Interview: Victor Brun – Executive Director, French-Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Colombia



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Executive Director of the French-Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Victor Brun, shares his insights regarding the solid Franco-Colombo relations. He speaks about the synergies between the two cultures, the attractive factors that make the country an ideal investment destination, as well as the role of the Chamber in helping companies navigate complex market dynamics in Colombia.

2017 is an important year for French-Colombian Chamber as its celebrates its 100-year anniversary. As a way of introduction, how would you describe French-Colombian relations?

Colombia and France have always had a privileged relationship, fostered through a long-standing amicability and economic ties. Both countries have always had a strong regard for each other. In January 2015, President Manuel Santos visited France as a testament of the good standing of the two countries. President Francois Hollande and President Santos decided to celebrate a season of Franco-Colombo ties from December 2016 to December 2017, which was inaugurated in Bogota through a festival of sound and lights provided by the city of Lyon. The celebration of the first part (French activities in Colombia) ended right before France's Bastille day, which highlights the growing significance of Colombia to France. After Brazil, Colombia is the Latin American country

with the most university exchange programs, and France sends over three thousand students to France per year. Both cultures have a mutual affinity for each other that produces good synergies in the cultural, educational and commercial spheres.

France is globally renowned for its fashion and gastronomy industries, but there is a strong effort to gain more international notoriety for its science and technology fields, laden with innovation. This is the image that we want to relay in Colombia as well.

Who are some of the key French players in the Colombian marketplace?

France is one of the biggest investors in Colombia. Given the widespread presence of French companies all over the globe, it is difficult to determine the exact level of investment in each country at time because the amounts go both back to the mother company in France as well as fostering the affiliates in different countries. Currently there are over 200 French companies in Colombia and they are ranked as the number one foreign employer in the country, providing over 100,000 direct jobs to Colombians. French companies represent a high economic significance to the country, with a net worth of 15-20 billion USD in total.

Among the most important French companies are Grupo Exito/Carulla, owned by the French company Groupe Casino, boasting as one of the top employers in the country. Teleperfomance, which is a large network of call center and bought Teledatos in Colombia, is another French company that provides about 12,000 jobs in the country. Companies like Schneider Electric, Renault, Legrand, Lactalis, Groupe Seb, L'Oreal, Saint-Gobain and Mane have manufacturing plants in the country. Prominent Oil and Gas companies such as Perenco, Maurel & Prom, Total, Schlumberger and Technip for engineering are also in the market. Poma, a company from Grenoble has made a profound social impact as the company responsible for the innovative cable car system, which is widely used in Medellin and has reshaped the city.

Why is the chamber the ideal platform to help companies navigate the increasingly complexities of the Colombian landscape?

The main responsibility of the Chamber is to create a high level of engagement in the business sector. The French Chamber is actually the oldest bi-national Chamber in the country, celebrating our 100 years of operation this year with 250 members. It is part of a network of 120 chambers globally.

Our main method drive engagement amongst our members is through networking events with cocktails and hors-d'oeuvres. Some of our closed-door events is really beneficial to our members

because they are able to be in an intimate space with the top influencers of a certain sector. For example, recently we had an event with the Minister of Energy, alongside the top entrepreneurs in the area in order to build a strong plan of action for the projects in this sector.

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Moreover, we also have certain departments and specific working groups dedicated to certain sectoral focus. They are also responsible for producing economic reports on different sectors on a regular basis. We also aid French expats who are in search of work in Colombia and guide them through the recruitment process. We also offer support for administrative and logistical needs. The Chamber also serves as an incubator for several start-ups and offer them support in a cost-effective way through coaching workshops and mentoring projects for marketing, commercial and finance areas.

What factors characterizes Colombia as an ideal investment destination for French companies?

From the general perspective, the size of its economy (fourth in Latin America) and its population, amounting to close to 50 million people makes it one of the most important market in the region, along with Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. Moreover, it is also geographically strategically positioned being situated on two important maritime waterways, namely the Pacific and the Atlantic. The country’s positioning also makes it easy to reach several major cities in Latin American quickly. Colombia actually has one of the oldest economies in Latin America, with a solid banking sector. In recent years, it has gradually risen to be one of the top countries in the “ease of doing business” metric by the world bank given the stability of its political and economic environment that is liberal and open. France is very well-positioned for greenfield investments in the country. Furthermore, the talent pool in Colombia is excellent.

In the context of the pharmaceutical sector, how important are French companies in Colombia?

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In Colombia, no company has yet to reach the notoriety and market capture that Sanofi has, along with its generic arm Genfar. Nonetheless, there are also notable French companies in the sector such as Laboratoires Servier, with a strong distribution channel in the country, as well Biomerieux, which is a leader in diagnostics. Other companies such as Laboratoire Urgo, which hails from Bourgogne, recently bought Laboratorios Gerco from Cartagena in 2016 and now has a more

prominent stance in the OTC market.

In the dermocosmetics field, Naos with brands like Bioderma and Institut Esthederm is a top French company in Colombia. We also have companies such as Biologique-Recherche, which is represented by the company, Cosmetica Real, in Colombia, as well as Guinot Mary Cohr, which is a cosmetic brand that is well-known to sponsor sporting events. Pierre Fabre is also present in Colombia throught a distributor (Percos), and their products are available in drugstores.

What are the strategic priorities of the Chamber in the next three years, with 2020 in the horizon?

Increasing the Chamber's presence across the country is a top priority. Currently, we only have offices in Bogota and Medellin but there is also tremendous growth in other cities such as Cali, Baranquilla and Cartagena where the level of demand and consumption for different products are growing. Each of these cities have their respective investment organizations whose synergies are conducive to the work of the Chamber. There are also several French companies that are already situated in these cities, for which the Chamber can help provide assistance.

Another item high on our agenda is to grow the number of members which already doubled from 125 to 250. Our overarching goal is to incentivize investment, find opportunities and foster the growth of both Colombian and French companies and strengthen the diplomatic relationship of these countries.

On a more personal note, what advice would you give to newcomers in the business landscape of Colombia?

It is imperative to recognize the regional nuances in the country, not only in regards of accent, the way of being as well as the culture of business affairs. For example, Bogota has a very different business climate as Medellin. Bogota has a far more formal demeanor whereas Medellin has a more modern atmosphere. It is important to adapt to the different mentalities in the various regions and be advised by experts. In regards with multinational companies, partnering with local companies is the key to success in the business milieu.

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