Interview with Günter Schaden, General Manager, Almirall Austria

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Almirall was offered through the acquisition of Hermal in 2007. What impact did that have on Almirall's operations in central Europe, and where does Austria fit in Almirall's picture today?

Nowadays Almirall Austria plays a significant role amongst the Almirall-affiliates. The Austrian subsidiary has been meeting and exceeding the expectations over the last five years. The company has secured a solid position in dermatology, being one of the top three dermatological companies in Austria. Almirall Austria has enjoyed substantial growth over the last couple of years and I think this is mainly based on the company's culture. Almirall's organizational culture is very customer-focused. As a small organization, the business-approach is very flexible, fast, and pragmatic. With this framework, Almirall's employees are extremely dedicated to, and passionate, about their work. As we a small organisation, every person has a very important role and thus there is a high degree of transparency. The environment at Almirall provides the opportunity to commit to a great deal of responsibility – it is more about doing things rather than avoiding mistakes. The local affiliate is focused on our core business: sales, marketing, and medical. The rest of the services is provided either by external partners (i.e. logistics) or internal support functions (i.e. finance, customer-service, regulatory, human resources etc.). Related to these functions Almirall Germany, is operating as a service hub for Austria and Switzerland. This frame-work enables the two smaller affiliates to run their business highly efficient.

How does the dermatological environment in Switzerland compare to that of Austria?

I think both environments are very comparable. Moreover there are strong historical ties within the German-speaking dermatological societies. For example it is common practise that Swiss and Austrian dermatologists are attending congresses or lectures in Germany. These cross-border conventions are highly appreciated by all participants due to the possibility for personal contacts and exchange of experience. Almirall as a top dermatological company with an excellent reputation in these two markets is benefitting from these traditions.

Israel Garcia of Almirall in Mexico said that a large portion of their strategy was aligned with the company's overall main focus on R&D. Can you tell our readers about some of the most exciting products that you will be distributing in 2013?

Almirall Austria will be providing three exciting new therapeutic options which will be offered to patients and doctors in Austria: pain with Sativex®, respiratory with Aclidinium®, and gastro with Constella®. The company is in the fortunate situation of having built a solid structure over the last months specifically designed for the future challenges of these three big markets. As such, our organization will be expanding very soon. We have some very exciting and new products on the way, some of which are already in a very late stage in the reimbursement process. This is an immense source of pride for the affiliate; we are a small business but we are offering incredibly innovative products to the society.

What challenges come with expanding your portfolio over such a broad base?

The challenge for Almirall Austria is to establish ourselves in a new and competitive environment, previously unexplored by us. While we have been recognized for our achievements in the dermatology segment, this is a niche market. Now we are entering into markets dominated by big pharma, which is a significant challenge for us. Additionally to releasing single products, Almirall has created a strategy with combination products which allows us to have a broader portfolio overall in the near future. We have set up the right structure to establish ourselves in these new therapeutic areas, and then we have to match and surpass the competition in the upcoming years.

As a small to medium multinational player, historically in a niche market, what would you say is Almirall's competitive advantage?

Ultimately, it is all about customer focus and pragmatism, speed is a very important factor as well. But the base is set by Almirall's commitment to R&D.

When competing in other areas with bigger players in the industry, many companies have seen the rise of emerging markets with centralized healthcare and excellent education systems in Central and Eastern Europe. How can Austria assert its positioning in the face of this competition?

I think Austria was previously a hub where companies entered and established themselves. There are still a lot of companies that are using this system for Austria. Almirall does not have any local responsibility for Eastern Europe, and currently there is no strategy to elaborate Almirall Austria as a hub for East European countries.

Please can you tell us more about Almirall's partnerships in Austria?

Almirall has one partnership set up globally with Menarini, which has been working quite well. We are happy to have Menarini on board to promote Aclidinium in Austria. So far this cooperation has been very successful. I also believe that if we can demonstrate our ability in the new therapeutic areas in which we will operate, then Almirall will increasingly become a more important and decisive partner, particularly in smaller countries.

The pharmaceutical industry has become a target for cost containment. This causes problems for patients to access innovative medicines. What can pharma companies do to ensure the reassurance that a patient will receive a treatment when it is needed?

If people understand what added value the pharmaceutical industry provides to them, then we would not be restricted to a discussion about prices. Pharmaceutical companies need to expose the benefits that medicines have, and there are not too many industries that have had such strong development over the past few years. I believe if we convey this message more strongly to the general public, it will have a positive impact, notably on the reimbursement system in Austria.

You bring the right people to Almirall. How do you go about ensuring that you have the best talent in Austria working for you?

I think Almirall has a promising pipeline. The company has a great future with products that are on the way to being launched in the market, which makes us exciting. Almirall is particularly strong in two key areas: firstly, we have a strong commitment to research and development – meaning innovation, and secondly, our lean structure enables everyone in the company to be very hands-on and practical. Everyone takes ownership, and I think people like to create their own goals as well as being on a winning team. Much of the work that Almirall's employees carry out is self-motivated, which I think creates a wonderful working environment.

You seem like a very relaxed person; is there anything that keeps you awake at night or makes you check your email over the weekends?

Generally speaking I am always dedicating some time to check emails also on the weekends or during holidays, although my personal mantra is to work hard and play hard! I am always either fully concentrated on work, or focused on something entirely different. There needs to be a clear distinction between work and non-work related activities, to guarantee a solid work life balance. which I believe provides mental and physical strengths and resources.

If we were to return to Austria in three or four years, where can we expect you to have taken the company at that point?

I hope that we will have established Almirall in our new therapeutic areas successfully: it is very important that patients and doctors are benefiting from our new products at that point. Additionally, I want to have solidified our position in dermatology which is very important as it is our existing core business. I also want Almirall to become a desired employer for young talented people. Within the next twelve months we will more than double the Austrian and Swiss affiliates. It is a time-consuming process, and as everyone plays such a critical role in the organization, we must be sure that we hire the right people.

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