Marwan Omar – General Manager, GCC Cluster, Ferring Pharmaceuticals



Investing in Saudi Arabia is not merely an option—it is a strategic necessity

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Marwan Omar, General Manager of Ferring in the GCC, lays out the company's growth strategy and its deep commitment to the region. With a focus on local talent development, strategic partnerships, and expanding its product portfolio, Ferring continues to strengthen its presence in reproductive medicine, gastroenterology, and uro-oncology.

What has driven your exceptional 28-year tenure at Ferring, and how have you sustained your enthusiasm and momentum in this role over the years?

My tenure at Ferring began at a transformative moment when the company had no established presence in the Middle East, relying solely on distributors. Recognizing the untapped potential of the region, I collaborated with my manager to propose a bold vision to the company's leadership. We advocated for the establishment of a regional office in Amman, emphasizing its strategic advantages: an educated and talented workforce, cost-effectiveness, and a geographically central position. This proposal resonated with the company's direction, leading to the establishment of our office in 1996.

From this foundation, we systematically expanded across 17 countries in the Middle East, creating an operational framework where none previously existed. This effort involved appointing

distributors, building and training teams, and engaging directly with hospitals and markets. My role required versatility, spanning market engagement, operational oversight, and even marketing—tasks I embraced to ensure the region's success. Over time, the results were extraordinary. The Middle East became the second most significant region for Ferring after Europe, growing to a team of 280 employees and generating annual sales of €117 million, contributing 5-6% to Ferring's global turnover. These achievements far surpassed expectations for a region that had started from scratch.

What has kept me deeply committed to Ferring over the years is the profound sense of ownership and connection I have developed. Having been instrumental in building the company's presence in the region, I feel an enduring bond with both the organization and its people. This sense of belonging is further strengthened by the diverse roles I have undertaken, which have continually challenged and enriched me, sharpening my skills and broadening my perspective.

Even during challenging periods, I have remained steadfast in my belief in Ferring's resilience and capacity to thrive. For me, Ferring is far more than a multinational corporation; it is a personal journey and a professional legacy. This combination of purpose, connection, and growth has sustained my energy and drive, ensuring my commitment to Ferring's ongoing success remains as strong as ever.

How has Ferring developed its presence in the GCC region, and what measures are being taken to strengthen its regional operations?

Ferring's growth in the GCC region has been shaped by deliberate and strategic efforts, particularly in Saudi Arabia, which has emerged as the cornerstone of our operations. My initial role with the company focused on overseeing the Levant region, including Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. However, in 2002, I transitioned to Saudi Arabia, acknowledging its critical importance and the need for a robust infrastructure to establish a meaningful presence. We began by building a comprehensive structure that encompassed marketing, sales, finance, and regulatory functions, with HR support provided from our Amman office. This integrated approach laid a solid foundation, and today Saudi Arabia not only houses most of our regional employees—42 out of 68—but also generates 55% of the GCC's total sales.

In 2023, my responsibilities expanded to include the entire GCC region, a transition that required the standardization of operations across multiple markets. Over the past two years, I have worked to replicate the success achieved in Saudi Arabia by embedding a cohesive culture and aligning all

teams under a unified vision. My leadership approach emphasizes values and principles that foster purpose and autonomy among employees. By empowering teams to operate independently once they are adequately trained and developed, we ensure sustainable growth and operational efficiency.

A significant initiative currently underway is the establishment of a regional headquarters (RHQ) in Riyadh. This move not only aligns with Saudi Arabia's economic diversification strategy but also positions Ferring to better serve the region. The RHQ will consolidate regional roles and leadership functions, supporting the Kingdom's ambitions to attract investment and strengthen sectors such as biotechnology. This transition underscores our commitment to aligning with the Kingdom's vision while reinforcing our presence in a market poised for significant growth.

Through a carefully balanced strategy of local adaptation and regional integration, Ferring continues to strengthen its footprint in the GCC. By leveraging a unified approach and embracing the region's evolving opportunities, we are well-positioned to deliver sustainable success and long-term impact.

