Interview with Véronique Rebours-Mory, Director General France & Belgium Nordic Pharma, Nordic Pharma France

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Nordic Pharma has been established in the French market since 2002 as one of its first steps towards internationalization. What have been the main milestones and achievements of Nordic in the French market since then?

Since our establishment on the French market in 2002, Nordic Pharma has had a number of important milestones. At the beginning it was quite uneasy for the company because we started from nothing in France – no company, no product – and it was an interesting challenge. The first issue was to have a pharmaceutical license in order to be allowed to market medicines. Therefore we started to build the company with a pharmaceutical license and in the meantime we registered our first product.

The first product was an injectable used in oncology, Ostepam®, registered in 2003 and launched in December the same year. As of 2004, we started to have a real commercial activity. We launched our second product – Synercid® – in 2005, a product used in severe nosocomial infections. Synercid® is a kind of orphan drug product, meaning it is used when no other antibiotics work.

It was interesting for us to start within the hospital market with high-tech products. Nordic Pharma continued to focus on the hospital market and tried to find new opportunities. Like all companies the main issue for us is to have products to develop – Nordic Group is a young company and we

only started to have research and development activities in 2003/2004.

Nordic Group started in 1995 Sweden (with Nordic Drugs) and after 2002, it became a truly European company. The development of the Group was organized with the creation and the acquisition of other companies, for example QPharma, a manufacturing company. It was the way for us to expand and to be less dependent on contract manufacturing organizations. We also acquired a development company called Disphar. Now Disphar still has some activities for its previous partners but it's also the R&D department of the Nordic Group with high tech skills and tools.

What would you say is the role and the importance of the French market for the Nordic Group?

France is one of Nordic Pharma's biggest markets. Besides market size, our president being based in Paris, it is important that the French affiliate is a leading company for the Group. And of course for me, it's important to have the most dynamic company in the Group. We are still a small company, but after a couple of difficult years, France is now leading the Group in terms of turnover this year. For us, it is important to show that after only five to seven years we developed one of the fastest growing companies in the Group. The Nordic Group now has a lot of "baby" companies, like Belgium, Germany and Italy, and we would like to replicate the French success in these important markets as well.

As already the main affiliate in the group and with more than ten products in place in the French market – and active in the service industry as well – what have been Nordic Pharma's main growth drivers in the French market?

Once we started spreading our activities in Europe, we were faced with one reality: If you don't have a product you cannot have a company, and if you don't have a well established company you cannot attract a partner to have a product. Therefore, Nordic management decided to set up the organization all over Europe to ensure that we have a wide presence in the continent. Europe is a fragmented market and it is much easier to find partners when you can cover a wide geographic area.

Today you can say it is much easier for us to launch products on a European basis. For instance, the two European products that we licensed recently was first a product used in gynecology surgery called Hyalobarrier® – it is used for the prevention of adhesion after surgery and secure women future fertility. The second product is Mifegyne®, a product we recently licensed for the medical termination of pregnancy. Gynecology will be one of the biggest areas of growth for the Group. We are also strong in rheumatology, with a product called Metoject®, a clever product used in Rheumatoid arthritis. Rheumatology is an important field for us. In Scandinavia, we have a large portfolio in pain management, and we expect to develop this therapeutic area in the future.

Partnerships have always been at the core of Nordic Pharma. But also as a new player, it's natural that the company was at first unknown in the French market. What was your strategy to make Nordic Pharma a better known company in the competitive French market?

We started with our main focus on the hospital market, and of course at the beginning we had only one product. The task for our team was to make sure that not only our product was known but also the company. We spent a lot of time going to hospitals and meeting with pharmacies and physicians to present not only the product but also Nordic Pharma. In 2007, in the second phase of its development, Nordic Pharma had the launch of Metoject® in rheumatology, and rheumatology was then new area for us. Therefore, we spent a considerable amount of time presenting Metoject and also show that, despite small, Nordic Pharma is a professional partner in Rheumatology.

The French hospital market has undergone important transformations in recent years. For instance, the HPST reform brought important changes to this market. In your opinion, how these reforms have affected the sector as a whole and Nordic Pharma specifically?

I think the environment is increasingly difficult for companies. However, the impact was differentiated according to each player. The competition in this market is becoming increasingly difficult each day and the authorities put a lot of pressure on the sector.

