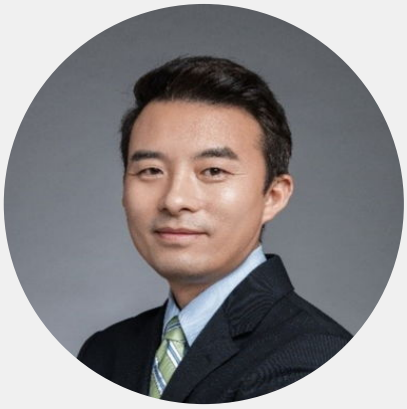
Jim Xu – General Manager, Medidata China



Positive government policies and positive industry development have in turn contributed to positive growth for Medidata China

22.08.2019

Tags: China, Research, Digitalization, Medidata

Jim Xu, GM of Medidata China, shares the importance of the China market to Medidata Solutions, the global leader in cloud services and solutions to the life sciences industry; his three priorities to foster stronger customer relationships, build talent, and deliver our offerings locally to the China market; as well as the vision of Medidata to optimize and transform the way drug R&D is done within the industry through the power of technology and the Internet.

Jim, having joined Medidata China in February 2018, what have been your strategic priorities over the past year and a half?

Medidata has been present in China for four years and has experienced tremendous growth through the years. Positive government policies and positive industry development have in turn contributed to positive growth for Medidata China. We definitely see China as a very important and high-growth market.

The decision to bring me on board at Medidata China is part of the journey to accelerate our growth in China further. The focus of the past few years has been on the continuous development of the local affiliate and the strengthening of our local presence. This means having better coverage of local sponsors and CROs. In particular, fostering strong long-term relationships with all of them, particularly with some of our larger customers, is a major priority for me.

The second is talent, both internally and externally. Internally, we have been adding new people and functions to ensure we have the right infrastructure in China to support our growth as well as to invest ahead of that growth. Since I joined last year, we have doubled the number of employees in China. Externally, we recognize that the industry is fast-growing, which means continuous demand for talent – and in particular, experienced talent. We want to contribute to the overall environment by providing more training to build a greater knowledge base for the whole industry. For instance, we offer accreditation programs for our sponsors and CROs as well as certification programs for individuals. We invest time and effort to grow the talent pool for the entire industry.

The third aspect of the overall strategy is the delivery of our products and services to China. The question is really how, as a global company, we can embed ourselves in this marketplace to provide better technology and services and continue to be a winning factor for companies in China.

Prior to joining Medidata, you were leading affiliates at giant corporations, Microsoft and GE Healthcare. Medidata is a leader in its area but a more niche player. What inspired you to join the company?

Drug development and the overall healthcare and life sciences industry in China is a very upbeat and great industry to be present in. Medidata is a niche player but a technology leader in this area. We are the leading global provider of cloud-based solutions to the life science industry, and the global leader in collecting, managing and analyzing clinical trial data. With China's growing healthcare needs and the rising investment in drug innovation, I think there is no better place to be than in China for drug development. This is the place, the time, and the topic.

Growth has always been the keyword in my career – the reason I wake up every day energetic to go to work. My past experiences have brought me to the present where I feel I need to contribute meaningfully to something impactful that can drive growth for the company as well as the industry. As a company, Medidata is investing in this country and in this industry for the kind of growth I want to see.

Before going into your relationships with customers and talent, let's look at the solutions and technology that Medidata offers, and the needs of the market here. How do the needs of the Chinese market differ from more developed markets like the U.S. – and how can Medidata adapt your products to those needs?

I actually asked this exact question during my interview process with Medidata! The strength of Medidata is precisely in handling localization needs. That is key to success in this market. Since I joined Medidata, this adaptability and capability to localize have only been confirmed. Medidata is always willing to listen, adapt to and adopt local needs. I find this openness truly amazing. Looking across my past experiences, I certainly believe Medidata is the company most willing to listen and to change according to what the customer wants.

That said, Medidata operates in a very specialized niche market that is highly regulated– and what has surprised me is that the related regulations in most countries are based on very similar principles. China is no exception. We are expected to be able to deliver a standard set of capabilities based on the same fundamental principles. If I can draw an analogy, it is like working with the Microsoft Office Suite, which is robust and broad enough to cover the basic or core needs of users in most markets.

Over the past 20 years, Medidata has conducted over 17,000 studies, including in China. This has allowed us to develop products that are innovative yet broad enough to cover a significant proportion of our customer needs in most markets. There is not a lot of specific tailoring needed to the local market. At the same time, when we see that we need to listen and to adapt in terms of our service capabilities and package, we do that. This is where the most variation in needs occurs: at the service level. We are committed to close interactions with our customers in local markets to understand how to better support them in their use of our products and services.

Medidata provides good connectivity to the ecosystem. For instance, we have the Medidata Enterprise Data Storage (MEDS). Big Data today is a buzzword but remains a concept not well-understood by many in the pharma industry. Those in the IT industry understand the specific requirements of working with Big Data. Big Data is only meaningful if your data meets four criteria: structured, accurate, clean and standard. Without these four criteria, the data is not meaningful.