What are the key healthcare advancements in Saudi Arabia, particularly in women's health, and how is Ferring playing a role in this transformation?

Saudi Arabia's healthcare sector has experienced a transformative evolution, driven by Vision 2030, which prioritizes economic diversification and the advancement of critical sectors such as education and healthcare. Historically, the healthcare system faced inefficiencies, particularly in regulatory processes, which were centralized under the Ministry of Health. The establishment of the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) marked a significant shift, introducing globally aligned standards that initially seemed stringent but ultimately brought clarity and efficiency. Today, these streamlined regulatory processes have greatly facilitated the registration of new products and the management of variations, and Ferring has capitalized on this by building a strong, well-connected team that collaborates seamlessly with the SFDA.

Efforts to improve healthcare delivery are equally evident in the government's decentralization strategy, which has introduced health holding companies integrating universities, hospitals, and clinics into cohesive networks. While these entities still require financial autonomy to fully optimize their operations, their creation marks a critical step toward enhancing healthcare services. In parallel, the Public Investment Fund (PIF) is pioneering advancements in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and genomics to address pressing public health challenges, including diabetes and

smoking, which have significant societal and healthcare implications.

Women’s health has seen substantial progress, though it remains an area requiring further investment. Historically overlooked, it has gained prominence through robust awareness campaigns, particularly those focusing on breast cancer, which have successfully mobilized a unified effort across sectors. These campaigns have created a unique momentum in Saudi Arabia, unmatched by other countries. However, broader women’s health issues, such as fertility and pregnancy-related complications, remain underexplored. Ferring has taken a leadership role in addressing these gaps, offering a portfolio of products that span the continuum from conception to childbirth. As one of the earliest companies to prioritize fertility treatments, Ferring continues to innovate in this space, while also addressing critical needs such as preterm labor and postpartum hemorrhage, areas where few competitors have ventured.

These healthcare advancements align with the broader societal changes under Vision 2030, which emphasize women’s empowerment and inclusion in the workforce. The resulting cultural shift has fostered more open discussions about women’s health and broader societal issues, creating an environment where these topics are better understood and addressed. At Ferring, this shift is reflected in the composition of its Saudi medical representatives, 70% of whom are women, a testament to the progress being made in both healthcare and gender inclusion.

Ferring’s commitment to advancing women’s health in Saudi Arabia mirrors the Kingdom’s own aspirations for societal and economic progress. By addressing unmet medical needs, raising awareness, and innovating in underserved areas, the company is not only contributing to the improvement of healthcare standards but also reinforcing its role as a catalyst for meaningful change in an evolving landscape.

How has Ferring contributed to the development of fertility treatments in the region?

Ferring has played a pivotal role in the evolution of fertility treatments in the region, transforming a once misunderstood and culturally sensitive area into a vital part of healthcare. Alongside a small group of pioneering companies, Ferring worked tirelessly to address these barriers, emphasizing the life-changing impact of fertility treatments for couples and their broader societal benefits.

Education and collaboration have been central to Ferring’s approach. Through local congresses and partnerships with global experts, we facilitated knowledge-sharing and promoted dialogue. Additionally, we enabled regional doctors to participate in international conferences, expanding

their understanding of advancements in fertility care. These efforts not only built trust but also fostered a deeper awareness of the potential of fertility solutions.

The results are evident today. In Saudi Arabia, IVF cycles have increased to approximately 33,000 annually, with ovulation induction treatments—another critical fertility option—matching this figure. Together, these advances reflect the success of Ferring's commitment to advocacy, innovation, and education. By addressing misconceptions and expanding access to care, we have empowered countless families to achieve parenthood, while contributing meaningfully to the region's healthcare landscape.

What are the strategic focus areas of Ferring's portfolio in Saudi Arabia, and which segments are driving its growth?

