Stefanos Agiopoulos – Country Marketing & Sales Manager, DHL Global Forwarding, Freight Greece



"Piraeus is becoming the gateway to Europe. In light of the acquisition, it is important to note that Piraeus is no longer a Greek port, but an international one."

10.03.2017

Tags: Greece, DHL, Logistics, Pharma, Regulatory Reform

From Greece to the world, and from the world to Greece – the Greek affiliate of the world's leading logistics company sets its aim high to continue catering to its global network. Stefanos Agiopoulos, Country Marketing & Sales Manager at DHL Global Forwarding, Freight Greece, speaks about the transformative period in the Greek logistics sector, staying abreast with the rapidly-changing life sciences regulatory environment, as well as the upcoming priorities in Greece.

The logistics industry in Greece is undergoing a transformative period as China's biggest shipping company, COSCO Shipping, gained a foothold of Greece's biggest port in Piraeus. The basic premise of the deal is to make Greece an ideal gateway to the rest of Europe, with its strategic geo-positioning. Do you think this latest development sets the Greek logistic sector to a path of expansion?

Piraeus is becoming the gateway to Europe. In light of the acquisition, it is important to note that Piraeus is no longer a Greek port, but an international one. Although it has always had international activities, it now has a new stance in the market given the latest development. Cosco decided to invest in Piraeus with the fundamental strategy of making it as the main hub to Europe. Therefore, from the DHL perspective, Piraeus is not viewed as a local port, but primarily as a gateway. We have already implemented services to accommodate the latest development.

Amongst one of the most important developments is that of the Maritime Silk Road, which we introduced in 2016. Simply put, the route takes advantage of the fact that Piraeus is an international port to create very short lead time. We designed the service to shorten the average travel time between point A and point B, for example from Asia to Middle Europe. For instance, products originating from China can travel by ocean freight to Piraeus port and cross-dock afloat the containers and be directed overland to be able to reach its final destination in Europe, decreasing travel times by seven to nine days. Given the direct connection, we are able to shorten the lead time which is an additional value proposition to our customers.

Mr. Agiopoulos, you have been with DHL for almost 19 years and have been in a leadership position for 8 years. How would you describe DHL's overall positioning in the Greek market?

I have started my career within DHL in 1998 at DHL Express, and throughout the last 19 years I've moved to DHL Global Forwarding Freight. Currently for the last seven to eight years, I have held the position as the Country Marketing & Sales Manager at DHL Global Forwarding, Freight, which is a combined business division covering forwarding and freight activities.

In Greece, DHL is represented in two divisions, namely DHL Express, which provides time-definite deliveries around the globe with a strong position in the Greek market, as well as DHL Global Forwarding, Freight, which provides all forwarding services including air, ocean and road freight as well as warehousing and distribution.

How important is the life sciences sector compared to other parts of the operations in your portfolio?

DHL operates in a very global network in terms of life sciences, as evidenced by the 4,900 staff dedicated predominantly on this sector alone. Around the globe, we employ 150 pharmacists, alongside 150 life science-graded warehouses globally with approx. a size of 1.8 million square meters dedicated to life sciences of DGP-graded facilities. Moreover, we boast a network of 90+ life science certified stations, 15 GMP certified sites and 20+ clinical trials depots globally.

[Featured_in]

Key European pharma hubs in Europe are located in Banbury (UK), Mechelen in Belgium, Milan in Italy and Riga in Latvia. Furthermore, our operations cover air, ocean and road freight for this sector. More specifically, for road freight, DHL operates in a cold-chain network wherein services are provided even down to LTL (Less-Than-Truckload) rates. This means for the customers, they do

not have to pay the Full Truck Load rate but only for the actual load they are shipping with DHL. Therefore, they can easily move from one palette to a full truck at a more cost-efficient rate. For instance, when we ship products from Athens to Stockholm, we are able to cross-dock at our Mechelen hub in Belgium that is GDP certified. From there, the shipment will be carried on smoothly to its final destination in Stockholm. This is one example on how we are adding value to our customers due to the fact they can avail this efficient route at LTL rates for pharmaceutical products, that are typically time and temperature sensitive.

Globally, the logistic landscape is undergoing a transformative period parallel to the increasing trend of biologics in the market. There is an ongoing big revolution in cold-chain supply system, especially in regards with the regulations. How do you accommodate to these changes?

The demands and requirements are constantly changing. We are spending a lot of time, effort and expertise in order to be proactive with the changes in the landscape. For example, temperature monitoring is only one part of the equation. Throughout the developments within all these years, there are a lot more high qualitative services we have focused on in order being a true partner for life sciences customers. We have been improving our infrastructure continuously in order to cover and serve even more challenging logistics markets like in North Africa, India, Pakistan and Russia.

