

Direct Banking activities, methodology and interesting facts



The advisor is the central figure between the client and the Bank's internal services.

What are the specific features of virtual advisory services? To get a better idea of what's behind Direct Banking, we asked Giovanni Cavuoti to answer a few questions.

Giovanni Cavuoti

*Head of Direct Banking Advisory Services,
Banca Popolare di Sondrio (SUISSE) SA*

Direct Banking – what does it mean and what do you do?

Direct Banking is a virtual branch in its own right, organised into two synergistic operational areas:

- the Call Center on the one hand, which is focused on client support, handling technical and operational requests and
- advisory services on the other, which is the area I'm responsible for. It's dedicated to managing individual portfolios and offering banking products and services.

The collaboration between the two groups is strategic: requests for assistance can turn into advisory opportunities and, vice versa, advisory services can resolve technical issues, ensuring an integrated service.

As regards the service I'm responsible for, our approach is mainly digital (via telephone and e-mail), so it's a matter of remote management. However, for particularly complex investment advice, we prefer to meet clients in person as this allows for a clearer and more effective interaction.

The activities we carry out are similar to those carried out by Retail Banking advisors, including liquidity monitoring, payment management and compliance checks (including anti-money laundering (AML) procedures). In carrying out these activities, we are supported by a team of specialised assistants, who are essential resources for our daily operations. The most important area is still cross-selling-oriented advisory services/sales, where we offer clients a comprehensive service and provide customised solutions. We do not deal with mortgage activities and structured investments. In such cases, the client is referred to the nearest Retail colleagues, in a process that we internally refer to metaphorically as an "assist".

Does your role as manager involve any special duties?

In addition to managing my client portfolio as an advisor, I also have management duties; I'm responsible for leading a team of eight people. I would like to point out that Direct Banking is the only service in the Bank that has team objectives. This means that I analyse how my colleagues perform and define the strategy to achieve

these objectives – sometimes even planning targeted campaigns for products/services. Nevertheless, I give my colleagues a great deal of freedom to act and let them decide on sales strategies themselves. In this regard, and at their request, I'm responsible for extracting the lists of clients they wish to target. Precisely because our objectives are team-based, I'm also committed to fostering a positive working environment – something I think is essential. I'm fortunate because the team was already close-knit before I arrived, but it's my responsibility to make sure that it stays that way. This is also why it's important to schedule in moments together to foster team spirit: whether it's going for a coffee together or organising after-work drinks or other activities. Alongside all this, like any manager, I provide them with support when needed.

**What are the distinctive features of communication that is mainly conducted by phone?
Are there any tricks to managing it better?**

Compared to a face-to-face meeting, telephone communication is more complex. In order to get the desired message across, you have to adopt a real strategy. Believe me, it's all about energy. Even if we can't see each other, the person on the other end of the line can feel everything. This means that it's important to pay attention to your tone of voice and posture – some advisors prefer to stand up, others to sit down (but in this case, it's best to avoid crossing your legs). When starting a phone conversation, it's important to smile. Body language influences tone of voice, and it's this that triggers certain feelings in the client listening.

The banking sector is highly regulated. Can you explain what “cross-border” means and what consequences this has for you as “virtual” advisors?

Cross-border regulations are intended to regulate the management of banking activities involving clients who are not resident in Switzerland. Specifically, a Swiss financial advisor may not offer or sell products/services when the client is physically outside the country. Since our contact with clients is mainly virtual, cross-border activities have a major impact on our work. So, before starting a sales approach, we need to check where the person is located. If the client isn't in Switzerland, the consultation should be postponed until the client is in the country.

Do you take measures to ensure privacy and verify the accuracy of information received by telephone or e-mail?

Absolutely yes, client identification is essential. Since we can't do it in person, we ask questions about the banking relationship that only the holder of the account can answer. We avoid asking for more general or personal information, as this is more easily accessible. E-mails are also an important means of communication for us and we're only required to reply to the e-mail address associated with the banking relationship. If a client requests an order to be executed through this channel, we're required to call them before proceeding to verify that they did indeed submit the request in writing. Last but not least, for all clients who wish to open a PassparTu package through the dedicated online feature on our website, we also use video identification through an external company.

