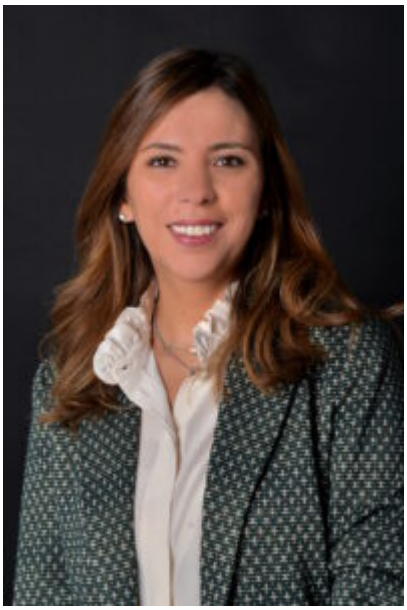
Sofia Lahlou – Country Manager, Versalya, Morocco

[Morocco's] trajectory points towards immense potential and growth

17.10.2023

Tags: Morocco, Versalya, Women's Health, Strategy

Women's health specialist Versalya enjoyed a resurgent 2022 in Morocco under the leadership of Sofia Lahlou. She explains some of the key trends in the Moroccan women's health space, how the company is supporting the healthcare transformation underway in the country, and her approach to talent attraction and retention.



What developments have occurred at Versalya – the Moroccan firm focusing on women's and children's health that you lead – in the last three years, especially considering the challenges posed by COVID-19?

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Versalya promptly prioritized Morocco’s pressing needs. We swiftly mobilized our resources to provide vital medicines, sanitization equipment, and support to our frontline healthcare workers. Despite these challenges, we transitioned our staff to remote work and prioritized their continued learning through online platforms. Although this meant a brief hiatus from our primary activities, our dedication to improving maternal and child healthcare never wavered.

2022 marked a pivotal year of resurgence for us. We amplified our workforce by 30 percent, culminating in a robust team of around 85 dedicated field representatives. We also enriched our technical division and augmented our support and marketing teams with great talents. We’ve seen commendable growth in our product lineup, always keeping maternal and child health at the forefront, emphasizing products that add genuine value.

A great example of our commitment is the introduction of a well-known medication tailored to counter pregnancy-induced nausea to the Moroccan market. The drug is specifically designed to ease pregnancy-related nausea and vomiting and stands out from other anti-emetic medications as the only one recommended for use during pregnancy.

While Moroccan patients have known and benefited from this medication, sourced primarily from Spain, for around thirty years, it was never accessible here. With international travel being disrupted during the pandemic, it became impossible to purchase for Moroccan patients, which created a pressing need. Recognizing this, Versalya spearheaded the initiative to procure the drug’s licensing rights for Morocco. The subsequent launch was met with enthusiastic reception from both patients and prescribers. The local availability of much-needed medication resonates with our enduring mission: enhancing healthcare accessibility for Moroccan women by providing value-driven solutions.

What are the specific figures regarding Versalya’s personnel and revenue, given the 30 percent expansion in your sales team and the introduction of new products?

Currently, Versalya boasts a dynamic team of 125 professionals. Beyond our medical representatives, we have a devoted technical division and administration team. It’s worth highlighting that the majority of our leadership is female, demonstrating our commitment to empowering women in the industry.

On the financial front, although we faced challenges during 2020-2021, 2022 marked a turnaround. We got back on the growth path by strategically introducing new products, benefiting from the market's recovery, and maintaining a strong focus on excellence in marketing and sales. Our consistent branding and presence in Europe, the Middle East, and LATAM have solidified our reputation in the medical sector and played a pivotal role in our success.

What areas of your portfolio are currently a significant focus for Versalya, and where do you foresee the most growth potential?

Versalya's core portfolio emphasizes gynecology and pediatrics. Within gynecology, our offerings span obstetrics, contraception, pregnancy products, fertility aids, essentials tailored for expecting mothers, and solutions addressing menopause, like Calcium/Vitamin D medicine for osteoporosis. Every product we roll out resonates with these categories. For pediatrics, our range includes antipyretics, a probiotic, and a solution for anemia, among others.

We've launched a specialized website for the Moroccan audience to bridge the gap between us and the patients. It features a blog and the unique 'Versalya-Mums Club,' designed to accompany individuals from conception onwards. This digital platform touches upon key life junctures, such as aspiring parenthood, pregnancy milestones, newborn care, and managing menopause. Our vision is to foster a supportive environment where patients can guide and uplift one another through their shared journeys.

We've also embraced social media to disseminate knowledge and insights, championing women's health and well-being. Our approach extends beyond clinician partnerships; it emphasizes empowering women with knowledge. For instance, when debuting our solution for vaginal atrophy, we prioritized patient education, ensuring they were aware of available solutions and encouraging them to discuss openly with healthcare professionals. Although we produce the solutions, we firmly believe that prescribing choices rests with medical practitioners. Our endeavor remains to equip women with comprehensive, informed options.

What specific trends and growth opportunities do you currently observe in the women's health and child healthcare market in Morocco, and how do you anticipate these factors shaping Versalya's operations moving forward?

In the women’s health and child healthcare market in Morocco, several pivotal trends and growth opportunities are evident, and they are intimately linked with the country’s unique demographic and governmental dynamics.