Ferring's portfolio in Saudi Arabia is concentrated on three strategic areas: reproductive medicine and maternal health, gastroenterology, and uro-oncology. Reproductive medicine and maternal health remain a cornerstone of our expertise, offering end-to-end solutions from conception to birth. This focus reflects our longstanding commitment to addressing critical needs in fertility and maternal health, supported by a deep understanding of the market and strong professional networks. In gastroenterology, we target significant diseases with impactful treatments, further solidifying our position in this essential therapeutic area. Meanwhile, uro-oncology is an emerging focus, highlighted by a breakthrough treatment for bladder cancer that has shown substantial success in the United States. This product is now advancing toward registration in major global markets, including Europe, Brazil, Japan, China, and potentially Saudi Arabia.

Globally, Ferring is pursuing a more targeted strategy, emphasizing areas where we possess strong expertise while simultaneously seeking growth through business development opportunities. This approach complements our research and development efforts by enabling the acquisition of innovative products that align with our strengths in fertility, maternal health, and gastroenterology. While these areas remain our primary focus, we remain open to integrating novel treatments in other therapeutic categories if they provide meaningful value to our portfolio.

By concentrating on these high-impact areas, Ferring is strengthening its market position and delivering solutions that address critical healthcare needs. This balanced approach ensures sustainable growth while reaffirming our commitment to advancing healthcare standards in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

How is Ferring advancing uro-oncology treatments in Saudi Arabia?

Ferring is firmly committed to advancing uro-oncology treatments in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on an innovative gene therapy for bladder cancer that has received FDA approval. While the younger demographic in Saudi Arabia historically presented fewer cases of bladder cancer, rising life expectancy has led to an increase in age-related diseases such as bladder and prostate cancers. This growing demand, coupled with Saudi Arabia's efficient regulatory framework, has positioned the country as a key market for Ferring's innovative therapies. The Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) provides an accelerated approval pathway for FDA- or EMA-approved products, shortening registration timelines significantly and facilitating quicker patient access.

To bridge the gap between approval and market availability, Ferring has initiated a Named Patient Program, which allows for the exceptional importation of treatments for specific cases based on physician recommendations. This program not only ensures patients receive life-saving treatments promptly but also builds familiarity with the therapy in the local healthcare system, paving the way for broader adoption.

How is Ferring advancing local capacity building and innovation in Saudi Arabia, and what measures ensure digitalization delivers meaningful outcomes?

Ferring plays a pivotal role in advancing local capacity building in Saudi Arabia, aligning with the government's structured and progressive approach to workforce localization. Over time, the localization targets for the medical representative role have increased significantly, rising from 20% to 100% as the pool of qualified Saudi professionals has expanded. Ferring embraced this initiative early, fostering a work environment that attracts top talent by offering diverse opportunities for professional development. The company is now focused on preparing local employees for middle and senior management roles, ensuring they are equipped to meet their growing ambitions and assume leadership positions. This strategic approach underscores Ferring's commitment to developing a sustainable, locally empowered workforce.

In parallel, Ferring is driving innovation through digitalization and advanced technologies to enhance efficiency and improve patient engagement. A dedicated commercial excellence team is implementing innovative tools, including Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, to streamline market approaches. One notable example is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to

reimagine traditional medication leaflets. By replacing paper inserts with scannable barcodes linked to a digital platform, Ferring provides patients with accessible, interactive, and user-friendly information, significantly enhancing convenience and understanding.

While embedding AI and digital technologies into the pharmaceutical landscape presents challenges, Ferring remains committed to making these innovations impactful. The company recognizes that digital transformation is not just a trend but a critical avenue for delivering tangible benefits to patients and healthcare systems. Through its combined focus on capacity building and innovation, Ferring is contributing meaningfully to Saudi Arabia’s broader vision of modernization and healthcare excellence.

How does Ferring integrate global growth initiatives with regional opportunities, and what role do partnerships and acquisitions play in this approach?

