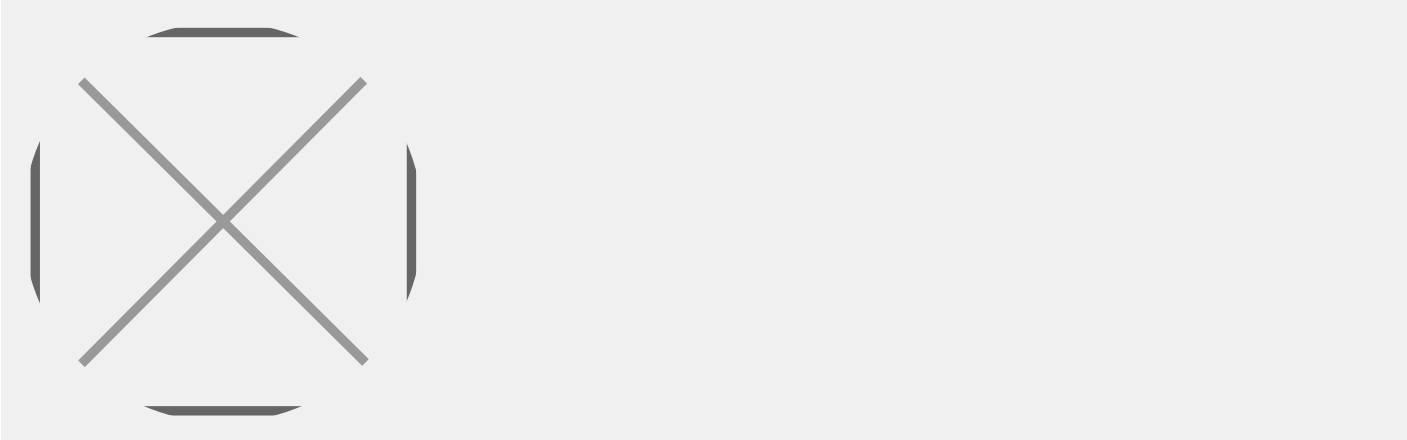
Interview with Sophie Kornowski-Bonnet, President, France, Roche France



10.11.2009

Tags: Roche France

sophie-kornowski-bonnet-president-france.jpg

Roche has a long history in France and currently enjoys a higher position than its worldwide ranking. Can you elaborate on the importance of this market for the group overall?

The affiliate in France is one of the largest European affiliate and historically we have held a strong presence through clinical trials. In fact, many Roche products were extensively developed in France such as MabThera and today we have more than 20,000 patients involved in our clinical studies.

We are intent on continuing this presence through partnerships in early research through our program Réseau Français de Recherche Roche. This allows us to work closely with leaders of innovative companies and be close to their everyday needs. Our proximity to these scientific ideas has contributed to the growth of Roche France.

What about the French market is attractive for Roche to conduct its trials here?

The particularity of France lies in the creativity of the researchers and storied history of scientific excellence. In France, people look for new ideas and think outside the box which has contributed heavily to our efforts here.

France also has a history of early access to innovation and the ability to quickly make a drug available to the patient makes you want to do more in a country to increase your presence: it’s a positive, self-fulfilling prophecy. Despite the toughening economic environment, the government

continues to favor the path of protecting innovation and ensuring early access.

Roche group is one of the biggest biotechnology companies in the world. In Germany when we spoke with your colleague he noted their large presence in biotechnology on the industrial side. On the other hand, France has more of the research and diagnostic capabilities; how do you link these skills to the rest of the group?

In addition to our therapeutics division we work closely with our diagnostics program as Roche is focusing more on creating personalized medicine which demand accurate diagnosis, such as Herceptin for breast cancer. The more we orient the company in this vision the more we have to look for synergies between these two divisions.

We have a significant unit in Paris for clinical development in Phases I-IV with over 200 people totally devoted to clinical studies. In addition, we have a translational research center which provides the first proof-in-man of our drugs and we are in the process of doubling this group's size. Moreover, this is the only Phase I center in Roche so we are very proud of it.

Our Réseau Français de Recherche Roche is one of the group's unique initiatives for public private partnership and it will likely be expanded in the coming years. While we are a significant actor in clinical research it's true that we have not been a historical actor in early research but through our 30 partnerships in the country we believe we can develop this side significantly. The difference between Roche and other 'big pharma' research is that when they invest their money goes into walls and tables while our cash goes straight to the researcher to develop the science.

As a whole Roche has a philosophy of growing from within as well as outside. With a growing biotechnology field in France are you invested in these local players?

We have several investments in biotechnology companies such as Oncodesign, I-Stem, Atlantic Bone Screen and Transgene among others. On top of this we are participating in more 'biotech dating' where we exchange knowledge and investigate whether we can do a project together.

