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Patrick Leimgruber of UPSA discusses the company's strategic growth roadmap and ambitions to expand its product portfolio and reach EUR 1 billion in net sales by 2027. He also outlines the importance of Switzerland as one of the French company's key markets, the challenges and opportunities presented by the Swiss regulatory framework, UPSA's CSR commitments to support European manufacturing while reducing environmental impact, and its strategies for attracting and retaining local talent.

What is the story behind UPSA, and how is the company positioning itself for future growth?

UPSA is a French pharmaceutical company helping patients to treat the minor ailments of everyday life, and employing around 1,900 people globally. Most of our operations are based in Agen, near Bordeaux, where we produce the majority of our products, including Dafalgan, which is Switzerland's leading pain relief brand. Our company has a rich history of innovation—UPSA was the first to introduce effervescent pain relief tablets to the market, alongside other pioneering pharmaceutical formulations, all developed in Agen.

In 2019, a significant turning point for UPSA occurred when Taisho Pharmaceutical acquired the company from Bristol-Myers Squibb. This acquisition marked Taisho's strategic expansion into Europe. With the change in ownership, we also welcomed Isabelle Van Rycke as our new CEO, who

brought her expertise from Sanofi and spearheaded the “Conquest 2027” plan—our roadmap for ambitious global growth. This plan aims to reach EUR 1 billion in net sales by 2027, a significant leap from the 300 million net sales we achieved just a few years ago.

Our growth strategy is focused on organic expansion, driven by our flagship product, Dafalgan, which commands 79 percent of the paracetamol market in Switzerland. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, we managed to maintain a steady supply, thanks to our vertically integrated production facilities. This flexibility has been crucial in ensuring our resilience in times of crisis. Looking ahead, we are also exploring strategic mergers and acquisitions to support our ambitious growth objectives.

What can you tell us about your professional background and your vision as GM at UPSA?

My life has spanned multiple countries, including Venezuela, the United States, and Switzerland, where I completed my studies. I began my career at Reckitt Benckiser, working in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) and over-the-counter (OTC) sectors, managing key accounts for the pharmacy sector in Switzerland. From there, I transitioned to Bayer, where I managed major brands in the pain, digestive health and cold categories, such as Aspirin, Pretuval and Iberogast.

After three years at Bayer, I sought new challenges and joined Sanofi as Head of Marketing for their OTC consumer health division in Switzerland, managing brands like Bioflorin and Buscopan. This role allowed me to further hone my expertise, and I soon moved into a regional role overseeing pain care for Europe. A year later, I became the Global Brand Manager for Sanofi’s pain care business.

In my current role at UPSA, my mandate focuses on two main priorities. Firstly, I am driving a cultural transformation within the company. UPSA had previously taken a more cautious, defensive approach, and my goal is to foster a culture of innovation, agility, and growth. I am building a team that is eager to push boundaries, take bold steps, and drive the business forward. Secondly, I am focused on expanding our product portfolio and establishing a robust innovation pipeline to serve patients and consumers’ needs, while ensuring that we meet the ambitious targets outlined in our “Conquest 2027” growth plan for Switzerland.

What role does Switzerland play in UPSA’s global strategy, and why is it important to maintain a direct presence in the country?

Despite UPSA’s relatively small size on the global stage, we maintain a direct presence in four key markets: France, Italy, Belgium, and Switzerland. Switzerland, in particular, is vital to our operations due to the significant market share of Dafalgan, our flagship product. Over the years, we have built a strong presence in Switzerland, and the success of Dafalgan directly supports our production facility in Agen, contributing to cost efficiencies and overall business synergies.

Switzerland’s uniqueness within Europe makes it essential for us to manage operations locally. Regulatory requirements, market access strategies, and even the multilingual landscape differ significantly from the rest of Europe. These specificities, such as dealing with the Federal Office of Public Health (BAG), mean that it would not be feasible to manage the Swiss market remotely. This is why we have established a dedicated affiliate here—to navigate the complexities and ensure that our products are tailored to meet local needs while contributing to our global growth ambitions.

What has been the role of Dafalgan in shaping UPSA’s presence in Switzerland, and how do you plan to expand and diversify your product portfolio moving forward?

