unconditionally on one another even more. My brother and I have great confidence and trust in each other. We both learned a great deal from our dad. He always considered it important that we understood what we were doing. He made sure that we did not only get the theoretical knowledge we needed, but that we could also put it into practice in the workshop by ourselves. There you have the unique combination that characterizes our business: innovative concepts and construction, cutting-edge technology and quality in the materials, and a whole lot of love and care lavished on the craftsmanship and sales.

Almost two years have passed since our father's death at too young an age. Although that isn't a very long time, I have the feeling that I have learned a lot as an entrepreneur. For example, I've learned to handle the fact that there are things over which I have no influence. I found that very difficult to begin with, as a degree of insecurity often made me impatient and determined to get my own way. Of course, I still take criticism of our skis personally although I am also thankful for feedback of any kind. It's just that I have invested

so much in the whole thing – sometimes the company is a bit like a baby to me.

My mother Hilary is a pillar of strength for both my brother and me. She has never put any pressure on us, but has always done everything she could to support us. It was important to her that we all continue to pursue Aldo Kuonen's dream. It was also important to her that Marco and I bring our own personalities into the business so that we can follow our own path. I must admit I'm really grateful for being given the chance to work in this constellation and in such a great environment. I am aware that I am in a very privileged situation.

Quality over quantity

Our production runs are small. We aim to maintain our focus on quality over quantity, even though demand is growing steadily. We currently produce around 3'000 pairs of skis each year. As we see it, we could increase production to around 4'000 pairs of skis. If we were to go for larger quantities, we would have to take on more staff. But there is no question of that happening at the moment, either for my brother or me. I think we both enjoy pulling all the strings together way too much.

The medallion on our skis is our assurance of quality. Each medallion bears Aldo's initials, and is added by hand as the last step in our workshop. Over the years, the medallion has become the shorthand for what customers can expect from a pair of AK skis: quality, passion and cutting-edge technology. This is what Marco and I dedicate ourselves to, each and every day.»