Ferring adopts a nuanced approach to growth, integrating global initiatives with the flexibility to capitalize on regional opportunities. At a global level, the company is navigating the challenges of sustaining growth in an increasingly competitive pharmaceutical market, where generics and biosimilars are reshaping the landscape. With governments worldwide prioritizing cost-efficient alternatives, Ferring is focusing on strategic partnerships and acquisitions to diversify its portfolio and ensure long-term growth. This proactive strategy reflects a broader industry trend, emphasizing collaboration to access innovation and enhance competitiveness.

Regionally, Ferring tailors this strategy to align with specific market dynamics, particularly in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom’s rapidly evolving healthcare sector presents unique opportunities for localized solutions, supported by strategic partnerships with countries like China and India, recognized for their innovation and manufacturing capabilities. Saudi Arabia’s focus on strengthening ties with China further amplifies the potential for collaboration in healthcare development.

A prime example of this approach is the forthcoming launch of Ferpront, a fertility product developed through a partnership with a Chinese company. Designed to support hormonal downregulation, Ferpront enriches Ferring’s fertility portfolio while addressing a critical need within the regional market. This collaboration underscores the company’s ability to seamlessly integrate global innovation with local market requirements.

By balancing its global vision with regional adaptability, Ferring not only fortifies its portfolio but also ensures it remains responsive to diverse market demands. This dual focus on strategic partnerships and localized growth underscores the company's commitment to delivering impactful healthcare solutions and sustaining its leadership in a dynamic industry.

What is the foundation of your leadership approach, and how do you cultivate talent while ensuring Ferring remains competitive in attracting top professionals?

My leadership approach is deeply rooted in clarity, purpose, and empowerment, emphasizing the importance of connecting individuals to the broader vision and goals of the organization. I believe that people perform at their best when they understand the "why" behind their work—why we do what we do, where the company is headed, and how their contributions matter. This clarity fosters a sense of purpose, enabling team members to align their personal aspirations with the organization's objectives.

At Ferring, I prioritize open communication and a supportive environment that encourages growth and experimentation. Mistakes are seen not as setbacks but as opportunities to learn and innovate. By providing autonomy, I empower individuals to set their own goals within the framework of the company's vision, while mentoring and coaching them through challenges. My role as a leader is not to solve problems for them but to guide them toward solutions, equipping them with the skills and confidence to address future challenges independently.

This leadership style creates an inspiring and dynamic workplace culture, where employees feel valued, motivated, and capable of achieving their potential. It also ensures that Ferring stands out as an employer of choice in a competitive market, attracting top talent through its commitment to personal and professional development. By combining purpose-driven leadership with a focus on empowerment, Ferring cultivates a thriving environment that benefits both its people and its long-term success.

What are your expectations for Ferring's growth in Saudi Arabia and the GCC by 2025, and what insights can you share about the region's broader potential?

Ferring is entering a transformative phase as it looks to 2025 and beyond, navigating the challenges of sustaining growth while capitalizing on emerging opportunities. While the company's portfolio has long been a cornerstone of its success, the evolving market landscape demands bold

strategies to expand and diversify its offerings. The commitment from Ferring's leadership, including the Executive Committee and ownership, to take decisive action reflects a clear vision for the future. Though challenges are expected, these steps will enable the company to transition into a new phase of growth, reinforcing its position as a leader in the therapeutic areas we are active in.

In the GCC, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, the opportunities are unparalleled. Saudi Arabia's role as the economic and developmental hub of the Middle East is driving transformation across the region. The scale and ambition of its initiatives present extraordinary prospects for businesses, not only in terms of growth but also in contributing to the Kingdom's broader vision. For companies operating in the region, investing in Saudi Arabia is not merely an option—it is a strategic necessity. The Kingdom's leadership and forward-thinking projects position it as a focal point for innovation and progress, making it an essential pillar for the success of organizations like Ferring. By aligning with Saudi Arabia's trajectory, Ferring ensures it remains at the forefront of regional and global healthcare advancements.

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