# Interview: Robert Magri – Executive Officer Pharma, Alfred Gera & Sons, Malta



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*Robert Magri, executive officer for the pharmaceutical division at Alfred Gera & Sons, introduces the key milestones and operations of one of the oldest pharmaceutical distributors in Malta, as well as the opportunities and challenges the sector is experiencing in the country.*

**Established in 1888, Alfred Gera & Sons has a long history as a dynamic pharmaceutical distributor in the island. What have been the key milestones for the company since its creation?**

Many years ago, Alfred Gera and Sons started operating as a pharmacy chain in Malta called the 'Economical British Dispensary,' owned by the Gera family until after World War II. Around this time, following the industry's trend of starting to produce prepackaged medicines, the Gera family split into two: one part continuing the pharmacy business and the other specializing in the distribution business. Nowadays, we are solely focused on distribution activities. The company remains family-owned with family members involved in the board and management together with non-executive directors from various backgrounds to ensure that different perspectives are brought to discussions. The company has continued to move forward to establish a strong reputation and values. We have always strived to embrace the rapid changes in the industry as they can become the most challenging part of running a business today.

**With full logistical facilities, Alfred Gera offers high quality services in pharmaceuticals, consumer health and food and beverage. What has been the main focus of Alfred Gera?**

Alfred Gera and Sons Ltd is part of a small group and specializes in distribution services. Over the past years, the company's turnover has increased substantially and we are planning to continue on this path through the quality of our services. We are also preparing ourselves for the future. As an example, we work very hard at ensuring quality operations and transparency to our suppliers so that their products can be distributed locally in the way they would do it themselves. Our strong commitment to suppliers is also linked to the patients at the end of the chain as we should never lose sight of them.

Another group company, Consolidated Packaging Ltd, is providing packaging services to third parties. It is a stand-alone operation and I am the only person common to both companies as we strongly believe that diversification can never be successful; if operations are mingled.

Consolidated Packaging Ltd was originally created before Malta joined the EU. Our vision is always to see every threat as an opportunity. In this regard, as we quickly recognized a need for repackaging services in the industry, set up this operation and clients started reaching out to us. In consequence, we moved to bigger premises after three years and enlarged the facilities when clients' requirement for more high-quality pharmaceutical storage and logistics services became evident.

**As the company has been operating in the country for the 80 years as a distribution, what do you see as the main challenges and opportunities for a Maltese distributor?**

In terms of challenges, Malta is a small country with limited space, so it is difficult for the island to be as competitive as other bigger countries in terms of warehousing facilities. Another important challenge is the export logistics. Indeed, being an island, the two logistic options are sea freight which is never as efficient as pure overland and air freight which is a lot more expensive and difficult to control.

However, our counterparts often underestimate us, and this can work to our advantage. Indeed, we have great and well-educated people in this country who strive to succeed. As we work in small organizations, our employees know a lot more about the different aspects of the business and are more flexible. Also, we get on well with clients as Maltese people genuinely like interacting with people. Moreover, as a European member, we can increase our footprint within Europe by offering certain services to third countries. With the advance of technology, we are more able to offer certain virtual services to international clients which then requires finding the right people to operate in this environment. As Malta is a small island, a lot of foreign organizations find our close communication between all stakeholders very unusual, but it is a great strength for the industry and an advantage that many organizations could benefit from.

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**How does Alfred Gera remain competitive in the market and continue to grow?**

Nowadays, distributors have to perform economic miracles. Our margins have always been squeezed and in that sense, you cannot spend money on frivolities, but you should be prepared to spend on upgrading the tools you need and on training and retaining the best people to handle these tools. At the end of the day, the quality demands on us are increasing constantly, especially as GDP requirements move closer to GMP. Moreover, we are on the lookout for innovative processes that can make us more effective. We always have to be ahead to ensure our suppliers are satisfied as they are the ones deciding on who to use as their distributors.

**How do you ensure to fulfill even the most demanding requests from your suppliers?**

Our people are the face of the company as they are the suppliers' first contact. Therefore, we are constantly helping our employees to develop themselves for them to be experts in their fields. As a manager, the most important challenge is human resources and being capable of finding people with the right qualifications and realistic expectations within the limited talent pool that Malta can offer especially with close to full employment. Another issue is that many people are leaving the educational system with salary expectations that international companies can offer, but that we are unable to match – and remain competitive.

SWe never promise something that we cannot deliver. I believe that exaggerating your capabilities is only acceptable if you can ensure that you will achieve it in time and are transparent about it. However, if you promise more than possible, it can damage your reputation which takes a long time to build, but short time to lose.

Finally, we are honest with our clients and suppliers by highlighting any issue that arises. By discussing and actioning problems immediately we improve our abilities, increase productivity and build our credibility. Our partners also see that we are being honest which strengthen our relationships. We also make sure not to ever speak about competitors. I will only talk about the attributes, opportunities and weaknesses of the company we work for.

**The long history of Alfred Gera can be perceived in all your daily operations in Malta but how do you build your name in the international market?**

On the one end, we have to build our brand from a B2B point-of-view, reaching out to suppliers on the one hand while at the same time dealing with our customers such as retail pharmacies and supermarkets. At the other end, the brand Alfred Gera does not mean anything to the consumer – with the consumer we are reaching out to them as the brands and product names that we distribute.

Indeed, for distributors like us, the brand Alfred Gera is an umbrella under which we are responsible of running the businesses that have been entrusted to us by our suppliers. All suppliers would ideally be in the market themselves but in little Malta, it rarely makes sense to do so although some may have established a sales and marketing presence. Therefore, we have this

loyalty and duty of trust towards our suppliers to follow their business models while adapting it to the Maltese culture.

The best advert for us on the international market has always been the company's track record. If you succeed in doing business with a long-term vision by providing high quality but competitive services and strong business relations, your collaborators will see that you can be trusted as a partner. We are also looking at modernizing our operations and being more flexible. As explained previously, the team plays an important role in a company's international branding as they have to be ready to accept and embrace new challenges. Therefore, you have to care about the people who work with you and recognize that they need to develop themselves and receive training. We have to show our suppliers how our company is handling their business to build on the credibility and accountability of the company.

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**What are the next objectives that you have set for the company in the upcoming three years?**

I want to leave the organization in at least a good if not better health than when I started, and to make sure that the teams who work with us today and the ones who will work with us tomorrow can do so in the right atmosphere. Therefore, we are developing opportunities for them to get training and advance in their career – which is difficult within a small company. We also encourage employees to embrace the right values going forward in order to continue being part of a cycle which provide quality products that make other people's lives better. Moreover, it is really important to me that the company is always prepared and looks towards the future. We need to embrace it even if it's not always what we would like to see.

**Our report will be read by more than 50 000 people around the world. What would you like them to know about Alfred Gera?**

In an ideal world, our clients would be present on the market themselves but since it doesn't make sense for most manufacturers to have an affiliate in Malta, we are the next best option for them. Indeed, we are always striving to emulate and promote values our suppliers wish to promote in order for their products and brands to be seen by the consumer in the light in which they want them to be seen.

In this regard, Alfred Gera takes it to heart to select the right people for its teams, employees who believe in the same values, have a strong force of character and determination to apply these principles and who are aware that some lines should never be crossed. We have tried to embrace the traditional values which are important to employee retention and to the well-being of the business. Indeed, if this is clear to all people outside the business, it will allow us to be respected by our clients and ensure that business is conducted in the correct manner.

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