

# Switzerland

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## 1. Legal framework

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### National

The basic principles for trademark protection in Switzerland are laid down in the Federal Law on the Protection of Trademarks and Geographical Indications 1992 and the Trademarks Regulation 1992, which is currently under revision. The legislation is largely in harmony with the EU First Trademarks Directive (89/104/EEC). However, Switzerland is not a member of the European Union and is thus not covered by the Community trademark regime.

The Swiss Trademarks Office (STO) has published its internal guidelines for trademark examination and its guidelines for opposition proceedings on its website at [www.ige.ch](http://www.ige.ch). These guidelines are not legally binding, but are useful in practice, particularly in areas where the law leaves room for discretion. In February 2005 the STO published draft new guidelines which reflect its actual practice in detail.

Since the Trademarks Law mainly grants protection against commercial use of a trademark, plaintiffs in trademark conflicts often also invoke the Federal Law against Unfair Competition 1986, which in general forbids any unfair acts, in particular deception, denigration, unnecessary reference in advertising and misleading comparisons of goods and services.

### International

Switzerland has signed most pertinent international agreements, in particular:

- the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (Stockholm version, ratified in 1970);
- the Nice Agreement on the International Classification of Goods and Services (adopted in 1962);
- the Madrid Agreement on the International Registration of Marks (adopted in 1892);

- the Madrid Protocol (adopted in 1997);
- the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (adopted in 1995);
- the Trademark Law Treaty (adopted in 1997); and
- various multilateral and bilateral treaties which include clauses on the protection of trademarks and/or geographical indications.

Switzerland has not signed the Lisbon Agreement for the Protection of Appellations of Origin and their International Registration.

## 2. Unregistered marks

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### Protection

In general, unregistered marks are not protected in Switzerland, but there is a right to continue use where a third party subsequently registers a conflicting similar trademark (Article 14 of the Trademarks Law).

If a trademark has become well known in Switzerland according to Article 6*bis* of the Paris Convention, it also enjoys protection without being registered. In addition, Article 4 of the Trademarks Law protects against the unauthorized registration of trademarks by agents or representatives, according to Article 6*septies* of the Paris Convention.

Additionally, in special circumstances unregistered trademarks may enjoy protection under the Unfair Competition Law. In 1983 the Swiss Federal Court granted protection on the basis of this law to an internationally active foreign company which had no activities in Switzerland – although some of its advertisements had reached Switzerland – because its activities and advertisements in neighbouring countries suggested that it would also expand its activities to Switzerland. Building up an enterprise with the

same name in Switzerland was thus construed as a misuse of competition which was forbidden under the Unfair Competition Act (BGE 109 II 483 – *Computerland*).

### Use requirements

Aside from the limited exceptions mentioned above, use of a trademark in Switzerland does not establish rights.

## 3. Registered marks

### Ownership

Any natural or legal person from any country is entitled to apply for trademark registration in Switzerland. Normally, the applicant need not submit any evidence of its existence, such as a certificate of incorporation.

### Scope of protection

The Trademarks Law allows for the registration of ordinary marks, certification marks and collective marks, which may consist of words, letters, numbers, designs, three-dimensional forms or combinations thereof. The law does not exclude the registration of colours, sounds, smells, moving images, holograms or position marks. In practice, however, it may prove difficult to define such marks in a form that can be published in the *Official Journal* and that allows them to be clearly identified.

For all such symbols, whether registrable or not, the Trademarks Law uses the general term ‘sign’. Article 2 (in accordance with Article 6*quinquies* B(ii) and (iii) of the Paris Convention) excludes from registration signs that:

- constitute public property or are descriptive, unless they have acquired secondary meaning;
- represent goods or are necessary to achieve a technical function;
- are deceptive; or
- contravene public order, morality or the law.