Our approach is to be the logistics company for the world. This is for example why we invest continuously and acquire all necessary certifications. Responding to the growing needs of a Key Account Customer in Greece we have recently obtained ISO Certification for the handling of medical devices. As medical devices need to be handled with the same precision and care as other pharmaceutical products. We are warehousing them on the highest standard and with the deep understanding that these are products geared towards saving human life.

How would you describe the DHL network in Greece?

[related_story]

In Greece, we have the privilege of being a part of a real global network for which we are not only a part of, but we are a very active member. We worked hard throughout the crisis and ensured that we connected ourselves to the cold-chain network to stay abreast with the latest developments.

The DHL life science network in Greece boasts a lot of expertise, but our tactical approach had always been to not reinvent the wheel, but rather adapt it to today’s environment. DHL offers its services and solutions following a sector approach because every industry has its own particular

characteristics and supply chain needs. Therefore we defined core industry sectors and the Life Sciences & Healthcare sector is one of them. The other sectors are Technology, Engineering & Manufacturing and Automotive. But even if we look at it in a broader scale, the discussion will naturally bring us to the life sciences sector because of its high relevance for the global trade today. In addition, from a personal standpoint, the life sciences sector had always been something that made me feel enthusiastic because of its dynamism and scientific significance to the world at large.

How do you see the trajectory of the growth in life sciences given the fast-paced environment today?

It is obvious that the sector is changing and we cannot ignore the role of technology in both the sector itself and the logistics that accompany it. Changes are widespread ranging from different mergers and acquisitions, as well as the opening of new markets with increasingly difficult geographies to cover. We have witnessed a 20-fold growth in the generic industry for the last 20 years and regulatory conditions are constantly changing given the rise in quality standards. Keeping the temperature regulated could have been enough 10 years ago, but today it is necessary to have a holistic approach on the regulatory framework as a whole, especially given the fact that there is a rise in the spending for both Greece and Europe.

Customer behavior is also changing. In regards with distribution, e-commerce is growing and more direct-to-patient strategies are present in the market, which means that less people are buying from their local pharmacies itself. Therefore, new distribution channels need to be opened and explored to accommodate to new changes. These social changes are also further exacerbated by the rapid change in technology, which means that for a logistics business, we need to be able to provide our customers with real-time data about the conditions and whereabouts of the products.

In regards with your client-base, do the multinationals and locals differ in their logistics requirements?

More or less the requirements are the same. The quality partners in the pharmaceutical industry have been very active in the past years so the quality standards have been relatively on par with both the multinationals and the locals. Both adhere to the European legislation which has strong implication on how their supply chains are conducted as well.

We believe in the logistics axiom that “the end supply chain is only as strong as its weakest link”. Given a complex landscape, we ensure to be the most reliable partner for our customers who want to have the API to be transported properly to manufacturing sites, then unto different markets and

in the end unto local pharmacists. Even though a prescription is picked up in Athens, the ingredients consist of components from all over the world. Though this can be said across many different sectors, we are cognizant that pharmaceutical products are going into the improvement of human life and therefore we ensure that quality conditions are at highest standards within all stages.

Our main focus is to deliver the world to Greece and Greece to the world. In regards with pharmaceuticals, GDP-graded services are imperative in order to perform cross-dockings and domestic distribution, but for the moment, they are contracted to selected third parties. We ensure that both we and our partners are audited in order to provide the utmost security for our patients.

What do you see as your strategic priorities for DHL Greece in the upcoming years?

One of our priorities will be solidifying our Silk Road service from the world to Greece and from Greece to the world – which we are planning to extend to the life science sector as well. Therefore we will be looking closely at the significant changes that will be brought by the new Piraeus ownership. Be it pharmaceutical or not, the competitive transit time from the Piraeus port is an asset which will be promoted by us. Part of our job is to make such infrastructural assets more visible and accessible to our customers.

We have already achieved this in terms of our pharmaceuticals business and we are going to establish this for our further freight business as well.

A further strategic priority for us is to get Athens connected to the DHL Global Forwarding Thermonet network. That might require further investments in Athens airport.

In the end our overall objective is to make the access for to our global network as easy and seamless as possible for our customers and thereby the world becoming more connected. So whenever our customers are looking at DHL Greece or DHL Singapore or DHL Germany, we make sure that there is the same high standard of service of quality. DHL Greece has been present in the market for a long time and truly understands its dynamics. Especially with the strong trend in internationalization of local companies, it is an opportune time for us because the rise in business opportunities is what drives us.

See more interviews