Mouloud Boukhachab – Head of Africa Middle-East & Turkey, Pierre Fabre



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Pierre Fabre's recently appointed head for Africa, the Middle East and Turkey,

Mouloud Boukhachab, outlines his career trajectory, having worked and managed in geographies as diverse as BeNeLux and Morocco. Boukhachab also states his priorities for his new position and his strategy for navigating the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and lockdown measures.

Can you begin by giving an overview of your career trajectory?

I started as a sales rep promoting antibiotics & vaccines in Morocco in 1994 working for SmithKline Beecham. Then I quickly moved into marketing and started taking more responsibilities in the region for vaccines, OTC, and antibiotics. After that, I moved to London, working as a global strategy manager overseeing smoking cessation and antidepressant brands. In 2004, I was appointed marketing director EU for the pediatric vaccine portfolio.

Following that, I moved to France in 2007 as head of marketing for the vaccine division. While in France, I was offered an opportunity with Allergan and later on with MSD in Morocco, where I was set to take over the company's general management. But MSD's plans for the region changed and I was offered the country manager position for Pierre Fabre in Morocco.

The plan was to completely rebuild the subsidiary, the team, the business and the partnerships with local partners. Overall, it has been a great success and we have really managed to set up a strong footing for Pierre Fabre in Morocco with more balanced financial agreements with our local partners and a great new team.

You moved to head the Benelux affiliate of Pierre Fabre in 2016. What have been your key successes there?

I moved to Benelux in September 2016 to head Pierre Fabre Medicament, which includes the oncology, ethical and OTC portfolio of Pierre Fabre (not the dermo-cosmetic division). In Belgium, the purpose was once again to strengthen the foundation of the company, rationalize the portfolio and focus on the profitable franchises, and shift from an OTC portfolio to ethical and oncology products.

Where there was previously only one person in the oncology business unit, we moved to a 14 people strong team. We also launched our most innovative products in Benelux with BRAFTOVI® (encorafenib) and MEKTOVI® (binimetinib). We started in February 2018, recruiting, training and managing market access, first in the Netherlands and then Belgium and Luxembourg.

In less than a year we launched in the Netherlands for full access and reimbursement and in less than 11 months reached a 33 percent market share in the melanoma indication. A very short time later, we managed to also gain access for BRAFTOVI® (encorafenib) and MEKTOVI® (binimetinib) in Belgium in November 2019, followed by Luxembourg.

We then moved on to develop some of our other brands. In 2019 we grew our business very significantly vs the previous year, both in revenues and profit terms. During this period, we also opened a fully-fledged subsidiary in the Netherlands for both dermo-cosmetics and drugs. With the Netherlands having the second highest incidence for melanoma in the world after Australia, the need for innovative treatments there were and still are huge. We became an active actor of the pharma scene there by joining VIG, the association of pharma innovators, and reinforced our image with doctors, HCPs, and the government in that country.

These three years have been very busy and a great experience!

What are the keys to success in Benelux?

Benelux is often characterized as a cluster. However, the reality is very different. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg are each completely different markets with different regulatory environments. Having said that, in all three markets you need to have a very strong and committed team in general with best-in-class capabilities in market access and sales & marketing.

You were appointed MD for the Africa, Middle East, and Turkey region at the beginning of March, right when lockdowns were being announced in many countries. How challenging have these first few weeks been?

It has been a very active, but also very awkward situation, with a lot of teleconferences with colleagues throughout the region. Obviously the first few weeks have been around introducing myself to the teams and trying to get to know them better.

The reality is that this is a very complex region where currency volatility, social unrest and even wars have been the reality of these past few years. Added to this is the diversity of localization or partnering rules and regulations throughout the region. This is a region that will require really dedicated, agile and very motivated teams.

But beyond all these challenges, this is also a vast region full of opportunities, with many unmet needs on one side but also a growing middle class in many countries. Our medicine business makes up 55 percent of our incomes, while dermo-cosmetics represents the other 45 percent.