Signs that are considered to constitute public property include:

- single characters of the Latin alphabet – but not necessarily foreign characters and combinations of at least two letters and/or numbers;
- simple geometrical signs (eg, circles and rectangles) – but not necessarily combinations of these; and
- descriptive signs – for example, words that may be understood, in a national language or in English, to describe the quality, quantity, purpose, value, geographical origin or other characteristics of the goods or services, or slogans without a distinctive element. New combinations of words which were not previously used in business may also be found descriptive. For example, the following trademarks were refused protection due to lack of distinctiveness: DISCOVERY TRAVEL + ADVENTURE CHANNEL, AVANT GARDE, ROYAL COMFORT, COOL ACTION for perfumes, BIODERMA for biological skincare products, SMART for weapons, PROROOTE for dental products, FITNESS for food, JAZZ for compact discs and MASTER PIECES for financial services (these are all cited as examples in the STO’s new draft guidelines). These examples demonstrate that the Swiss practice is more restrictive than that in many other countries (eg, the United States), but comparable to that in Germany.

On the other hand, suggestive words that raise no specific expectations, or new combinations of descriptive signs which create a distinctive general impression, may still be registered.

There are two types of non-distinctive signs:

- If a sign is indispensable to the public – for example, POSTKONTO for financial services – it may in no circumstances be registered.

- Other non-distinctive signs may acquire secondary meaning and be registered upon evidence of long use in Switzerland (usually 10 years). This period can be shortened in extraordinary circumstances, – in particular, where the applicant can prove extensive use or popularity through extensive media coverage. In borderline cases, opinion polls may be required to prove that the sign has acquired secondary meaning.

Shape marks can be three-dimensional signs which are additionally applied to goods, such as the star on Mercedes-Benz cars. These marks present no special problems.

More problematic are marks that represent the shape of the goods or their packaging – one example is the shape of the basic Lego toy brick, whose distinctiveness has been repeatedly disputed in court proceedings. In general, these marks cannot be registered if their features are merely of an aesthetic nature or determined by technical necessities.

A trademark is deceptive if it creates expectations which are not necessarily fulfilled by the goods or services it represents. As an example, the STO's new draft guidelines refer to a Federal Court decision confirming the rejection of an application for registration of the mark GOLDEN RACE in relation to gold-plated jewellery, and explain that the mark would be acceptable for solid gold watches or jewellery. Applications for marks that suggest a specific geographical origin (eg, SAN FRANCISCO FORTY NINERS in relation to clothing) may still be registered if the list of goods is restricted to goods of the origin suggested.

A trademark may consist of distinctive and non-distinctive elements. It is sufficient that one element is distinctive. No disclaimers are required for non-distinctive elements.

Signs against public order, morality or Swiss law include religious symbols and the names of prominent individuals, without their consent.

As a result of the above exclusions, provisionally rejected word marks are often amended into design marks. If a conflict arises some years later, the owner may then be able to submit evidence that the originally descriptive word has acquired secondary meaning in the meantime.

Finally, domain names can be registered as trademarks. Top-level domain names such as '.com' or '.ch' are not distinctive and can only be registered as trademarks in combination with a distinctive word.

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#### 4. Procedures

##### Examination

The STO will examine a trademark application for formalities and to check whether there are absolute grounds for refusal of registration – in particular, those discussed in section 3 above.

If the STO finds grounds for refusal, it will issue a provisional rejection and set a deadline (which may be extended) within which the applicant may try to overcome the rejection.

This procedure also applies to the Swiss portions of international registrations.

Unlike many other countries, Swiss trademark applications may be amended in any way during the application process. There are no official fees for such amendments. However, in case of significant amendments, such as the expansion of the list of goods and services for which registration is sought, or a substantial change to the mark, the application date will change to the date on which these amendments are made.

### Opposition

Swiss trademarks are published following registration. Oppositions to registration may then be filed by the owners of:

- prior Swiss trademark applications and registrations;
- respective international registrations covering Switzerland; and
- trademarks that are well known in Switzerland according to Article 6*bis* of the Paris Convention.

The deadline for oppositions is three months and cannot be extended. In relation to Swiss trademarks, the opposition period begins to run on the first working day after the date printed on the issue of the *Commercial Gazette* in which the trademark is published. In relation to the Swiss portions of international trademarks, the opposition period begins on the first day of the month following the month of publication by the World Intellectual Property Organization.

### Registration

At the end of the examination process, and before publication, the accepted trademark is registered for a period of 10 years. The initial application fee also covers registration and publication.

### Cancellation/surrender

A trademark owner can revoke a trademark application or registration at any time.

Total or partial cancellation can also result from a successful opposition or cancellation action brought before an ordinary court.