Dafalgan has been central to UPSA’s presence in Switzerland for the past 40 years, serving as our flagship product and building a strong market foundation. Historically, it was the sole product in our Swiss portfolio, largely due to its deep-rooted association with UPSA and our previous ownership by Bristol-Myers Squibb. However, as we look to the future, diversification is a key priority. We are exploring opportunities to introduce additional products, such as the multivitamin Gummies we currently offer in France, which we believe would resonate well in the Swiss market. Moreover, we are expanding into new areas, including Women’s Health to meet the evolving needs of consumers.

While we do not set specific targets for the number of product launches, our strategy is heavily focused on driving innovation, with the goal of generating a significant portion of future sales from new, innovative products. Global trends, particularly the aging population, play a significant role in shaping our portfolio expansion. Although UPSA does not have the same scale of R&D resources as larger pharmaceutical companies, our focus on clinical and formula innovations allows us to bring meaningful advancements to the market, primarily through our production facility in Agen.

How does UPSA stand out in Switzerland’s competitive market, and what unique value does it offer?

UPSA differentiates itself through two key factors. First, we offer high-quality products at affordable prices. Dafalgan, our flagship product, is a prime example—it is the most cost-effective option among the top pain relief brands, delivering excellent quality at a much lower price. This pricing strategy positions us as a leader in value, which we plan to replicate with other products in our portfolio.

Second, our commitment to local production is a significant differentiator. Most of our products, including Dafalgan, are manufactured in our facility in Agen, France. Although we currently source paracetamol externally, in partnership with Seqens, the French government and Sanofi, we are bringing back the production of paracetamol Europe by 2026. Additionally, with Ipsophene we have a second project on-going which will produce paracetamol in Europe through a more environmentally sustainable process. This strategic move not only supports European manufacturing but also ensures greater flexibility and responsiveness to market demands, particularly in times of crisis, like during COVID-19, when we maintained a stable supply chain.

What challenges and opportunities do you face with Switzerland’s regulatory environment, especially regarding Swissmedic?

Navigating Swissmedic’s regulatory framework presents both challenges and opportunities. For medicinal products, Switzerland has its own specific requirements, making it difficult to directly import products from markets like France. Older products, in particular, require additional updates and adjustments to meet local standards. If Switzerland were part of the EU, this process would be much simpler. This complexity is one reason we are focusing on medical devices and food supplements, where the regulatory framework is more flexible. For instance, food supplements do not require formal approval from authorities in Switzerland, allowing us to move quickly—unlike in countries like Germany, where the process is more stringent.

Swissmedic, known for its rigorous standards, places a strong emphasis on quality. While this ensures high-caliber products on the market, it can also make the approval process more demanding. For large pharmaceutical companies like Novartis or Roche, which engage in clinical trials and cutting-edge research, Swissmedic offers valuable collaboration opportunities. However, for UPSA, which focuses more on over-the-counter products and incremental innovations, the need for such close regulatory collaboration is less pressing.

How is UPSA embracing sustainability, and what significance does the recent B Corp certification hold in this effort?

Sustainability is at the heart of UPSA's strategy, deeply embedded in our commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). We are taking meaningful steps to localize our production, not only to support European manufacturing but also to reduce our environmental impact. Achieving B Corp certification is a significant milestone for us, but it is not the ultimate goal. Our true aim is to continuously raise our CSR standards and become a benchmark for responsible business practices in the industry.

At UPSA, we are guided by a strong purpose—to deliver high-quality products while continually improving our production processes to make them more sustainable. For example, we have recently installed solar panels at our production site in Agen as part of our broader effort to reduce energy consumption and enhance our environmental footprint. Every decision we make is grounded in CSR principles, ensuring that we contribute positively to both society and the environment.

Currently, UPSA is one of only three pharmaceutical companies in France to achieve B Corp certification, a rarity in our sector. This achievement not only highlights our commitment to sustainability but also sets us apart in the pharmaceutical industry.

How do you approach attracting and retaining top talent at UPSA, especially in a competitive market like Switzerland with larger pharmaceutical players?

