

Christiane Fischer The Artful Insurer

In January 2000, after Daimler-Benz merged with Chrysler, it closed its New York beachhead and headed to a suburb of Detroit. Christiane Fischer, then General Manager of both Corporate Information and Reporting for Daimler's North American operations, opted not to move.

Her husband, Bernhard Harling, was based in New York; her three daughters (now 12, 11, and seven) were ensconced in school here, and since she first visited the Big Apple in October 1988 on a business trip for Daimler Benz, she has been in love with the town, enthralled by its intensity, energy, dynamics, optimism, people, and mode of transportation.

So she moved to AXA Art Insurance Corp, first as Director of Communications and COO and then, in January 2004, as CEO, in a job that combines her passion for art and figures. "I've always loved beautiful objects and numbers: being involved with them from a business and risk management point, combining left brain/right brain, is near heaven," she says.



"Heavenly" is also how her childhood sounds. She was born and raised in a pretty village in rural Germany, where her mother was a homemaker, caring for two older brothers and Fischer, and a keen gardener, who surrounded the family with huge flower and vegetable gardens and orchards. Fischer can't recall eating a store-bought fruit or vegetable in her entire youth. Her father, an engineer, worked for a large American heavy equipment and machinery manufacturer. His career took him all around the world, often for long periods. "I was fascinated by his travels and could not wait for him to return and share with me the wonders of those far away places," she says. Her whole family competed in athletics: from early on Fischer was a gymnastics and field and track star. (Her parents had met on the track field and subsequently formed a field and track club for their community.)

After receiving her Abitur (or international baccalaureate), she completed a program as foreign language correspondent in Mainz and began her career in the customer service unit of Bank of America in Frankfurt before moving to Daimler. She came to the US in 1989, when she was 24, after working in the finance department of Daimler-Benz in Stuttgart, and after a year at Mercedes in New Jersey moved to Daimler in New York. While holding down her day job, Fischer studied economics and marketing at NYU for three years.

Kids Change Everything

That hectic pace culminated when she had her first daughter; another followed 13 months later. Something had to give and it was school, she says. "Suddenly the focus changed from me to them." Fischer admits that it has been challenging "not to allow myself to be totally absorbed by my children" and considers her greatest accomplishment to be succeeding as a full-time working mother with three equally happy daughters. She shares her work with her children whenever possible and talks to them about it and what it means to her. But when they have a competitive soccer game at 3 PM on a Friday afternoon, she is there. "Thank God we now have cell-phones, Blackberries, laptops, the technology that allows me to live my life more on my own terms. I can have that special moment with one of my children and still be reachable and do the rest of my work at night or whenever I wish." Technology has also been a godsend, connecting her to her husband who moved to Atlanta two years ago to run public relations for Porsche and who returns home most weekends. "Handling complicated logistics and careful planning are crucial to our family and work lives," adds Fischer, who estimates that she travels almost 40% of her work-time to Axa Art offices in Chicago, Beverly Hills, Dallas, Atlanta, Boston and to Europe to meet with the 30 members of her staff, clients and overseas colleagues.

I've always loved beautiful objects and numbers: being involved with them from a business and risk management point, combining left brain/right brain, is near heaven.

Analyzing Risk

When in New York, she rises at 5:30 to have breakfast and read the paper in her Long Island City home. (Her live-in au pair walks the two dogs.) By 7:15 she is heading toward the subway with her girls, they for school and she for the office. (Most evenings she entertains or attends art events, but weekends are reserved for family.) By 8 AM Fischer has usually made her way through the barrage of emails and voicemails and is on her way to a meeting or immersed in reviewing a large risk offering. In a year she'll personally sign off on some 600 insurance policies of very high value. Roughly 55 percent of clients are private collectors; 20 percent museums, 15 percent exhibitions and the rest, private dealers and galleries. Three out of five policies she green-lights immediately. For the rest she'll discuss the premium with the underwriter—all before a customer sees a policy—and more often than not ratchet up the premium. Sometimes she'll call for a location-inspection. Because of the threat of earthquakes, California policies tend to cost most; the threat of terrorism in New York pushes up insurance policy prices here.

People Who Made a Difference

Competitors like Chubb and AIG have a bit of an advantage in being able to offer home owners' insurance and to "package" their offerings. To counter that, AXA positions itself as a specialist with more flexibility in tailoring custom-made solutions to address clients' issues. Obviously this has worked for the \$31 million AXA US boutique unit that Fischer runs, which has grown 10 percent in each of the past several years. With plans to expand into Canada and add product offerings such as insurance for jewelry, rugs and furs, collectibles, antiques, wine cellars, musical instruments, photographic equipment and theatrical props, she expects to run a \$50 million unit by 2010.

While she's had many mentors in her life, starting with a history and German teacher who nurtured her love for reading, Fischer was most influenced by her father. Her mother's example taught her the importance of nurturing family, but her dad taught her determination and persistency and that "no is never an option." Like him, she cannot sit still and do nothing. "There is always another project to start and pour energy into, something to discover, try out, challenge, accomplish." She loves turning ideas into reality and savors having the autonomy to act. "I don't do well when someone watches over my shoulder," she says.

Fischer also loves getting involved in settling claims, deciding how to proceed, and mapping the claims negotiation process. Having no ego is handy here, dealing with a lot of "personalities," successful, rich people with large amounts of ego, she says. "I try to remain focused on the issue, calm and factual." Payouts for Katrina went smoothly, but twice in the last few years she's been in the middle of two large cases of fraud.

Fischer revels in the now, occasionally regretting that she hasn't had a fourth child. As for the future: she fantasizes playing the saxophone in clubs around NYC. And why not? If Mick Jagger can swagger around at 62?

[Cover Story](#) | [Breaking News](#) | [Events](#) | [Biz Connect](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Issue Archives](#)
[Home](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [About US](#) | [Contact](#)

© 2003-2006 WomensBiz.US All Rights Reserved.

WomensBiz.US and WomensBiz.US online is published monthly. No part of the publication or web site may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.