How was 2009 for Roche France and what does the road ahead look like?

Last year we reached our target but today we are facing a phase with less growth in the market. Many believe that Roche has huge growth potential but the external market has to be considered; the market is negative in France and it's becoming a tough place to do business.
You do not grow a €1.4 billion company like you grow a €300 million one so you must factor in this consideration. We are launching a number of products in new indications and these endeavours are going well but the reality is these cannot compensate the plateaus we see on the horizon in several of our bigger brands. Our best sellers have been made accessible to the market and patients are well treated which means we are entering a stable phase. Nevertheless, we are quite serene about this because we are structured to handle this correctly by focusing on our core

activities and investing in the scientific community.

I am positive that we will be ready for the many launches to come in the future and the window from 2012 to 2014 will contain a lot of new products Roche.

It's important to remember that in the pharmaceutical industry you can have some years where great drugs will lift the company but in other years its business as usual and you need to rely on your team to make the difference. This period offers an opportunity to invest in the people and I look forward to developing our people more in the coming year.

Given the size of Roche France you have a number of people on your team. How do you motivate the people and keep them engaged?

The level of employee engagement is outstanding and I would not be lying if I said that 90% of the people want to – and are proud to – be here at Roche. The challenge comes more from our focus on the patient, the science and meaning of what we do here. We offer a very wide portfolio and there is a higher competition in the market each day.

Given the shear size of the company if you grow just a few percent you have to ensure you do it correctly given the shear workload under constrained resources. If you are not careful you can put people under great pressure which is why it's our management team's mission to alleviate this weight and create an environment where people can bloom. It has to be a focus and it's my personal obsession: I can humbly say we are not there yet.

You have a lot of exposure to different cultures and businesses in your career. What qualities and contributions do you bring from these experiences?

I have worked in companies where things did not go well and I know how it feels. Personally, I do not want anyone at Roche to feel the same experience. Many people are motivated by the glass half full mentality where as I am driven by the glass half empty. Let's enjoy when we do well and fight complacency wherever we can; I can frankly say we are at this level today.

Secondly, when you have worked in many environments you realize there is not one, universal truth and you must accept uncertainty. I am always sceptical and afraid when people are so sure about everything. When we do reviews here I like to put questions on the table for people to think about in different ways. Most people in Roche are very motivated, professional and smart with a lot of experience so all you have to do is ensure they ask themselves the right questions and understand the potential pitfalls in order for them to find the answer on their own. To get to this level requires good dialogue and people to feel secure in the challenge.

Aside from previously founding an affiliate in Israel, this is the first time you've run a big division in the industry. What is your vision for Roche France?

To begin with, when you're in Israel you think it's huge as many there feel it's the center of the world and in many respects this is true.
That being said, in I want for people to reach the peak of their professional development due to the impulse I give them as a manager.

What will be the next challenge for you?

I want to get it right here in France. Others may say that three years is enough but I do not feel I'm done in France. What's next for me is the next year here: everyday is my first day. It's nice to have had three good years but I want the next three to be even better despite it becoming a harder environment. It's a marvellous challenge!

You've risen quickly as a manager in your career; what would your recommendations be to an up and coming manager?

You should always search for the leverages in every scenario and search for how you can do better. Commonly, people are quickly satisfied yet I feel that I am eternally dissatisfied preferring instead to think of how I can do it better, faster and more differentiated! You can celebrate with your team but do not spend your time getting drunk off your own success: the day of your death you can celebrate – not before. I feel I was born with this so it's not so revolutionary.

The one thing I have really learned growing up in this industry is caring for the people around you. You cannot do anything alone and being generous in your interactions is an absolute must. In the 1980s you could be a lion and succeed but nowadays you have to share and bring people up with you. Life is tough and the world is tougher for everyone.

When I first came here one of the first steps was to get close to the people and have a dialogue inside the company. If you have a problem and you put the right person on the job and continue to motivate them then it will be fixed. When you are young you think you can do it on your own and it's a mistake. Little things you can do alone, but certainly nothing long-term or of any size.

Do you have a message you would like to send on behalf of Roche France to the readers of Pharmaceutical Executive?

There are a lot of untreated diseases and many people who die of from these diseases that still require more research. We need to stay focused on our mission of finding, developing and offering new medications to patients. I understand that many other companies want to diversify and find other activities outside of innovation. Nevertheless, when I wake up in the morning I think about the patients who cannot go about their lives due to their diseases it reminds me that what we do makes sense.

It's hard for the pharmaceutical industry to be heard but we must underscore the truth: without our companies there would be no new treatments. Competition should not weaken our message of

scientific progress.

See more interviews