Within the region under my responsibility, you have Turkey with a huge market, but also the GCC countries and Saudi Arabia, where the appetite for innovative products is very positive for a company like Pierre Fabre.

I believe that beyond our traditional portfolio, the new global partnering strategy of Pierre Fabre will open some new revenue streams in the region. We have been promoting Toviaz for Pfizer Europe for the past four years and have been doing very well, proving that we can make a great partner. We have also demonstrated best in class launches in Europe with our innovative Braftovi Mektovi combination in the BRAF melanoma indication.

My objective today is to ensure access to Braftovi Mektovi and to Nerlynx, another innovative therapy in oncology, across the AFMET region.

Another area where our portfolio should match the needs of the region is in the Oral Care and Dermo-Cosmetics portfolios where there is great demand for brands with a strong medical identity

like Eau Thermale Avène or Ducray.

The other asset that Pierre Fabre enjoys in the region is a very positive image. There are countries in Africa where we have been present for over 50 years, where HCPs and professionals not only have a special relationship with our brands but also with the late Mister Pierre Fabre himself, and of course with the Pierre Fabre Foundation, which is committed to improving access to better health care solutions in countries with high levels of unmet medical needs.

What are your priorities right now as you embrace these new responsibilities?

First, I am dedicating most of my time to listening to the teams, the challenges they face, and their ideas to have a very precise understanding of what opportunities lie out there.

When managing such a variety of markets, you need to make sure that you identify the growth clusters and that our teams have an excellent understanding of the market, of the HCPs, and of physicians, regulators and consumer needs. We have embarked on a strategy of precision marketing to have an in-depth understanding of each market's needs.

The second priority is the absolute need to focus. That means choosing on which market to focus, as you cannot tackle every opportunity at the same time. Focusing on brands or territories where you can have the highest returns is really the key to success.

The last point is the importance of aligning with local teams. For this you need trust. You need to trust them, and they need to trust you. We need to leave them the room to manoeuvre. You need to align on the strategy, on the markets and on the tactics. Only then should you start moving forward and you need to fully empower local management for implementation.

So far, I have been very impressed by our people, their knowledge, commitment and the number of initiatives that they have been taking to capture opportunities.

What could be the implications of these priorities for the company and its presence in some of those countries?

In some of them, we may have to revisit our business model entirely. We may need to rethink our partnerships, or even in some cases rethink our presence if we see the ROI is low. All possibilities are on the table.

Realistically, there is room for growth. The reality is that to achieve this we need to launch new products, as the increase in profit margins needs to come from an increase in revenue.

People and teams will be pivotal in this. At Pierre Fabre, we have one advantage, that is that people truly enjoy working for the company. They have a level of autonomy that does not compare with big pharma, where the decision-making process can be incredibly lengthy. Having worked for big pharma previously I have to say that at Pierre Fabre people matter. For us, this is more than just a word, it is a reality.

The other thing is that we belong to the Pierre Fabre Foundation – a government-recognized, not-for-profit foundation – and it fundamentally changes the purpose of your work. On the one hand, you know that the money goes either to R&D or to humanitarian projects, and on the other, you are protected from these never-ending take-overs, mergers, etc.…I think that Pierre Fabre, by offering the possibility to take initiative and empowering its teams, offers the right frame for the challenge we face in this region.

Beyond the harm it is doing to the economy, what do you feel will be the long-term impact of the confinement on your business and what could be the key learnings?

The most obvious is that it will reinforce the utilization of digital tools in the workplace. It has been an accelerator of the adoption of digital solutions to communicate with the HCPs. Many companies will come to the realization that some of these solutions really work, and it will most probably change the way we do business in the long run.

At the same time – although it sounds somewhat contradictory – I think that while reinforcing digital communication, it also highlights the value of face-to-face communication and the need for strongly connecting with our customers overall.

I am also very happy to see that this crisis has shown the capacity of our company and of our industry to be extremely flexible and agile to adopt change in a very efficient way.

What would be your advice to someone starting a career in the pharma industry today?

First, be ambitious; never let anyone challenge your ambition. But at the same time do not forget that it takes hard work and a lot of patience.

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