Morocco is distinguished by a high birth rate, with roughly 650,000 births annually. This is largely influenced by its youthful population and a demographic structure that is quite distinct from European nations. Such a backdrop guarantees a continually growing and sustainable market. Enhancing this potential are the government’s significant advancements in healthcare coverage. From previously catering to only a limited segment of the population, they’ve quickly broadened their reach to cover a vast majority. This exponential growth has played a transformative role in shaping Versalya’s strategic direction. Our primary goal has always been to augment awareness and facilitate greater access to healthcare, and the government’s initiatives have been invaluable allies in this mission.

A few defining trends that merit attention are:

Digital Evolution: The digital revolution is impossible to overlook. With more Moroccans turning to online platforms for health-related information and community support, there’s a golden opportunity for healthcare providers to establish a more interactive relationship with their patients.

Holistic Health Approach: The interest in integrating contemporary medical practices with traditional remedies is growing. This integrated healthcare approach is gaining traction and resonates with the values of many Moroccans.

Collaborative Healthcare: Cross-sector partnerships, particularly between public and private players, are on the rise. These collaborations promise richer research, product diversification, and enhanced service delivery.

Morocco’s adept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, its successful vaccination drives, and the rapid digitalization of its healthcare infrastructure are testament to its evolving healthcare prowess. With some hospital infrastructures now mirroring European standards and a strengthening healthcare network, the country is poised for growth. Anticipating this, Versalya has strategically positioned itself to meet the surging demands. Emphasizing awareness, R&D through our parent company Italfarmaco, and preventive care is not just a global trend but is now deeply ingrained in the Moroccan healthcare ethos. In response, Versalya is mirroring this shift towards preventive medicine, acknowledging its profound importance in the dynamic healthcare environment. Women, as central pillars of Moroccan society, deserve unparalleled healthcare. Ensuring their well-being equips them to navigate the diverse and pivotal roles they fulfill within our community.

Some companies leave the Moroccan market due to its small size and limited purchasing power, while others invest heavily for growth. How do you view this evolving landscape, considering the emergence of new players and products?

The Moroccan market landscape is undeniably dynamic, marked by an ebb and flow of entities, each reacting differently to its unique challenges and opportunities. In this intricate configuration, the emphasis should be on astute strategy. Entering with another generic offering in an already dense market might not be the most successful approach. Instead, focusing on unexplored territories or underserved niches can pave the way for meaningful returns. Competition, contrary to being a threat, can be a boost when approached with intelligence and integrity. It can galvanize market growth by amplifying awareness and championing causes like women's empowerment.

Therefore, rather than shying away from competition, embracing it can be the key. However, the mantra for success in such an environment is discernment: identifying the right arenas to venture into, curating the right product portfolios, and always spotlighting value-driven, niche solutions. It is not about being the loudest voice but the most resonant one.

In the context of Versalya's strong brand and unique company culture, how do you go about attracting and retaining new talent?

At Versalya, our robust brand and distinct company ethos serve as a foundation for our talent strategy. Our growth trajectory has been marked by a commitment to a collaborative, people-first approach. Recent survey findings reveal that financial compensation, while important, isn't the top priority for most professionals; they value factors like recognition and a conducive work atmosphere even more. This understanding supports our approach to talent management.

Rather than simply offering competitive pay, we emphasize the value of recognizing accomplishments and the importance of fostering an environment where team members feel autonomous and trusted. Micromanagement, in our view, is detrimental. If I were to hover over a team member, dictating their every move, it would limit their potential and creativity. That is why at Versalya, we cherish principles like recognition, empowerment, and trust above all else.

But it goes even deeper than that. We strive to infuse purpose and meaning into our roles, ensuring that everyone feels aligned with our mission. As we have evolved, we've seen firsthand how our nurturing culture significantly influences our successes. We're proactive in honing the soft

skills of our team and provide practical training avenues to uplift their competencies. Our teams collaborate seamlessly, each contributing their unique strengths to the collective success of Versalya. This rich tapestry of trust, learning, and mutual respect is the culture I'm committed to preserving and enhancing.

Looking ahead, what are your plans for the future, both personally and for Versalya?

Moving forward, our vision is centered around the roadmap we charted for 2020-2025, even though we've made a few adjustments along the way. We're not just limiting our sights to the immediate future; we're casting our gaze on 2030 and what lies beyond. Upholding women's health in Morocco continues to be our driving purpose, and we're dynamically broadening our range of offerings, with several products currently under registration. While our dedication to maternal and child health is unwavering, we're keen on diversifying into other therapeutic areas. This potential expansion may involve collaboration with our partners in Spain, given their extensive portfolio. Having carved a niche for ourselves in maternal and child health over the past decade, it's time we channel this expertise into unlocking fresh avenues.

Do you have any final message for our international audience?

To our esteemed international audience, I'd like to convey a message of unity, collaboration, and ambition. As we navigate a rapidly evolving global landscape, it's essential to acknowledge that collaboration, shared values, and mutual growth create better opportunities for success. The journey of Versalya in Morocco has been a testament to this, emphasizing our commitment to addressing local needs while also staying attuned to global best practices and advancements.

As we promote women's health and childcare, which are truly universal issues, I invite like-minded entities and individuals to collaborate and share in our mission. If you possess therapeutic solutions that resonate with our goals and vision, let's unite our efforts. Entering new markets, especially without local allies, can be daunting, but with Versalya in Morocco, you have a partner ready to embrace shared endeavors and ambitions.

Morocco stands at a pivotal juncture with significant advancements and developments. The country's trajectory points towards immense potential and growth. I am unequivocally optimistic about Morocco's bright future and invite you to be a part of this exciting journey with us.

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