Interview with Mark Connolly, Managing Director Benelux, Boehringer Ingelheim Benelux

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Can you illustrate to our readers the company’s main milestones and key achievements since you took the reins four years ago?

In the last years we have experienced a period of strong growth for the company based on the portfolio which we had. Today, however, following a strong focus on our pipeline, we are in the process of launching a number of new products. Needless to say, we have spent quite some time preparing for this and we are certainly looking forward to introducing these products into the market.

What is the strategic importance of Belgium for Boehringer Ingelheim in the region?

Considering its role as a European hub, Belgium is certainly an important market for us. More specifically, innovation and clinical development are at the heart of activities here demonstrating great expertise. For these reasons, we have been and are continuing to invest heavily in local clinical developments, as are many other companies.

Mr Xander Bos, your Dutch counterpart noted to us that the main reason they were able to achieve outstanding above average growth rates was primarily a result of a differentiated sales strategy. To what degree is your strategy tailored to the Belgian market and is there room for improvement?

As you are aware, together with the Netherlands and Luxemburg we form a Benelux organisation and therefore frequently meet and work together. This cooperation has been successful so far and we would certainly like to emulate their growth as far as possible in Belgium because it represents part of a future business model that works very well. Nonetheless, it is not so easy to implement this fully in Belgium at the moment since in the Netherlands there is a strong focus on chronic care support with the necessary flow of local funding and the system in Belgium is different.

As a result of recent government cost cutting measures, the current market environment in Belgium remains rather challenging creating a context of unpredictability. How do you cope with, as you pursue your strategy?

It is interesting that you should say that since the first word that came to mind when reflecting on the current market environment in Belgium was unpredictability. Although we understand the difficulties of the local market, as well as the world market for that matter, in addition to the economic challenges that the government is facing, it is certainly difficult to plan without any degree of predictability. Indeed, this makes business planning a challenging task.

Earlier you mentioned Boehringer Ingelheim’s Belgian product portfolio, how would you describe the performance of your individual segments locally? Do you feel that your market share levels are where they deserve to be?

I can say that until recently we have been growing consistently ahead of the market. However, in the current environment that becomes increasingly difficult. So, we are looking at our new introductions, which are very exciting, to reinvigorate our growth potential.

With respect to our current portfolio our key areas of focus are respiratory diseases, especially COPD as in many markets worldwide, but also hypertension, Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) and Parkinson’s disease, amongst others.

In addition to this, we now are moving into other directions as well. For instance, we have established a long term partnership with Eli Lilly to develop drugs for the treatment of diabetes. In fact, we have recently launched our very first product, Trajenta, this month.

We have also recently launched Pradaxa, which is a highly promising oral anticoagulant used to reduce the risk of stroke and blood clots in people with atrial fibrillation, not caused by a heart valve problem. It is worth noting that this is a first in class drug and we are very excited about its prospects and potential to improve treatment and quality of life for patients.

Finally, although we do not yet have a presence in the field of oncology, we do have a great pipeline. This represents a new field for Boehringer Ingelheim in which we have made significant investments for some time. The first products are already in the last phases of development and so we are preparing to introduce them.

Can you tell provide readers with an insight into your product pipeline and which upcoming products you're most excited about?

We have a very strong pipeline, starting with our recent introductions that are taking off as of now and of course I am very excited about this. In the last few weeks we have introduced two new products to the market which include Trajenta® – for the treatment of Diabetes (together with Lilly) and Pradaxa – our first in class blood-thinning drug.

Moreover, we are also working towards introducing additional products, for instance in the fields of asthma, COPD and Hepatitis C.

Boehringer Ingelheim has clearly recognized Belgium's strength in the field of clinical research as it represents the affiliates other business activity. Can you tell us more about how the company is taking advantage of local clinical trials and what makes it so appealing to you?

I believe that the main attraction is the number of high quality research centers to work with and the expertise of the investigators. When we work in partnership with these centers we consistently see high standards of management of the studies as well as superior data management. Furthermore, the approval process for clinical studies is relatively fast. Overall, I would say that it is a mixture of reputation and consistent delivery of results that make the environment so appealing.