How does Direct Banking advice differ from traditional advisory services?

Although our daily activities and business are essentially the same, unlike Retail Banking, we don't deal with mortgages or structured investments. Client acquisition is also different; in our case, it's more "passive". On the one hand, this is because new clients are assigned to us annually based on certain criteria. On the other hand, because our team covers the whole of Switzerland and therefore manages a larger number of clients per advisor, we wouldn't have enough time to acquire new clients. By contrast, traditional advisory services focus mainly on the area where they're located. As I already mentioned, the channel of contact with our clients is different, but this doesn't affect the relationship of trust that is established. The added value of our Bank compared to other institutions is that clients managed virtually by Direct Banking have a contact person they can turn to when they need to.

Regardless of the similarities and differences, we virtual advisors and traditional advisors work really well together. For our part, we provide so-called assists, transferring clients interested in mortgages and structured investments (up-selling) to them. In return, since we operate virtually and so don't have a physical location, the branches provide us with enormous support – for example, when clients need to sign contractual documents or pay in an initial amount upon opening an account.

Since the way you're in contact with clients is different, does your team have different objectives?

Like I said, ours is the only service that has team objectives. However, we are all advisors and our aim is to provide clients with comprehensive advice, offering products and services that support them in managing their daily needs (cross-selling).

3

The Call Center also operates electronically. Can you explain the difference between them and your department?

To simplify, we can say that the Call Center assists clients who have problems with our products (cards, e-banking platform, etc.). Direct Banking, on the other hand, mainly deals with providing advice (sales activities). Another major difference lies in the method of contact: in the case of the Call Center, it's the clients who take the initiative to try to resolve their issues (inbound contact). We Direct Banking advisors, on the other hand, actively make contact (outbound).

What are the characteristics of a good Direct Banking advisor?

Motivation, passion and preparation!

An advisor has to be motivated; without this inner drive, it becomes more difficult to connect with clients and achieve results. A good knowledge of banking products and services is also crucial, especially when communicating by telephone. A virtual advisor only has their voice to convey their knowledge and build trust. If the client senses insecurity, there's no getting around it. Finally, passion is also very important – if you're not passionate about what you do, it's difficult to get good results, both in terms of client satisfaction and sales.

In an increasingly digital world, what future challenges will Direct Banking face?

In my opinion, virtual advisory services will grow in popularity as the years go by. We're noticing that more and more clients don't have the time or inclination to visit a branch and prefer to conduct their business by phone or e-mail. Time will become even more precious in the future and there will be a tendency to optimise the use of this resource. In addition to this, the increasing use of artificial intelligence, or technology in general, will allow us advisors to focus exclusively on providing advice.

Finally, what was your career path before taking up your current position?

I had just become an adult when I had my first experience at BPS (SUISSE). During those six months, I worked in three different areas: Marketing, the Call Center and Product Management. Over the next decade, I continued to work in banking, albeit at a different institution, where I dealt with cash management, basic consulting and investment. I worked in both Ticino and in central Switzerland and obtained my federal certification. In 2017, I became deputy manager, taking my first steps into management. In 2023, I returned to BPS (SUISSE) as Head of Direct Banking Advisory Services. Although providing advice virtually was a challenge at first, the experience I had gained over the years was undoubtedly vital.

Publisher

Banca Popolare di Sondrio (Suisse) SA

Via Maggio 1
CH-6900 Lugano
Tel. +4158 855 31 00
Fax +4158 855 31 15

Call Center 00800 800 767 76
contact@bps-suisse.ch
www.bps-suisse.ch/en

Disclaimer

This publication is intended for information purposes only and does not constitute an offer and is in no way a substitute for the qualified advice required prior to any purchase decision, especially in relation to the risks associated with it. Therefore, it is the duty of the individual investor to consult his/her financial advisor. The financial products described here are not intended for persons subject to a jurisdiction that limits or prohibits their distribution from Switzerland.

Published: October 2025