Interview: Ali Bennis – President, Laprophan – Morocco

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The president of Laprophan, a leading Moroccan pharma company, discusses the company's commitment to R&D, and how it has found success through innovation and partnership with leading MNCs.

Established in 1949, Laprophan was one of the pioneering companies of Morocco's pharmaceutical industry, and is now among the leading national laboratories. How have you risen to such a position?

Laprophan has been the pioneer and leader of the national pharmaceutical industry since 1949. My late father, the president and founder, Abderrahim Bennis, played a key role in the elaboration of texts pertaining to the pharmaceutical profession for the establishment of a pharmaceutical industry. Laprophan is the emblem of the Moroccan pharmaceutical industry, which produces 70 percent of local medicine demand in the kingdom of Morocco.

We strongly believe that quality is the driving force for excellence. Quality is our credo! The quality of our products has international recognition: AFSSAPS accreditation, European GMP certification, and international GMP standards, as well as the quality trophy, presented by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry in 1998. The World Bank also mentioned us as 'excellent' during its audit operations of the Moroccan pharmaceutical industry in 1995. We invest in R&D to develop innovative and internationally-recognized patent medicines with high added value for health professionals.

We manufacture a wide range of high quality products covering most of the therapeutic classes: today, Laprophan produces more than 400 pharmaceutical products, both our own brand and under license. We work with international partners including Pfizer, Novartis, BMS, Baxter, Meda, P&G, Sanofi, Danone, Novo Nordisk, Merck, Mundipharma and Astellas.

We also work very closely with health professionals to better address their needs and participate in all important national and international medical congresses. We think big, but act small: we think big for our strategies, thinking like a Big Pharma company, but we remain very close to our customers and partners as if we were a start-up. And last but not least, we believe in our people. Companies don't succeed, people do.

You were the first company to introduce generics to the Moroccan market and there remains real potential for this market to grow further. As the company that brought generics to the country, how do you plan on leveraging your position to take advantage of such opportunities for growth?

The National Health Insurance Scheme consisting of compulsory health insurance (AMO) for both private and public sector employees, along with the implementation of the medical assistance plan (RAMED) for low incomes, has obviously expanded the percentage of Morocco's population that has access to healthcare, and has had a significant impact on the pharmaceutical industry, mainly on generics, resulting in a sales increase.

This growth in the consumption of medicines due to the extension of social security coverage has encouraged us to invest in a new manufacturing plant to enable us to achieve strong performance in terms of produced quantities. Moreover, many international companies would like to benefit from our advanced level of technology and our know-how to produce large quantities in our manufacturing facility.

We won the Swiss Morocco Foundation For Sustainable Development's (SFMD) Sustainable Human Development Award in 2010 in Geneva for all our efforts to produce high quality products at affordable prices.

How has Laprophan's new "smart" distribution center, launched in February 2004 and built at a cost of over USD 10 million, helped you to grow as a company?

Laprophan's distribution center is a state-of-the-art facility built by Jacobs, who are considered of the world's largest and most diverse providers of technical, professional and construction services. It is a new, highly sophisticated logistical center, equipped with modern ICT, centrally located at

the crossroads of the highways connecting main cities, close to Casablanca international airport (about 30 minutes) and to Casablanca port (about 10 minutes).

Our Distribution Center meets GDP (good wholesale distribution practices) and international standards. We have a large storage capacity and automated stock control. The distribution center ensures the distribution of own brand medicines as well as products from our licensed partners.

You were first pharmaceutical laboratory in Morocco to have your own R&D center. Many pharma laboratories in the country have been slow to invest in R&D – why did you as a company decide to invest substantially in this area?

Laprophan develops international patent medicines in its R&D center, and these innovative products are registered in over 110 countries all over the world, including the US. Laprophan was the first laboratory in the MENA region to receive four international invention patents: The first for a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug NSAIDs**,** Di-Indo, which is a molecular innovation, the second is the first antispasmodic in effervescent form, Neofortan, the third is the first proton pump inhibitor in effervescent form, Ixor, and the fourth is an effervescent antibiotic, Levamox.

Laprophan was awarded the first National R&D Innovation Trophy, presented by the Moroccan Association for R&D in 2008 for Ixor, and also received the prestigious Excellence Award from the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva in 2008.

Our company’s goal is to actively participate in the evolution of the pharmaceutical sector through a commitment to cutting-edge R&D in order to have more innovative products. We pursue our efforts through extensive R&D conducted in-house. Companies that do not commit to innovation tend to disappear: as Peter Drucker said, “A company has only two basic functions: innovation and marketing.”

You have developed a diversified export network in Africa and the Arab world. Can you tell us more about your approach to the region and your attempts to diversifying your exports to other markets including North America and Europe?

Laprophan has developed markets for its products in Africa, Europe and the Middle East; Latin America is in the scope and good contacts have so far been made.

We are present in most of African countries, including Ivory Coast, Senegal, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Conakry, Republic of Congo-Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Chad, Djibouti, Ghana, and Gambia, in the Maghreb region and the Middle East, including Yemen and Iraq.

Our products are achieving excellent sales performances as shown by IMS Health’s moving annual total for Africa: our products are top ranked number one or two in some countries. Still, we are striving to increase our market share, as our products have great potential.

We participate in most of the international big conferences and exhibitions: CPHI worldwide, Pharmagora, and the International Pharmaceutical Forum, to name just a few.

We are targeting Europe and North America especially for our patented medicines and most importantly, our state-of-the-art new manufacturing plant of 92000m^2 conforms to international standards (FDA, EMEA, and WHO), engineered by highly professional and reputable experts, to accompany our ambitious objectives at the international level.

Morocco has an ideal geostrategic location at the crossroads of continents and constitutes a good platform for exports. It is a real hub close to Europe (14 km), Africa, the Middle East and the United States. We benefit from the Free Trade Agreement with the United States to enhance our exports to this very high potential pharmaceutical market.

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