Federico Gomes de Freitas, General Manager Italy – Ferring Pharmaceuticals



Within reproductive medicine we are the leaders in the Italian market and one of the top 10 markets worldwide, still we want to be higher in Ferring's global ranking.

24.05.2022

Tags: Italy, Ferring, Reproductive Medicine

Ferring Pharmaceuticals' Federico Gomes de Freitas, General Manager Italy, gives us an overview of how the Italian affiliate fits into the company's global strategy, especially with respect to reproductive health, and his efforts to foster corporate culture there.

You have a financial background. What brought you to the pharma industry and to Ferring?

Back in 2017 I was at AstraZeneca Argentina as a Business Unit Director for Diabetes Care, we completed a massive reorganization as a part of a global project, when we were finishing that project, I was approached by Ferring to start a similar one. Ferring had appointed a new global president in the second half of 2017, there was a new strategy to be rolled out, so, I joined Ferring Argentina & Uruguay as a General Manager in November 2017 to start executing the new strategy.

In the late 90s I was a financial consultant working for KPMG, I moved from my home country Uruguay to the US in 2000 because I wanted to switch from finance consulting to the business. It was close to impossible to do it in Uruguay, so I enrolled in an MBA in the US with focus on International Business, in my second year of the MBA, I was approached by Bayer. Bayer at that time, 2002-2003, was reorganizing the company and they were looking for non-US executives who knew how the US works and would be willing to leave the country to work as change agents around the globe. The reason they were looking for non-Americans was because at least at that time

Americans were not motivated to relocate outside the US and they were looking for executives they could train in the US environment.

In 2004 I joined Bayer over-the-counter division based in the US. Two years after, in 2006, Bayer acquired Schering AG which was the global leader in Women's Healthcare business, and I was part of the integration process because of my previous experience as a consultant. After the integration I was offered the opportunity to take a marketing position within Bayer's pharmaceutical division based in Mexico City. Therefore, I cannot say that I set out with a plan to work in pharma. It was more like one project leading to another.

You mentioned being an agent of change in Argentina, but Italy is a completely different market, with its own complexities. What is the objective of your mandate at Ferring Italy and why do you think they were looking for someone from outside of Italy?

Since I led Ferring's change in Argentina and Uruguay, I knew the company from the inside, and they were looking for someone who knew the company and who could align the local organisation to the global strategy. There are similarities between Italy and Argentina. Italy is a larger market, a more sophisticated one, but culturally not that far away from Argentina. I found that the Italian affiliate was not fully aligned to the corporation. The objective of my mandate is to fully align Ferring Italy to Ferring's global strategy, which is similar to what I did before for Bayer and AZ in different countries.

Can you give us an overview of the global strategy and where Italy is today in terms of assets and infrastructure?

The strategy is basically to focus on Reproductive Medicine and Maternal Health. That is one pillar, other pillar is Gastroenterology, and the third pillar is Uro/Oncology. That is on the business side. On the cultural side, I found in Argentina and Italy a company that culturally needed to be realigned to Ferring's Global culture. The company is headquartered in Switzerland, still its culture is more from the Nordics. Therefore, the big challenge is to develop Ferring corporate culture inside Ferring Italy.

Specifically, how are you introducing this more corporate culture?

I must ensure Ferring's leadership principles are applied in a day to day basis. For example, empowerment, as a team we need to ensure that decisions are taken at the right level. Not all decisions should be taken by the GM, but by the person closer to the project. When people are empowered and allowed to take decisions the entire organization gain speed and quality improves. Everyone has a role in the organization, clearly everyone has a hierarchy, and everyone must make their own decisions at the proper level. I found that in the past a lot of decisions were escalated, which delays projects and reduces quality. I am pushing for the decision-making process to happen at the right level and to do that you have to increase transparency, communication, and collaboration.

You mentioned the focus of the business is reproductive health, gastro and urology/oncology. How important is Italy, especially for reproductive health given that Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in the world?