### Revocation

There is no requirement to submit evidence of use to the STO in order to maintain a trademark registration.

Trademarks that are not used, without legitimate reason, in the five years following their final registration (ie, the date on which the decision granting the registration became final) may be challenged before the civil courts on the grounds of non-use.

Under the same circumstances, in the event of opposition proceedings a trademark applicant may claim non-use of the opponent's trademark. In such case the Trademarks Office will establish a time limit within which the opponent must submit plausible evidence of sufficient use or justify the non-use on the grounds of extraordinary circumstances. Extraordinary circumstances may include:

- severe natural disasters or wars;
- lengthy procedures for the approval of medications; or
- litigation or serious threat of litigation concerning the trademark in question.

According to a February 20 2004 decision of the Federal Court, non-use of the Swiss portion of an international trademark registration may be justified by an opposition against the foreign basic registration.

Assuming use of a long-unused trademark before a third party claims non-use will re-establish the original priority.

### Invalidation

The Trademarks Registry may correct errors, but it is not entitled to cancel registered trademarks on its own initiative, unless the registration is not timely renewed.

According to Section 3 of the Trademarks Law, the registry will delete a trademark registration from the register if it has been declared void by a final judgment. If a judgment to this effect has been issued by an arbitration court, confirmation that it is executable is also required (Article 193 of the Law on Private International Law).

Such proceedings may be brought, for example, because:

- the plaintiff missed the opposition deadline;
- an opposition was dismissed for reasons that could not be considered in the opposition proceedings (eg, contractual obligations to cancel a trademark); or
- the distinctiveness of a registered trademark is disputed.

## 5. Enforcement

### Complexity

In case of infringement, the owner of a registered mark can take action through opposition, by filing a cease and desist action before the civil courts or through the arbitration courts. The Trademarks Law also allows for criminal action if the trademark infringement was intentional. In addition, Customs is authorized to notify trademark owners of any suspicious deliveries; in such cases the trademark owner may request that the respective goods be withheld for up to 10 working days, during which period it can try to obtain a judicial injunction. In order to cover damages caused by potentially unjustified withholding, security must usually be posted.

In criminal proceedings it is often difficult to present sufficient evidence of intent or negligence. In civil actions, the calculation of damages can likewise prove complex: this also requires evidence of intent or negligence on the part of the infringer. The damages may be calculated on the basis of:

- diminution of the trademark owner's profits;
- dilution of the trademark and confusion of the public;
- costs of enforcement;
- the illegal profit made by the infringer; or
- sometimes, an adequate licence fee.

Punitive damages are not available and the sums awarded are usually low, generally ranging from between Sfr1,000 and Sfr10,000.

These points aside, the enforcement of registered rights is not overly complicated. The trademark owner enjoys a presumption that its rights are valid. The key questions are usually the risk of confusion between the marks in question and the similarity of the goods and services claimed.

According to Swiss practice, there is some interaction between these two elements: if the marks in question are identical or very similar, there may still be a risk of confusion if the goods are not so closely related, and vice versa.

There is a risk of confusion if two trademarks create the same impression, whether phonetically, visually and/or conceptually, or if the consumer might be deceived into thinking that both products come from the same source or from related entities.

Diluted or weak trademarks (eg, marks with suggestive content) enjoy a narrower scope of protection than characteristic marks, well-known marks and trademarks that constitute part of a series of marks. The STO's new draft guidelines cite the following decisions, among others, to illustrate these principles:

- A risk of confusion was affirmed between the trademarks CAMILLOSAN and CAMILAN; VIVA and COOP VIVA (with design); FLY AWAY and FLOTE AWAY; and GRILON and GELON. All these cases concerned consumer products, and in the last case it was emphasized that the products on both sides were identical.
- A risk of confusion was denied between the trademarks RADION and RADOMAT (washing powder); TASMAR and TASOCAR (pharmaceuticals); TKS-TECNOSOFT and TECHNISOFT (with design); and ISOVER (with design) and

ISOCOVER (due to the different general impressions, the length of the words and the visual impressions). The last case demonstrates that word marks have a broader scope of protection (unless the design is also imitated). The practical conclusion is that in normal circumstances, it is better to register a word mark.

