Interview: Gaelle Meaude – Operations Director, Thea Switzerland



"We cover nearly all the therapeutic classes in the area of ophthalmology, something which is particularly appreciated by the Swiss doctors."

03.11.2016

Tags: Switzerland, Thea, Pharma, Pharmaceuticals, Opthalmology, Strategy

Gaelle Meaude, operations director of Thea Switzerland, talks about building an effective sales and marketing team over the last few years; why the Swiss preservative-free eye care market remains particularly dynamic; and how working for a French family run entrepreneurial company, with five generations of expertise in the field of ophthalmology, is extremely rewarding.

Can you start by giving our readers an overview of Thea's Swiss affiliate?

Today Thea has affiliates across the main European countries, including in Switzerland, where we have been present since 2001. I joined Thea Switzerland in 2010, working in a number of areas, including in finance and marketing. In January 2015, I became the operational director of the affiliate.

We have experienced a lot of changes, and plenty of growth, over the years. Initially in Switzerland, Thea had been working through an external partner for its sales and marketing activities. Since January 2015, we have been fully responsible for such activities ourselves. Initially our portfolio was rather small, focused on products for dry eyes and eyelid hygiene. Every one to two years, we have been able to bring at least one new product to market. Today we have an extremely broad portfolio. Indeed, this is how we differentiate ourselves from the competition. We cover nearly all the therapeutic classes in the area of ophthalmology, something which is particularly appreciated by the Swiss doctors. Thea is one of the few pharmaceutical companies to be 100 percent

dedicated to ophthalmology.

Can you tell us more about the development of the different products within your portfolio?

We have two different kind of products: service products, primarily intended for diagnostic, a relatively small market, but an important service for eyes doctors; and then we have our extremely innovative products, where our ambition is to have almost exclusively perseverative-free products. Thea has played a major role, in this latter area, over a number of years' now. Thea is a family run company. Jean-Frederic Chibret, President of Laboratoires Théa, is the 5th generation of a very successfully entrepreneurial family. Our history as a company, has always been to develop innovative drugs, that are preserve-free, providing a considerable benefit to patients. Our primary objective is to work with doctors to ensure that they appreciate the value of such products. This process cannot happen overnight: today the majority of prescribed drugs still contain preservatives. Having said that, Thea Switzerland has experienced tremendous growth over the years. Indeed, we are now the number one preservative-free eye care company in the country; and amongst the top ophthalmic companies in Switzerland in general.

[Featured_in]

Exactly how do differentiate yourself from the competition, which includes the likes of Novartis and Allergan?

As a company that is exclusively focused on ophthalmology, we like to call ourselves the specialists in this field. Indeed, we have a particularly close relationship with eye doctors. This is the case for our mother company in France, and all our affiliates in Europe and beyond. In Switzerland, one of my primary responsibilities it to continue building on the excellent relationships we already have with the key opinion leaders.

Alongside our close relationship with our customers, our other key differentiator is our uniquely innovative products. We have successfully developed our preservative-free portfolio through a number of different approaches. We have our Abak eye drop range: a unique multi-dose bottle that delivers a consistent drop size each time, providing long lasting relief from eye discomfort and dryness. The Abak system keeps the contents of the bottle free from microbial contamination for a period of three months, without using any preservatives. Thea invented the first multi-dose bottle capable of dispensing preservative-free eye drops. This became the catalyst for other innovative packaging ideas, the latest of which is Steri-Free Technology, which allows the delivery of preservative-free gels. Another key innovation has been Monopost, the first and only preservative-

free latanoprost, treating patients with open angle glaucoma and ocular hypertension. A competitor had developed this product using preservatives; and it has taken Thea 17 years to develop the same treatment, with the same reference, with preservative free technology. We entered the glaucoma market, launching Monopost, in 2013 in Switzerland. This product has been a great success story, tackling this long-term disease with preservative-free treatment for the first time. Indeed, a recent study conducted on a European level, showed that the proportion of Swiss patients asking their doctor for preservative-free products is higher than in most other European markets.

What will be some of your key product launches in Switzerland over the next few years?

[related_story]

Next year we plan to launch our second preserve-free product in the area of glaucoma.

A number of molecules aren’t compatible with the Abak system. To overcome this, Thea invented Easigrip bottles. Designed to be easy to hold, they make administering preservative-free eye drops simple, which is particularly important as this is a disease that tends to affect the elderly disproportionately. Studies show that a key factor behind a successful therapy is the compliance of the patient. In this regard, we are very excited to be launching this bottle technology in 2017. Thea´s main growth drivers are in the field of dry eyes and glaucoma, and our strategy will be to focus on new product launches in these two areas.

Compared to other European markets, what do you see as some of the unique features of the Swiss healthcare system?

Switzerland has a separate regulatory framework from the rest of Europe, with Swissmedic, the Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products. We apply directly to the Federal Office of Public Health, and Swissmedic; we do not go through the European Commission and the centralized European procedures. The other unique factor regarding Switzerland and the rest of Europe, is our approach to doctors. In other European countries, medical representatives visit doctors without any appointment. In Switzerland a fixed appointment is still required, and sales representatives therefore spend more time detailing the benefits of a certain product to doctors.

What potential do you see for eye care companies in Switzerland?

There remains great potential in two areas in particular, glaucoma and dry eye, due to the aging nature of the Swiss population. There are also environmental and lifestyle changes that are taking place that will ensure there remains a dynamic dry eye market.

What will be your key priorities for Thea Switzerland over the next five years?

We want to create a preservative-free generation. I want to ensure that this affiliate is fully up to speed, using the latest technologies; adopting to the latest trends, both regarding our drugs, and in the manner that we communicate with both doctors and patients. We have a very exciting pipeline of products that will come through over the next few years.

What do you find most exciting about working for a French family run company with such an extensive history in the field of ophthalmology?

Thea as a group, has a relatively small structure, which ensures we can take quick decisions, reacting to evolving market dynamics. Our French headquarters' also give us the freedom to run pilot projects at the Swiss level. Such initiatives can then be used at a global level. Having this freedom when leading the affiliate is extremely exciting. Over the last few years we have built up an excellent team in Switzerland. It is a pleasure to work with people who are all motivated, with a strong entrepreneurial spirit. There is nothing more rewarding then working for a company that is fuelled by innovation.

See more interviews