Attracting and retaining talent in Switzerland is certainly challenging, particularly with the presence of major pharmaceutical companies like Roche and Novartis. While UPSA is a well-established name in France, it is less known in Switzerland. Even though Dafalgan enjoys 99 percent brand recognition here, many still don't immediately associate UPSA with the product. Once we clarify that UPSA is the company behind Dafalgan, there is a stronger connection, but building the company's own brand awareness remains a priority.

To compete with the larger players, we have placed a strong emphasis on improving public relations and employer branding, though we are still in the early stages. One of the key selling points we offer to prospective talent is the unique growth path that UPSA is on, particularly with our ambitious "Conquest 2027" plan. We are not just focused on maintaining the status quo; we're

driving forward with an ambitious growth strategy, and we have the support and resources from our global headquarters to achieve these goals.

What makes UPSA particularly attractive is the opportunity for individuals to make a real impact. Unlike larger, more centralized companies that are focused on cost-cutting and consolidation, we offer a dynamic environment where people can take ownership and drive meaningful change. It is not just about managing the bottom line—it is about achieving top-line growth, expanding market share, and growing volumes. For those seeking hands-on experience and a chance to truly influence the company's direction, UPSA provides a unique and exciting opportunity.

Additionally, we often leverage our professional networks to bring in talent. For example, several of our key hires, including some from Sanofi, came through these connections. This approach allows us to attract skilled professionals who are eager to be part of a more agile and growth-driven environment.

How do you foster loyalty and engagement among your team at UPSA, and what strategies do you employ to keep employees motivated?

As a leader, my primary focus is on cultivating a culture that empowers individuals to take risks, embrace innovation, and learn from their experiences. It is vital to create an environment where making mistakes is seen as a valuable part of the learning process. Although the term "empowerment" can sometimes feel clichéd, it genuinely plays a critical role in motivating our team and driving forward momentum.

Recognizing that not everyone may align with this culture is important; some natural turnover can be beneficial as it introduces fresh perspectives and new talent. For those who resonate with our vision and wish to contribute to our growth, it is essential to provide an engaging atmosphere. This goes beyond offering competitive salaries and benefits; it includes fostering a workplace that encourages collaboration, communication, and meaningful interaction among team members.

In the post-COVID landscape, the conversation around remote work and flexible office policies has become increasingly significant. We are currently in the process of redesigning our office space to create a more modern and interactive environment. Our existing setup does not fully support the level of collaboration we aspire to, so we plan to undertake a renovation that may involve temporarily closing the office. Our objective is to establish a workspace that promotes spontaneous interactions and idea-sharing, which are crucial for strengthening teams and enhancing overall

company performance.

What key lessons have you learned in your role as General Manager at UPSA, and what are your main priorities for 2024-2025?

One of the most significant lessons I have learned in my role is the critical importance of public affairs and market access. Transitioning from a focus on the over-the-counter (OTC) segment to one that relies heavily on prescription (Rx) products has highlighted how essential it is to establish effective market access strategies and robust public relations. At UPSA, cultivating relationships with key organizations, such as the Federal Office of Public Health (BAG), is vital for our success.

As we look forward to 2025, my primary focus will be on driving innovation. We expect to see a considerable influx of new product developments, both through strategic acquisitions and internal innovations originating from our facility in Agen. A notable example is our recent collaboration with a UK company called Rem3dy Health, which led to the launch of UPSA Nourished—a line of gummies infused with vitamins and minerals. This product was just recently introduced to the Swiss market, building on its successful launches in France and Italy.

Additionally, we have just finalized the acquisition of Serelys Pharma, which will further enhance our growth trajectory. Expanding our product portfolio is crucial for reducing our current reliance on Dafalgan, which currently accounts for 100 percent of our sales. By diversifying our offerings, we aim to capture new consumer segments and strengthen our market presence.

Another important priority is to reinforce the Dafalgan brand in light of increasing cost pressures and a growing trend toward generics. It is essential for us to effectively communicate the value of branded products like Dafalgan, especially since our manufacturing process is entirely based in France, ensuring superior quality and consistency. While we do not currently compete directly with generics in the pain and paracetamol market, we do face competition from other paracetamol products that may appear like generics. In summary, UPSA is committed to growth, innovation, and advancing our business objectives while staying true to our corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitments and production strategies.

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