Italy is one of the top four markets for reproductive medicine in Europe. There is Spain, which is one of the centres of reproductive health in the world, Germany, France, and Italy. It is indeed a large market. The healthcare system in Italy is highly developed. Yes, it could be better; everything can be better, but I consider the Italian system as one of the best in the world.

Where does Italy stand as a subsidiary of Ferring? Are you where you should be, or do you think that commercially you are still not getting everything out of what the market has to offer for a company like Ferring?

Within reproductive medicine we are the leaders in the Italian market and one of the top 10 markets worldwide, still we want to be higher in Ferring's global ranking. Regarding overall Ferring's portfolio, about 10-15 years ago, Ferring Italy developed a different portfolio from the rest of the organization, now we have the opportunity to realign our local portfolio with the global one which would give us a strong opportunity to grow.

As I understand it, you are aligning the culture in order to further develop the portfolio. Is that correct?

Yes. I had to lead a difficult reorganization of Ferring Italy in 2021, not related to the pandemic, but to the fact that Italy had a portfolio that did not match 100 percent Ferring's Global strategy. We stop promoting some products that were not our own brands. They were OTC brands, not pure pharma. Therefore, we focused on our own portfolio and then we had to reduce the size of the team. Now we have a highly experienced team with deep experience in pharma. I am very happy with the performance of the Italian team of 62 people and the way we are developing and growing.

I imagine launching products is at the top on the agenda. What is it like to launch new products in a market like Italy with all its regionalisation and different market access speeds?

If you like challenges, it is exciting. For example, we introduced a new pen-product in April 2021 and we got the authorisation price nationally, but then the team worked region by region to make sure the drug was available. Sometimes, in some regions, you find two or three sub regions. Yes, it is highly atomized, it is challenging, and might be more complex than in other countries, but it is the same situation for all competitors. I will not complain about it because it is a great market to be in.

Are there also opportunities because of this very segmented market?

For me, the largest challenge was to understand the legislation and what you can do and what you cannot do, because the same situation cannot be replicated from region to region. It is not an exact science. Once you learn this, there are opportunities and we are capitalizing on them, we became leaders in terms of market share for reproductive medicine in the second half of 2021.

You said you became leaders in reproductive health in 2021. What other growth paths or KPIs would you like to share?

I will say for us the main KPI we follow is market share. Particularly, in 2020, fertility centres in Italy were closed for about three months and after that some of them had to work at half capacity because of COVID. Clearly, the market in 2021 was up about 20%, but for us being up 20% when the market is up 20% is not growing. Market share is where you see whether you are delivering or not. That is why for us the key indicator is market share, then we aspire to be the reference

company within the therapeutic areas we are in. Sometimes you are the market leader in market share, but doctors see someone else as the leader. Once you get the market share, you want to make sure that doctors see you as the leader which clearly is much more complex than having the highest market share.

Where would you say Ferring stands in terms brand name recognition?

We do market research with doctors, for them we are either number one or number two. However, I would prefer to use something like IQVIA because market research could be highly subjective.

When you leave Ferring Italy, what would you like to look back and feel that you have achieved in your tenure here?

I am very proud of the fact that we reached leadership in Reproductive Medicine in the second half of 2021. I am very proud of the fact that we are growing double digit with our Mesalazine for IBD and UC. Then I would say, I expect to leave as my last legacy, beyond the market, the cultural change within the Italian affiliate.

What qualities would you say are required to lead this kind of change?

It takes a lot of passion and you must be a risk taker. Clearly, there are “rainy” days, but when those days arrive it is important to keep the main objective in mind and keep pushing forward.

Is there anything else you would like to share with PharmaBoardroom’s global audience?

No question we are living in a highly volatile environment with significant changes, still we have a unique opportunity to drive and shape those changes. For example, with digital connectivity, now we can interact with key stakeholders digitally or face-to-face, we can leverage projects needs with people’s need and that is something extremely good that we didn’t have 3 years ago.

See more interviews