Interview: Venu Ambati – Managing Director, Abbott India Limited

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A passionate advocate for reverse mentoring, Abbott India Limited's managing director, Venu Ambati, discusses the productive investments that the company has made in India, and his intention to make digital technology, building interactive healthcare ecosystems and going 'beyond the pill' strategic priorities for the future.

A strategic acquisition has enabled Abbott to take a leadership position in India. Six years down the line, how would you qualify the outcome?

It's interesting that you start with leadership. For us at Abbott, leadership is multi-faceted and goes much beyond commercial leadership. We believe that if we can create multiple patient-centric healthcare eco-systems in developing nations like India – that's true leadership, because only then can we truly help people get healthy.

Strategic alliances definitely help to enhance leadership presence. Abbott's pharma business has been able to increase its scale of operations and develop a portfolio that is structured for growth, with a focus on access, quality and affordability. Today, Abbott's pharmaceutical business is present in 90 percent of key therapy areas. We have a leadership position in diabetes, cardiovascular, women's health, CNS, gastroenterology and hormonal therapies. Importantly, our portfolio encompasses all life stages, addressing the healthcare needs of children, young adults, adults and older patients.

Abbott is in fact the only multinational company whose pharmaceutical business is 100 percent focused on emerging markets. We have built our business to be driven locally, yet powered globally. And, as we speak today, Abbott's pharmaceutical business in India is growing faster than the market.

Abbott India has a range of products focusing on a wide spectrum of therapeutic areas, from Neurology to Gastroenterology, to Thyroid and Pain Management. Can you share which franchise has performed better over the past year (and two months) since your appointment?

IMS trends showed growth in our Women's health, Metabolics and Diabetics franchises.

I believe our success is due to our underlying principle of creating sustainable healthcare ecosystems. Speaking of metabolics for instance, if you take thyroid disease, the prevalence is very high, but only 25 percent of Indians are actually aware of the disease. So, we can help people improve their health by helping them understand the disease.

This is critical, because many people think pharma companies are focused on discovering new molecules, but we're focused on innovating everything but the molecule. We look at the best technology and science, new ways of using existing medicines, new delivery methods, new dosage combinations, new indications or digital solutions that improve patient adherence and make people's lives better.

Applying these incremental innovations to existing off-patent medicine provides added value to our patients. Whilst this approach is common in other industries such as consumer goods, this insight-driven approach is less common in pharma.

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Are there any projects and initiatives that you would like to share with our international readers?

Operating in the branded generics market is really interesting because of the intense competition. Competition is good. It fosters better awareness, which should lead to better health for people.

For example, we are currently undertaking a project on fatty liver disease, where we are creating an ecosystem for doctors and patients to manage their lifestyle. This is done through a unique lifestyle management program, where we connect fitness wearables and electronic health record systems to help people and doctors better manage their health. This is critical to tackling the silent

nature of liver disease.

For another project, we used digital to empower HCPs to ensure patience adherence and better outcomes in Vertigo. In fact, our in-clinic Scientific Detailing through Virtual Reality & Patient Education Augmented Reality app, enabled better treatment outcome with patients of Vertigo. This initiative was recognized in many forums including the 2017 eyeforpharma Awards.

While our marketing initiatives are reaching out to patients & HCPs for treatment, our recent CSR campaign reached out to people from two villages of Gujarat (where we have our manufacturing plant) to make them free of open defecation. These villages had an open defecation rate of 70 percent – prone to several health complications, which is now brought down to zero! We created over 500 toilets in one year.

There has been a recent announcement about the decision to invest into a Global I&D (Innovation & Research) center in India. Can you tell us more about it?

Global scale provides us with a solid base to remain competitive, especially when it comes to manufacturing and innovation. But, our business model is driven locally, where we tailor our innovation and product portfolio to adapt our go-to-market model locally. This helps us to navigate the complexity of India’s healthcare industry with agility.

Our new Innovation and Development center in Mumbai, opening in early 2018, will be the largest development hub for Abbott’s pharma business globally. The new center will develop products for India, but will also create new products for more than 30 other markets. Developing and launching new, improved medicines to India is a major part of our strategy.

India has been chosen for its capacity to generate frugal innovation. How long can the country hold such a position? Do you think one day that India will reach its dream to be seen as more than a “frugal” innovation location?

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The Indian pharma industry has come a long way – we are consistently showing a double digit CAGR growth. And I don’t think this will stop because affordable healthcare is a worldwide concern. Affordability is essential. Frugal innovation is producing cost-effective sustainable solutions. But low-cost manufacturing capabilities augmented with a strong R&D is how I see the future.

As we gradually shift from generic to innovative, “bigger is better” models are also slowly caving in. I am sure India will be soon shift to being recognized for its innovation capabilities rather than

being only a frugal innovation location.

How do you assess the cost and pricing climate in India?

Several recent changes in pricing ensure that the market remains dynamic. Pressures are high for all of us in the industry, but it is the patient that matters – such that we can provide them the best solution. Overall, we should also focus on improving the other **“A”**s of the system – that is **Accessibility** and **Availability**. There are various routes to affordable medicines and we are with all our partners in ensuring quality, trusted, affordable healthcare to people in India.

Are you open to acquisitions in the country?

We are always open to evaluating opportunities.

On a completely different topic, we have seen that you are a strong advocate of reverse mentoring. Why do you believe this is the way to go and how easy is it to implement this it in a country like India where the vertical hierarchy is still very strong?

I believe that the core competencies required for great leadership do not necessarily come only with experience. The values of kindness, empathy, integrity, respect and courage are something that can be imprinted on both the mentor and the mentee. While vertical hierarchy is strongly in place in India, gradually companies should and are formalizing the reverse mentoring process in order to ensure best practices in today’s digital world.

Younger employees come with different learnings and belief systems, and their presence definitely adds pace and compassion to the workforce. We have in place a few recruiting programs where we hire talent from top institutes across India and abroad, and most interactions with these future leaders are impressive. They have smart ideas to reach rural stakeholders through IoT (Internet of Things) & emerging technologies, and interesting ideas to solve complex problems like disease prevalence by using big-data.

What advice would you give to the next generation of aspiring pharma leaders?

The first piece of advice is to be flexible! Because if one observes the development of the Indian pharma industry, the trend has shifted from taking audacious bets on certain segments to making astute choices for growing in niche areas. In a rapidly changing environment – of say diseases and patient profiles – leverage all help, digital and otherwise, to understand the trends and predict outcomes. I have observed a larger role of the consumer in health decisions, and the next leaders should ensure the patient-first approach in most decisions. Value-added services such as patient

support programs that can help ease adherence issues and improve access to medicines may be a big part of the industry soon.

I can say for myself, that being a part of the pharma industry, one should be aware that they are helping patients lead a better quality healthy life, and should always take pride in that.

Mr. Ambati, what will be your strategic priorities for the next five years?

All our strategic priorities are focused on making life better for the patient. Over the next five years, we want to create an innovative healthcare ecosystem that improves access and is based on technology and insights, for both ‘now’ and ‘next’ therapies.

We want to accelerate our established brands by creating innovative services for patients, doctors, caregivers and chemists across the continuum of care, which increases our breadth and depth. And we believe that technology innovation through digital ecosystem is a key in markets like India, with increased penetration due to the recent boom in the telecom sector.

The current state of digital innovation in India, though rapid, is perhaps being carried out in silos– pharma, diagnostics and doctors are perhaps not cross-talking enough. We want to shift that paradigm. We want to be a holistic healthcare provider across the continuum of care, keeping patients as the focal point; that I believe is the key to our sustainable success.

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