Howard Lin – Founder & Principal, CL Consulting



Hong Kong is a two-way gateway between the rest of the world and mainland China

15.08.2023

Tags: Hong Kong, China, Guangdong, Macau, CL Consulting

Leveraging his 24-year career in Big Pharma, Howard Lin recently moved to set up healthcare and life science consultancy CL Consultancy in Hong Kong. Lin examines the opportunities and challenges for companies in Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area region today; how the city acts as both a point of entry to, and exit from, the mainland China market; and his optimism regarding Hong Kong's transition into a bio-innovation hub.

Could you introduce yourself to our international audience and what led you to found a consultancy firm to support the healthcare and life science industry in Hong Kong?

First, a bit about myself: I joined the industry after graduating from Berkeley in 1999. I was initially looking at a career in advertising, but a twist of fate landed me in the pharmaceutical industry where I started as a sales rep in the San Francisco Area. Subsequently, I relocated to the corporate headquarters where I had marketing assignments for the US and then key international markets.

In 2010, I relocated to Asia and began my leadership journey and commitment to serving Asia’s markets. My first stop was Hong Kong where I underwent a career change joining the ethics and compliance team for Southeast Asia. My marketing experience served me well. I soon realized that I was not only promoting a product but building trust around the company’s brand in the marketplace.

To round out the last decade, I experienced working in the animal health business, then went back to human health to spearhead a digital marketing and connected care initiative before leading compliance in China, and then serving as general manager in Hong Kong.

In view of the evolving opportunities as China pursues healthcare innovation, the development of the Greater Bay Area region, and Hong Kong as a gateway between China and the rest of the world, I recently chose to set up my own company, CL Consulting Limited.

Do you see any alignment in standards between Hong Kong and mainland China?

Hong Kong is obviously a part of greater China, but the Hong Kong market and the mainland China market and healthcare systems are very different. Therefore, it is difficult to group operations in Hong Kong together with China, but each company has its own strategy, and some have chosen to oversee Hong Kong as part of their China operations. It is doable but at the same time a challenge to focus on Hong Kong's specific needs.

Are there any concerning trends in Hong Kong?

The most concerning trend is the outflow of talent. A significant portion of the emigration trend has come from the labour force. The pharmaceutical industry is not immune to this. During my time as GM, turnover was high with employees either emigrating or taking positions vacated in other companies. On top of that, Hong Kong has historically been a magnet for financial services jobs, so attracting talent into healthcare and into pharmaceuticals is an ongoing area of attention.

You just started a new company – CL Consulting – what can you tell us about it?

I founded my own company, CL Consulting, a few months ago. After 24 years of Big Pharma experience, especially on the commercialisation end of the business, I have chosen to take my knowledge and give it back.

My target is small to mid-sized pharmaceutical and biotech companies that are looking to scale up or set up operations in Hong Kong. That could be in areas such as marketing strategy, developing a compliance program or negotiations with local distributors.

Hong Kong is a relatively small market. Are you looking to stay here or expand beyond Hong Kong?

There are good opportunities here with the regulation changes that support the expansion of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) and the innovation coming out of China. Hong Kong is a two-way gateway between the rest of the world and mainland China and this position could be leveraged much more.

Regarding the GBA, it is an emerging pathway for therapies to become accessible to part of the mainland market, meaning those GBA-designated hospitals serving the nine mainland cities that comprise the GBA. This could be a particularly attractive opportunity for companies whose therapies are yet to have Chinese patient data in clinical trials – a key requirement of the regulator in Beijing.

How did you identify the need to assist companies and provide these services through CL Consulting?

As I mentioned earlier, Hong Kong is positioned as a gateway. During my time as a GM, I also served on the board of the local industry association, the Hong Kong Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry (HKAPI). As a sponsor for the GBA Taskforce, I was able to witness the progress made towards advancing healthcare due to evolving GBA policies. With a population the size of Germany, there is a lot of potential.

Furthermore, we know that there is considerable R&D investment in China, which is generating innovative therapies. There is a certain momentum for Chinese companies looking to establish themselves in HK with eventually broader global ambitions.

Have companies already been using this Hong Kong to the GBA pathway?

Yes, for sure. There are around 20 medicines that have taken advantage of this method of entry and once these products are used for a while, there will be more and more data generated. It is a nascent opportunity.

You mentioned private insurance being used in the GBA, but this may be quite complex to navigate. Are there any clear channels for access to the market?

Patients within the GBA are looking for better healthcare, and with this comes a growing need for more private insurance. We recently learned that Class 3A hospitals often have a wing offering services to well-heeled patients, patients willing to pay for the latest innovative treatments, and patients who have private insurance. As for now, mainland-designated GBA hospitals are up to 19, including nine which are Class 3A, meaning they have at least 1,000 beds. Certainly, there is a degree of scale, and we now know that the private insurance industry on the mainland side of the GBA is rapidly expanding.

Who sets medicine pricing?

For products that access the GBA, companies set pricing and those products are not subject to reimbursement. I do know that private insurance companies are seeking innovative partnering opportunities with pharma companies; I experienced this in my previous role in the oncology space.

Do these designated hospitals in the GBA have key opinion leaders that understand the value of innovative medicines and that can make fair assessments for their patients?

This is one piece of the puzzle that needs more clarity. For the products approved for the GBA, physicians based on the mainland need education about these therapies. The dilemma is, since these products are not generally approved across China, the normal route for disseminating product information is not available. But having products approved and physically available is a solid first step.

What other areas do you see as possible low-hanging fruit for your services?

From a CL Consulting perspective, the expertise is in pharmaceutical commercialization. For companies looking to set up or scale up, I can be of assistance. Some of these companies may want to take the GBA route to begin accessing the mainland market. Other companies may have begun on the mainland and have aspirations to expand into Hong Kong and beyond.

Do you have any final message for PharmaBoardroom's international audience?

Hong Kong is more than just financial services. Hong Kong is positioning itself to be a bio-innovation hub, the GBA policies present a commercial opportunity, and the combined reputation of Hong Kong's researchers, thought leaders, and institutions means it continues to be a reliable place for conducting clinical trials and for generating real-world data.

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