In relation to famous trademarks, Article 15 of the Trademarks Law also allows a trademark owner to take action against use in relation to any goods or services if the distinctiveness of its trademark is jeopardized, or if its reputation is exploited or affected. The owner of the prior right bears the burden of proving that its trademark was famous as of the date on which the alleged infringement began, but the courts can usually also base their judgments on publicly known facts. This recently happened in a Federal Court decision which allowed a claim by Nestlé based on its famous MAGGI trademark against a family website, 'maggi.ch'.

#### Timeframe

Opposition proceedings are usually decided in about a year or even sooner, depending on the extensions of time requested by the parties. The same applies to recourses which can be made to the Commission of Recourse.

The opposition proceeding is administrative in nature and focuses on the question of whether there is a risk of confusion between two marks as registered. Other circumstances, such as actual use, advertisements or co-existence agreements between the parties, will not be considered. Therefore, even after confirmation by the Commission of Recourse, decisions in opposition proceedings are not final and the dispute can still be brought before the ordinary courts.

A peculiarity of the Swiss legal system is that each one of the 26 cantons has its own procedural law. Accordingly, the course and

rhythm of proceedings can be very different. Depending on the circumstances, it may take between one and two years to obtain a decision at first instance and a further year to obtain a second instance decision, usually from the Federal Court.

#### 6. Ownership changes – legalization requirements

Swiss trademark applications and registrations can be assigned with or without the goodwill of the business, for all goods and services claimed, or only for specific goods and services. The legal basis for an assignment can be inheritance, a court judgment, a compulsory auction or a written agreement. In order to have an assignment recorded, a deed of assignment is usually submitted to the Trademarks Office, but other documentation, such as purchase agreements or evidence of a merger, can also be accepted. Signatures need no longer be notarized.

Assignments become immediately effective as between the parties. Third parties may still sue the registered owner until the assignment has been recorded.

As an exception, the validity of assignments (and licences) of certification marks and collective marks depends on their recordation.

In contrast to assignments, licences can also be concluded for only a part of Switzerland (as long as this is in accordance with the Antitrust Law). No specific form is required for concluding licence agreements and they can also be made orally (eg, as happens within related enterprises). However, for the purpose of recording a licence agreement with the Trademarks Office (which is not compulsory), a written form is required. The main effect of recordation is that the trademark cannot be assigned to third parties without the

obligations in the licence agreement. This protects the licensee.

## 7. Areas of overlap with related rights

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Trademark rights can overlap with other rights, particularly copyright, designs, special laws on the protection of geographical indications and unfair competition law. As a consequence, a device mark with individual character in the sense of Article 2 of the Copyright Law may enjoy protection even if it is unregistered. A validly registered trademark may thus be challenged by the owner of a conflicting copyright.

The Trademarks Law grants protection only against the use of confusingly similar marks in connection with related goods and services (including advertising). Other types of use, such as comparisons with a competitor's products, imitations of trade dress and denigration, are covered by the Unfair Competition Law. In practice, both laws are often simultaneously invoked.

## 8. Online issues

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There are no specific legal provisions on the use of trademarks on the Internet.

Unless a trademark is famous, the Trademarks Law allows only for proceedings against commercial use in relation to similar goods and services. The law may thus be of no assistance against mere registration of an identical or confusingly similar domain name used to advertise other goods and services.

However, in many cases the Unfair Competition Law may allow proceedings to be brought against unfair acts (including the use of a

trademark in metatags). In addition, several municipalities (Montana, Lucerne and Frick) have successfully challenged domain names that included their geographical names, based on the Unfair Competition Law and their personal right of name.

The Umbrella Organization of Tourist Offices in the well-known Berner Oberland region also succeeded in a cancellation action brought under the Unfair Competition Law against the 'berneroberland.ch' domain name. Meanwhile, a special law on the protection of public arms enabled the Federal Court to take action against a domain name that incorporated its name ('bundesgericht.ch'). The courts also protected two well-known artists against the use of their respective pseudonym and name in domain names ('djbobbo.de' and 'hundertwasser.ch').

In several cases the courts also granted assignment of the disputed domain names to the plaintiffs ('brego.ch', 'luzern.ch', 'tonline.ch').