For instance, for each product there is a strict price negotiation which is long and difficult, and we have to show that we are good partners. If we do sell more than planned, we have to give the money back, so it's always difficult to plan, to organize, and to show that we are in line with what we forecasted. Having said that, it's undeniable that the French market is still very attractive and the continuous growth of Nordic Pharma France proves that.

As you said, this is a very competitive market with all players under the same legislation fighting in order to increase their market share. How did you manage to actually increase Nordic Pharma's participation in such an environment?

Naturally, it is true that when you are small you can increase your market share much quicker than when you are well established. I think that for instance with Metoject®, Nordic Pharma arrived with a product which really fulfilled the unmet medical needs and the requirements for patients as well. Even with a small company and a small team, without huge levels of resources, we at Nordic Pharma did a good job in showing the unique value of our products to physicians and this is the key for our current and future growth in the French market. Being small, we are also obliged to think different and to make sure that each employee is highly professional. In large structure deficiency of one employee is mixed in the volume, for us it is dramatic and our team is highly important for the development of the company.

Nordic Pharma Group has a number of selected partnerships with non-EU companies that are willing to enter the European market to develop and produce their products locally. How can you help these partners enter and succeed in the French market?

First of all, Nordic Pharma searches for partners that have similar views as we have. In fact, we don't target the mass market because it's not possible for us. We target orphan and niche areas where Nordic Pharma can really make a difference.

It is also important for us to have a close relationship with our partners; fruitful exchange and a good relationship with trust for each other – this is why Nordic Pharma has a number of important partnerships not only in the French market, but also in other countries. The products are more successful when this mutual understanding is in place.

After these years of experience Nordic Pharma knows very well the rules of the French market and it shows that we can overcome some challenges other mid-size or smaller players couldn't. For instance, to get the reimbursement of Metoject® was a challenge; it took some time, but we were quite happy to achieve a reimbursement at a reasonable price, because we are bringing an important novelty to patients. This is also the way to attract new partners; to show that we can succeed in our plans and make a difference for both partners and clients. It's all about making the best of what you have.

We have had to change our way of looking for opportunities. At the start, we were very opportunistic, and we saw opportunities in more or less everything in the hospital market. But we soon realized that it takes time and energy to know a particular area and to know what the real physicians' needs are. Thus, we figured that in fact, if you want to do a good job, you need to focus on what you're doing in a particular area and make sure you can manage it. That is why now we focus on Rheumatology, Gynecology and Critical Care.

You were responsible for starting the operations of Nordic Pharma France from zero by yourself; starting with no staff. How did you manage to pick and retain the best talent around you in order to achieve Nordic Pharma's current position?

The first thing is that when you start a new venture or company, there are many challenges that require a lot of attention and dedication from the team. This is why you can attract people who are tired of being at a huge company where they are only a number, where they have to follow the corporate way, making it very difficult to make a difference. In a smaller company like Nordic Pharma, we are flexible and everybody has the opportunity to make proposals. If it is a good idea, well presented and with a balanced risk, then we can go ahead with the project. This is something that attracted people to Nordic Pharma: here you are real a person and not a number.

On the other hand, it is difficult to retain people in a company where you do not have a lot of support and you have to work independently; you have to do it on your own most of the time. Therefore, it is not so easy. You can use the support of external advisors and consultants like everywhere, but here you are responsible, and if it doesn't work, you are the person who will be blamed. This is why when we established Nordic Pharma France we made sure to have talented and entrepreneurial people around us who were up for the challenge.

What are your main ambitions for Nordic Pharma in the next three to five years on the French market?

I think the biggest challenge Nordic Pharma will face in the coming years is to continue with its fast development. In the past, we have had 50% or 60% growth every year but we will struggle to maintain this trend. However, this is natural once we consolidate as a bigger player in France. Regardless of numbers, the most important thing is to continue to have a dynamic growth and a dynamic attitude to make sure we remain flexible and open. I want the people at Nordic Pharma to be happy to come to work and proud to work for our products.

The last eight years were quite tough. Nordic Pharma was very successful in the last two or three years, but at the beginning it was hard to establish the company as quickly as possible, and there were hard negotiations with the authorities over prices and delays in the registration. On the other hand, I'm very proud to see what we have achieved this far and that the hard work has paid off. Hard work, good skills and happy people really make things happen – Nordic Pharma is proof of that.

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