Interview: Wojciech Sulimierski – General Manager, Aspen Poland and CEE

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Wojciech Sulimierski, general manager of Aspen Poland and CEE, discusses the opening of the regional operations in 2014 and the importance of the CEE region as the company establishes itself in the global pharmaceutical ecosystem. Moreover, he highlights the impact of global acquisitions and the niche area model they have utilized to quickly gain an impressive market share in Poland as well as his aspirations for Aspen CEE in the future.

What have been your objectives since the Polish affiliate opened in 2014?

Aspen is quite a unique company, gaining momentum through a fast decision-making process and expanding quickly thanks to bold moves ensuring platforms for constant growth. A key global growth driver is acquisitions, which also benefits regional and local operations. The good thing about being part of this game is the scope of empowerment local management is given and the way local expertise is valued.

This fits very well to the Polish and CEE environment being quite a dynamic business playground where plenty of room for expansion still exists. For instance, the thrombosis market is still undeveloped in many CEE countries and segments, with the average number of syringes per capita being two to three times lower than western EU markets. This indicates insufficient levels of patient prophylaxis and obvious unmet medical need.

Saying that, the key objective is to capitalize on the unique Aspen business model and ensure the further growth of the company. The driver for this is to give access to affordable medicines to as many patients as possible. This can be achieved both through organic growth and adding a new acquired incremental portfolio.

How has the company been growing and what is the mandate of the Polish office?

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The global acquisition of the thrombosis portfolio from GSK back in 2013 was an important milestone for Aspen; triggering commercial operations being established across Europe and a switch from a predominantly buy-sell business model to currently 85 percent consignment through our own professional Aspen Operations.

Aspen Poland was established later that year and we kicked off our business in January 2014. From the very beginning, the Polish office served as a headquarters for Central and Eastern Europe, driving and supporting commercial strategies for the region. The first months were truly challenging and fascinating at the same time as we had to set up company from scratch taking over more than one hundred employees from GSK. Saying that, from day one we've had to establish a fully running operations in 16 markets providing all necessary tools and systems for quite a big team to ensure continuity of supply and promotion.

During the initial years we focused mainly on the thrombosis business, totally redefining our strategy and giving more attention to a few well-identified growth factors. These basic changes helped us to convert the thrombosis sector into a growing business again. This organic growth would not be possible without improving supply and local distribution.

As local markets, we really took advantage from all investments and changes Aspen implemented in our production facilities in EU ensured continuous supply. In each individual market, we have set up new distribution contracts and ways of working to improve availability of products for local patients. In 2016 we incorporated another classical brand from previous distributors and fine-tuned our operational model focusing on key accounting, MSL support and multichannel capabilities. This made us ready for anticipated changes in the healthcare environment and further portfolio expansion.

What makes Poland the ideal market to conduct regional operations?

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It’s quite natural to set up a regional headquarter in the biggest market, obviously Poland holds this position in the CEE cluster. Large population, healthy and still rising economy, growing and dynamic pharmaceutical market, together with the good abundance of experienced and well-trained individuals makes Poland a good place to set up the regional office.

The generics market in Poland is extremely competitive and companies take different business approaches. What model has Aspen used to gain market share in Poland?

As aforementioned, Aspen strategies vary, depending on geography. In Europe, our business model is focused on classical brands and targeted promotion to specialists; a good example having the thrombosis business as one our specialist operations. Thanks to our unique technical capabilities in this area we are in a good position to stay competitive and attractive for all stakeholders even in this highly competitive environment.

How does Aspen Poland approach the concept of “patient centricity”?

First and foremost, we aim to provide affordable products, so they can reach as many patients as possible. We do not overpromise on what we can deliver. In each domestic market, we have set up new distribution contracts and unique ways of working leading to improved availability of products for local patients. Fraxiparine®´s evolution in Poland is a great example of success; after the re-launch in 2014, volume grew almost 70 percent as per the National health fund’s report on reimbursed volumes. It worth to say all CEE markets equally followed this pattern.

What is the importance of the region for the company globally?

The branded generic market offers a lot space for Aspen to be able to effectively compete through top class production capabilities, product quality and stability in supply being our competitive advantages. Supplying affordable products supported by selective and focused commercial organization creates a good mixture to increase our presence in CEE.

Furthermore, the CEE is one of Aspen’s largest regions, and in Aspen´s official yearly report Poland and the CEE were named as “emerging” markets, as it is as area that is projected to grow much faster compared to more developed, Western European markets. Being in this league is a big opportunity and challenge at the same time, as we need to secure further growth drivers to play in this club.

The company in 2016 made two large acquisitions of anaesthesia portfolios, first from GSK and in September 2016, from AstraZeneca. These moves have positioned Aspen as the largest anaesthesia company outside the US. How have these global decisions

impacted your operations in the regional sense?

Obviously, the acquisition of anesthetic products from AstraZeneca and GSK were key milestones for the company globally – in fact – this portfolio gae Aspen a strong sales boost, especially for markets beyond Europe. For the CEE and Poland this addition fits very well to our business model based on strong presence in hospitals, tendering capabilities and many team members have personal experience with anesthesiology.

On the other hand, many of these products lost patent years ago and the market is crowded with intensified competition. Therefore, this situation calls for a wise and selected investment.

How do you continue to attract HQ´s attention so they do not overlook Poland, especially as the company goes global and moves into huge markets such as Brazil and China?

Poland is an attractive market with 40 million people and offers good investment prospects. Aspen was always driven by acquisitions – it is in our DNA – and no one is surprised to see new announcements from our CEO from time to time. Obviously centrally driven deals are based on a larger global fit, and from a local perspective do not always add a huge incremental value. To be on a more proactive side, we've kicked off several local business development projects to fill existing free promotional slots. Simply put – we need to be proactive and deliver!

What are your strategic priorities in the next three years?

Over the following few years, our priorities will be driven by our ambition for growth. Therefore, we need to further evolve our business model through three pillars that our management team is currently focused on.

Firstly, we need to expand our portfolio both from central acquisitions and from local stream, which is an ongoing project. Secondly, leveraging team competencies is another crucial step to ensure the organization is capable to work with multiple portfolios and differentiated levers. Finally, embedding cooperation within the CEE region to build on similarities and enhance efficiency.

What is the driving force that motivates you each day at Aspen?

Joining Aspen for me was a start of a new journey, one which becomes more engaging and interesting day by day. For a person being commercially driven there is always something to improve to be ahead of the game. Classic brands are the core of the CEE, and they give me a unique opportunity to stretch my business acumen as you need to use a huge variety of levers to drive sales and there is not just one model for the entire portfolio. Nevertheless, as a leader in

Aspen, you must be able to see the horizon ahead, while in the meantime understanding all the details of the current business engine is crucial.

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