Sergio Serra Ripol – Managing Director, Tillotts Pharma Spain



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Sergio Serra Ripol, managing director of Tillotts Pharma Spain, highlights the challenges associated with setting up the affiliate and the strategic importance of Spain as Tillotts grows its European footprint. Furthermore, he gives an insight into the importance of relationships in building the company's network and his vision for the future.

What was your largest challenge setting up the Tillotts Pharma Spain office?

Setting up an affiliate is similar to being an entrepreneur, and this is the first feeling I had when I left my former employer to start this new endeavour at Tillotts Pharma Spain. The immediate challenge I faced was putting down a strong foundation for the company to set us up in the long-term, which means a lot of things, such as a legal perspective and staffing, but also presenting our company and building its reputation from zero in Spain, etc. Coming from a big company it was sometimes hard to know where exactly to start.

Since 2011, we have had an array of different milestones. Firstly, the launch of our two main products: Asacol, a first-line treatment for mild to moderate ulcerative colitis, and Entocort, a product we obtained from AstraZeneca in 2015, a first-line anti-inflammatory agent and locally acting glucocorticosteroid for mild to moderate ileocecal Crohn's disease (capsules) and ulcerative colitis (enemas). These products, as well as some other in-licensed treatments, have allowed us to

grow well over these first exciting seven years.

What has been the biggest learning curve?

How to deal with the administration is not a process I had performed intensively in my previous roles within the consulting, business development, marketing and sales space. In fact, in Spain, these administrative activities are quite complex and important due to the need to interact with the 17 autonomous communities separately for some issues. As an example, I remember a delay of around six months in the effective commercialization of one of our products in a specific small region, due to a mere technical particularity in their IT prescription system which we should have probably identified earlier.

I would not change how I built these relationships, but possibly having a larger focus on this at the start would have been useful, and this is something I learned through experience.

What is the strategic importance of Spain for the company?

Spain is the 10th largest pharmaceutical market globally and the 5th largest in Europe, and really any company looking to build a strong reputation in Europe must position themselves in the EU-5, and therefore, in Spain. Additionally, Spain is experiencing a positive trend in terms of economy, with a rising GDP and many life science investments.

On a different level, the nation is backed by excellent education –such as world-class business schools, for example–, and a large number of key opinion leaders and medical professionals that are world-renowned within their therapeutic area. This is all topped off by the obvious truth that the Spanish healthcare system is one of the best in the world in some aspects (universal care, etc.) and a model every Spanish citizen is proud of. All this adds value and makes Spain a positive environment for pharmaceutical companies to build a footprint within.

Using the example of the two best tennis players ever to describe the relationship between the affiliate and its Swiss mother company – tennis is one of my passions outside the pharmaceutical industry – Spanish player Rafa Nadal, through amazing talent, hard work and determination, helped Swiss all-time champion Roger Federer to become an even better and more competitive athlete.

Where does Tillotts Pharma Spain sit today?

Today we have 15 staff and outsource some processes, as well as having a network of very strong partners. Since the launch of our products, we have experienced double-digit growth and we believe that we can maintain these number for the upcoming years.

This will be backed by at least two main growth drivers. Firstly, the market entry of another indication of Entocort, for the remission of active microscopic colitis (capsules). Secondly, the launch of new products, such as Asacol 1600™ –an in-house development enhanced with Opticore, a new technology for our core mesalazine treatment delivery throughout the colon–, and Colpermin™ for the symptomatic treatment of painful bowel cramps and bloating in irritable bowel syndrome. This will give us short-term results, while in the meantime build up our portfolio foundation for long-term stability.

You mentioned the need to manage the fragmented nature of the Spanish healthcare network. How have you been able to deal with this?

Spain is one of the most decentralized countries in the EU. This might have some advantages, as it allows the health system to stand closer to the end user, but it definitely is a challenge as well in some respects and even more so being a smaller company like Tillotts Pharma. To be effective we must understand the local market and build our market access capabilities accordingly, while in the meantime building the relationships with key opinion leaders. Once we build this knowledge, it again brings up the need for efficiency as we have fewer resources, both human and technical, compared to big pharma.

Do you believe innovation is being well valued in Spain?

There has been a lot of debate around this issue and how the payer should deal with innovation and how much they should spend etc. What we must understand and accept is that there will always be a dilemma. It is a real challenge to find the correct balance between innovation and pricing. Of course, companies always want a better price for their therapies, but as the pharmaceutical industry, we must partner with the payer to help them establish this balance, so the healthcare system can be sustainable in the long term.

What advantages does it offer to be a niche player focused on Gastrointestinal (GI) health?

A recent report indicated that digestive diseases and metabolism was the second top prescription market in Spain, accounting for some 17 percent of the total Sell Out in values. This clearly shows the great potential the GI sector has and offers Tillotts a strong market to eat into. From an operations perspective, our focus is specifically on GI allows us to build synergies and strong relationships that help us to be extremely effective within the therapeutic class.

Finally, developing strong skills and building up key competitive tools and capabilities within one specific market also allows us to learn and be ready to eventually succeed in some new, related areas.

What perception are you looking to build for the company in the market?

We want to position ourselves as the preferred GI partner, not just for doctors and all healthcare professionals, but for other companies looking to license their products in Spain within the GI field. We have the capabilities to make a strong impact in Spain, despite our relatively young age as an affiliate.

As you know, many of the diseases we are working with are chronic, and we are very sensitive to this. Therefore, we have built strong relationships with gastroenterologists – through honest, transparent and scientific value-adding interaction with them – who in turn are able to transmit the information through to patients and help them with their life-changing diseases. Dealing with a strong focus on GI is an advantage in establishing our credibility within this field, and being the preferred partner is embedded in our company’s mission.

Where do you envision the company in five years?

We need to continue building locally on our strengths and putting ourselves in an even better position. We now have the team and knowledge.

This coupled with our HQ´s appetite to grow the portfolio through acquisitions and licensing opportunities, as well as through our own in-house R&D activities, will only allow us to develop the affiliate even further. I have a lot of trust in the current global leadership of the company for the future and their commitment and steps forward in terms of building up stronger innovation

capabilities.

Looking back, what makes you the proudest during your time as the general manager and how has your past experience helped you?

It is not easy to attract and motivate talent when you commence operations, therefore, I am most proud of the team we have built at Tillotts Pharma Spain. We are learning every day and are setting ourselves up for the exciting future ahead.

Looking at how must past experiences have assisted me in my role, it is a clear answer. Any experience you get working in different companies and different roles allows you to learn as you face new challenges and need to find unique solutions. Also, working in such an entrepreneurial environment as Tillotts Pharma is a great complement to the learnings you get in big pharma. In this sense, thinking creatively out of the box and being able to make informed decisions, sometimes with limited resources and support, is a must, since it all has a real impact on the business.

Furthermore, it really comes from within the individual, and if someone loves to learn and experience changes every day, like me, this also helps.

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