Interview: Juan Carlos Mejia Hernandez – General Manager, Altadis Farmacéutica, Colombia



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Juan Carlos Mejia Hernandez, General Manager of Altadis Farmaceutica, a fresh entrant into the Colombian market, speaks about his strategies for advancing the educational system within the medical community by developing a platform based on digital channels.

Mr. Mejia, Altadis Farmaceutica is a recent entrant to the Colombian market, having established its operations this March 2017. What are the main challenges and opportunities that you observe in this evolving process?

We have identified the opportunity to bring various therapeutic lines, which can be divided in five categories: central nervous system, cardiology, oncology, biotechnology and immunomodulatory. Altadis is aiming to provide medicine to the population in need. As we are a very recent entrant to the Colombian market, our strategic priority is to advance the positioning in the market and establishing a strong presence marked by recognition in the industry. Nevertheless, this is not an easy task considering the immense competition present in the market. However, we have developed a strategy that relies on competing in quality and communication with the doctors and patients. As the market is experiencing frequent regulatory changes, the requirements have transformed, necessitating an alteration in the way we approach the market.

In line with this, the system has set the right foundations, however we are facing certain challenges that we must overcome by joining the forces and creating a comprehensive environment working

towards a strong contribution to the sustainable healthcare system that provides access to all the patients. This is the way leading to the improvement. Ensuring that the medical community receives products of quality that don’t require increase in cost is one of the imperatives for Altadis. We are perfecting our strategy of providing branded generics of high quality along with studies of bio-availability.

Nonetheless, these can provide doctors with the information proving the quality of our generics that is exactly the same as the original branded product. However, the medical community is still not completely familiarized with these terms, therefore we have decided to create an educational platform that will inform the doctors about these topics. As the pharmaceutical sector is in many aspects outdated, where we still apply the same techniques as a century ago, it is of critical importance to work on modernization and strategies’ differentiation. This is what Altadis is working towards.

You mentioned that your product portfolio divided into five therapeutic areas. Where do you identify future growth drivers?

Each product category stands as an individual growth driver. As we decided to specialize in the mentioned areas, the focus is on developing products of outstanding quality, offered at a reasonable price that does not affect the system negatively. We are lowering the costs, but keeping the same quality. Consequently, we have a dialogue with the government in terms of price decrease, however our belief resides in the quality aspect being the essential factor leading to progress. Indeed, the main necessity of the market is the quality; this is where we want to compete, while establishing and maintaining good relations with the medical community aiming to form our strength and distinction in this area.

What is your strategy in order to upgrade the communication between doctors and patients? What is the essence of your educational platform?

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One of the significant element shaping our educational approach relies on school visits and education of doctors about the importance of a proper diagnosis that takes into account the emotional state of the patient. By this, I specifically refer to depression being the silent disease that people are still ashamed to talk about. Consequently, people suffering from this disease don’t consult the doctor as they are more concerned with the physical symptoms that can mislead in diagnosis.

Our goal is to advance the level of primary care and ensure general practitioners can understand the patient and communicate properly to them as it is a factor that indeed shapes the lives of patients at times. As an example, a person who is diagnosed with a cancer can feel inconsolable after receiving this type of information, but the right communication approach from the doctor's side can influence the patients' state in many ways.

Nonetheless, the communication we are promoting will be based on digital channels. As I mentioned earlier, it is time for pharmaceutical sector to renovate the route of doing business. Digitalization is part of the new era and this is the direction we want to take.

You have projected on commencing the production in Colombia by 2020. Can you expand on this potential initiative and what benefits can it bring to Altadis and Colombia?

Production brings along two major benefits both for the country and Altadis. Foremost, we would be the first company with two manufacturing plants producing different therapeutic lines; one plant being located in Colombia and the other one in Portugal. At this moment, we are importing products produced in Portugal, however in some years, national production will allow us to have our products under control from inceptions, guaranteeing the on-time product availability.

Additionally, we can support the country's capacity in pharmaceutical production and create more jobs for the population. Our manufacturing focus will be on biotechnology, which at the moment still represents a difficulty due to high costs and the investments into bringing this type of technology into the country. In this regard, our investments and efforts into this specific field can eventually result in lower costs for the system and augment our competitive advantage versus big pharma.

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Even though we are currently not exporting our products, this incentive is in plan for the near future, as we understand the advantage of the geographic location of Colombia. However, our essential strategic priority at the moment is building a strong presence within the Colombian market that will in six to seven years allow us to expand internationally within the Latin American region, with prime focus on Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador.

What makes Altadis a partner of choice?

We want to be partners for the different actors at the level of health in Colombia, demonstrating our interest in providing quality, efficacy and safety of our medicines at a competitive price that

benefits both payers and patients. marketing differentiation and our distinguished approach to the market, we are also embracing innovation. Nevertheless, we are seeking to provide different forms of medication.

Through research and development, we are looking to develop a new form of medication by combining and uniting different formulations. As there are many diseases that complement each other, our goal is to simplify the process of taking medication for the population consuming a great amount of medicine. In this sense, the patients taking medication for the heart, the memory and others, could take just one pill for all ailments. Indeed, we are looking to provide innovation in this regard, while offering efficient products that serve as a solution for the patients at the same time.

Additionally, we are building a strategy of connecting the channels in the sector with patient being at the centre, as the purpose of our existence is based on improving the quality of life of patients.

What would you like our readers to think when they hear Altadis?

Quality translated into trust. I want to build a recognized brand that the community associates with quality and marketing differentiation. I believe the key ingredient is the capability to bring innovation along with doing things differently. Acknowledging the differentiation factor leads to modernization and pushing the boundaries to move forward. This is what Altadis is looking to achieve.

You have over 20 years of experience in pharmaceutical sector. What advice would you give to someone looking to build presence in the country?

For someone who seeks to build my advice is to do things well and differently; we cannot expect to enter a market like this doing everything the same, we must innovate and think that we are all part of this market, thus delivering the best and the most innovative products.

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