For Belgium, building such a reputation and level of expertise certainly takes a great deal of hard work and dedication. For that reason, we have continued to invest in Belgium for over 50 years now and we have consistently expanded our clinical development activities in the country.

In light of the upcoming EU regulatory proposal on clinical trials that is set to harmonize the industry across the Union, how do you think this will this impact your clinical activities in the country?

The new European regulation could very well have an impact on our clinical research activities. Nonetheless, whatever the regulations, what really matters is the ability to deliver good quality data, good quality management of studies according to the plan as well as recruitment rates. Of course, together these elements are critical to maintaining a healthy clinical trials environment and I believe that Belgium's reputation in doing that will undoubtedly last.

At the same time, however, the research-based industry will certainly face competition, within Europe as well as from emerging markets. After all the motivating factor of the EU's proposal is the highly complex, expensive and difficult nature of the activity but this must be balanced against the quality and reliability of the services rendered.

Having said that, yes I do believe there will be increasing challenges for Belgium as well as the pharmaceutical industry in general. Nonetheless, we are continuing to invest since the country's capacity to innovate and provide high quality research continues to outweigh the challenges.

Although Boehringer Ingelheim does not explicitly have a Research department here, it seems to be making efforts to leverage the country's R&D capabilities as illustrated by its on-going research collaborations with Ablynx for example. Exactly to what extent is the company taking advantage of Belgium's expertise?

As with many other research-based companies we have fewer, although larger, research sites than we used to. That said, in Belgium we are only active in clinical development. However, we do maintain partnerships with local biotech companies and we are conducting a number of earlier phase research studies. In fact, we are highly committed to these partnerships and have been pursuing this strategy for quite some time now and we look forward to some exciting results in the future.

Can you give us an example of some of your most rewarding partnerships so far?

Locally, if you go back a very long way, we had a partnership agreement with Leuven University. From this, we have long since brought to market two products that were developed in cooperation between us. More recently, we have also formed a partnership with Eli Lilly for the development of diabetes treatments, as noted earlier. The key characteristic of this collaboration is that it is long term, and we are both contributing to its development. We certainly aim to be active and competitive in this field market and that is why we believe we have a bright future in the treatment of diabetes.

On a global level, our largest commercial partnership is the long lasting co-marketing agreement with Pfizer on Spiriva®. This is a long term partnership that has been successful worldwide.

What does it take to form a mutually beneficial partnership and what makes Boehringer Ingelheim the partner of choice?

Broadly speaking, I believe that with the right partner and the right product, you should be able to make it work. It takes mutual respect, constant attention, clear and common goals as well as a lot

of hard work to ensure that those very goals are met through the joint efforts and dedication of companies. Once you get this mix right and work as one team, the synergy works well.

A very important aspect of pharmaceutical companies in order to be successful is the quality of human resources. How do you recruit and retain the best talent?

This is becoming more and more important, especially in light of the changing environment. In general, I would say that talented people certainly like to join our team because we have been successful and this trend will continue as we roll out our strong pipeline.

Another key factor that makes Boehringer Ingelheim an interesting and attractive workplace is the fact that it is a family owned company and has a long-term strategic view. This makes a big difference. The team spirit and collaborative culture that is associated with our company serves as another element that sets us apart.

Looking ahead, where would you like to take the Belgian operations of Boehringer Ingelheim in the next 1 to 2 years?

We need to make sure that we maximise the benefits resulting from our product pipeline. In the short term we have begun to realize this by introducing some truly innovative products. On the other hand, in the longer term we will be active in new therapeutic fields such as diabetes, oncology and hepatitis C. In order to achieve this, we have made constant learning and portfolio renewal one of our key areas of focus.

You have been working at Boehringer Ingelheim for more than 30 years, how have your past experiences have helped you shaped the Belgium affiliate into what it is today?

I believe that like all countries, Belgium has its own culture, dynamics and way of going about things. What I have learned from my experience in different places is that you have to absorb the cultural differences unique to each country and respectful them.

Admittedly, as an international manager, this can sometimes be difficult and time consuming to truly appreciate. However, if you come in from another country you have a different viewpoint and that does help to bring in some new ideas and to challenge what people see as the way of doing things. I suppose that is the basis of all international assignments, where you may not be an instant expert on everything local but you at least realize that there are other ways of doing things

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