Imagine that you have, as you often do in China, a very large variety of systems and data sources. How do you maintain a single dictionary to capture all of the different sources? That could be a nightmare. But MEDS provides a single location to capture all of the data according to one standard and one dictionary to render that data usable and meaningful. That is the foundation that we want to build to enable the industry to treat data in a standard way. Once you build that capacity, it becomes a robust data foundation on top of which our sponsors or CROs can build their own IT infrastructure and/or their overall data strategy.

As a technology leader, we want to be the one with the standardized platform holding the data that enables our customers to make any tweaks or changes according to their needs. We cannot provide all the variations ourselves since they depend on the specific needs of our customers. But we can provide the platform and the tools for our customers to make their own customization.

Your top priority was to foster long-term relationships with customers in China. This might be one of the most challenging aspects of being a service provider in the Chinese market. How do you go about it?

With Medidata being a global technology company, you might expect that the global pharmaceutical companies are our main clients but in China, the majority of our customers are actually local sponsors and CROs. Taking care of our local customers therefore sits within our DNA.

In China, we have two key local segments: emerging biotechs and established local pharma players. Looking at the latter, I believe they are catching up very fast. They are rapidly changing their mindsets and looking to become strong forces in drug development. Looking at the top ten traditional pharma players in China, the majority are already our customers, with some having adopted our entire platform, the Medidata Rave Clinical Cloud. We have won their hearts by communicating the value of Medidata well and by showing how our technology can address their needs. Ultimately, we demonstrated that we are able to support their growth and their desire to transform from a local company into an innovative drug company and subsequently, a global innovative drug company. This is the kind of dialogue we are having with our local sponsors and CROs.

As a technology service provider, how easy is it to communicate your value proposition to customers in China?

Looking at our local customers, having a global data management system benefits them because it increases the tradable value of their assets. Investing in the Medidata Rave Clinical Cloud platform at the beginning of their drug R&D set-up enables the future development of these projects. If they are looking for or expecting commercial partnerships with foreign companies and/or in foreign markets in the future, having a strong foundation underpinning their data and dossiers make their assets more valuable. The return on investment (ROI) and the evaluation of their projects will be different if they use Medidata as a platform for their data versus other solutions.

This has not been easy for the overall industry to realize because we are talking about the overall value of our platform technology. Many companies still consider Medidata to be an electronic data capture (EDC) company and therefore see EDC as a cost item. This is something we still need to educate the market on.

At the same time, China is very advanced when it comes to technological innovation. For instance, the country is very open to all kinds of mobile-based solutions. This is an area where we can look to innovate. Many of the emerging biotech success stories have also been established by highly experienced overseas Chinese returnees with global pharma experience as well as their own innovative ideas. Medidata is also looking to support these ideas and deriving inspiration from them in our own product and technology design processes.

What opportunities do you see for Medidata to work with the Big Tech companies in China like Alibaba and Tencent?

At the moment, we are not yet connected with them but we do see opportunities in the future. Big Health Data is now a major topic in China and we believe we have a lot to offer in this space.

In some ways, the visions of the founders of Alibaba and Medidata are very similar. They both believed in the power of the Internet to change the way society works. Today, we evolve our product portfolio and keep pace with new innovations and technology based on that vision.

On the talent side, what profile of people are you looking to recruit for Medidata?

On top of the industry shortage, we are very selective and have put continuous efforts in finding the right talent to fit the Medidata culture. This culture requires a very energetic working style, robust experience, and a fine balance between innovative thinking and strong execution. We need people who are inspired but also good with transactions, meaning how sales are processed and how customers are serviced on a daily basis. I am happy that we have a good mix in teams at the moment with all these attributes being represented.

We also embrace different ages across the organization. Having evaluated different age groups, we see that they tend to have different career motivations and expectations so we try to create a culture that fits these different layers and groups of people to promote a sense of belonging as well as their professional and personal growth accordingly.

Looking at the future, as the leading technology service provider in the clinical research space, how do you continue to grow and excel if you are already the market leader?

This is the amazing aspect about Medidata. Our founders think very differently about Medidata as a company. Sure, if we limit ourselves to solely being an EDC provider, we are indeed at the top of the industry and some might think, there is nowhere else to go. It is nearly impossible to sustain growth year-on-year by staying in just one industry niche for over 20 years.

However, our leaders have an ongoing vision to build the future of the industry. Once EDC became the market leader with the largest market share, we started looking at, mobile healthcare, virtual trials and clinical trial data management, with products such as our RAVE Clinical Trials Management Systems (CTMS) and so on. These allowed us to offer a broader range of services and have been the growth area for us in the past few years. That would be the second generation of our innovation.

We are now looking at the third generation of innovation, which is focused on AI: using data analytics tools to gain deeper and better insights of clinical trial and real world data. We aim to provide decision support for drug research and to offer cost-saving opportunities by streamlining the overall drug development processes. This will create a brand new market that will continue to drive the growth of Medidata in the future.

We ultimately hope to provide a roadmap to reshape the industry and help sponsors and CROs do an even better job when it comes to drug R&D.

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