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Founded in 1943, Mexican drugmaker Silanes has built a strong presence across multiple therapeutic areas, namely diabetes and cardiovascular, while expanding into others. The company's director of pharma and biologics, Rafael Quintanilla, explains Silanes' journey from being purely a branded generics manufacturer to embracing R&D, which has brought substantial growth and the launch of 12 new products over the last 18 months. He also shares Silanes' diabetes management efforts, its plans to expand geographically through strategic partnerships, and his leadership style.

Could you start by introducing Silanes?

Silanes is a family-owned Mexican company. Over 80 years we have built a significant presence in various segments. Our main focus has been on diabetes and cardiovascular treatments, but we also have a substantial business in analgesics, and we are recognized for our antivenoms R&D. In fact, we are among the top three worldwide leaders in the manufacturing and development of these products.

Our business is primarily based in Mexico, with 70 percent of our operations here, but we are also present in nearly 20 countries. Notably, we are the only Mexican company with FDA-approved antivenom products in the US for scorpions and snakes.

Silanes is growing at a rate of between 16-17 percent, far outpacing the general market growth of 4-5 percent. What are the factors driving this growth?

At Silanes, our purpose is succinctly captured by our motto: “Hacer de la vida una historia saludable,” which means make life a healthy story. We prioritize patient relief above all else. Innovation has been a cornerstone of our company for the past 80 years. About seven years ago, we made a strategic decision to move away from being a branded generic company, like many other Mexican firms. Instead, we committed to developing and launching new products that offer unique value to patients, rather than just branded generics.

We have a dedicated R&D site within our manufacturing plant in Toluca, where we invest between 10 percent to 15 percent of our resources annually in developing new products. Our team of 100 people focuses on creating new combinations and other types of drugs that can provide significant benefits to patients. Over the past six years, we have built a robust pipeline to support our planned organic growth. In the last 18 months, we have launched 12 new products and have 25 more in the pipeline for the next three years. Innovation, a crucial value in the pharmaceutical industry, is ingrained in our DNA and we aim to maintain this for the next 80 years.

Furthermore, we strategically position ourselves as the best partner for international companies that do not have a presence in Mexico, but with valuable products for the Mexican market. This allows us to achieve inorganic growth through in-licensed products, further bringing innovative and valuable solutions to a diverse range of patients.

You mentioned that Silanes focuses on the cardiometabolic and analgesic areas. Can you elaborate on which of these areas is driving most of your revenue, or is it evenly split?

In our pharmaceutical business, approximately 70 percent of our operations are based in Mexico. Within this, cardiometabolic therapies represent about 50 percent of our business. Notably, Silanes has a significant history in cardiometabolic treatments. For instance, we developed a combination of sulfonylureas and metformin, a major advancement that Sanofi Aventis was unable to develop at the time. This innovation was licensed out to Sanofi nearly 20 years ago, highlighting our early commitment to impactful development.

Currently, our cardiometabolic segment includes some of our most successful products. For example, our combination of ezetimibe and rosuvastatin, launched four years ago, quickly became our top product and has become the number one treatment prescribed for patients with high levels of cholesterol. This success reflects our ongoing focus on innovation.

Moreover, our pipeline continues to drive growth, with recent launches such as a unique combination of fenofibrate and atorvastatin for triglyceride reduction, also new antihypertensive treatments such as the unique combination with rosuvastatin and the unique combination with two antihypertensives plus chlorthalidone. In this field, we are currently launching a new antihypertension therapy, which is unique in that it includes a globally recognized component, distinct from traditional diuretics. This promising product is now in the distribution stage and we plan to officially launch it in September. These efforts illustrate our strategic focus on maintaining a strong presence in both cardiovascular and analgesic fields.

In the pain treatment field, we have launched unique fixed-dose combinations with different types of drugs that allow physicians to treat many types of pain more effectively. Ibuprofen plus paracetamol, the only combination with a paediatric formulation; pregabaline plus tramadol for neuropathic pain; and a unique combination with etoricoxib, paracetamol, dexketoprofen, and vitamin B: all of these are examples of our serious commitment for a pain-free world.

You mentioned that Silanes is looking to expand into new areas like respiratory and central nervous system (CNS) disorders. Can you provide more details on what we can expect in terms of innovation and upcoming products in these fields?

At Silanes, our immediate focus remains on strengthening our pipeline in cardiometabolic and analgesic therapies. However, we are also expanding into new areas such as respiratory and CNS disorders.

In the respiratory field, we plan to launch a new product by September 2025, which is already registered. This product targets senescence, the process of cellular aging, which is becoming increasingly relevant due to the aging global population. We believe this area holds significant potential for addressing the needs of older patients.

Additionally, we are exploring new markets in prevention and nutraceuticals. With the increasing emphasis on health and wellness, driven by digital information and patient awareness, we anticipate a growing demand for preventative and supportive therapies. Our strategy includes

developing over-the-counter (OTC) products and nutraceuticals to cater to these future needs, ensuring that we remain at the forefront of innovation for the next 80 years and beyond.

Diabetes is a major issue in Mexico, affecting approximately 13 million people, which represents around 30 percent of the adult population. The country also struggles with under-diagnosis and effective disease management. Given Silanes' strong presence in the diabetes market, what additional measures are you taking to address these issues and enhance your impact?

A few years ago, during a strategic meeting, we challenged ourselves to consider whether our mission was solely about selling products or if we could have a broader impact on the health of the Mexican population. This prompted us to revaluate our approach.

My point was that we must acknowledge that patients with diabetes need more than just pharmaceutical products; these are only a part of the treatment. Emphasis must be placed on prevention and ensuring that patients achieve their glucose level goals.

In Mexico, we face a significant issue with both diagnosis and prevention. The major problem is not just in diagnosing diabetes but in managing it. Two-thirds of diagnosed and treated patients fail to reach their necessary health goals because they rely solely on medication without making necessary lifestyle changes.

This is a significant problem. For instance, diabetes complications, particularly renal impairment, result in the highest healthcare expenditure by the government. We see numerous cases of foot amputations, vision loss, and even deaths every year due to diabetes. Therefore, it is crucial to promote lifestyle changes through various platforms and initiatives to support physicians and patients alike in achieving better health outcomes.

What role do digital tools play in this strategy, especially considering the varied advancement of digital health solutions worldwide?

While some countries, particularly in Europe and USA, have advanced digital health ecosystems with highly regulated and sophisticated tools, the situation in Mexico is different. Here, the healthcare system is less organized, and there is a need to educate both patients and healthcare providers on the effective use of digital tools.

Currently, we are exploring the development and implementation of a digital companion that could serve as a valuable resource for diabetes management. This initiative is part of a global trend, and we are investing in it despite the challenges. We anticipate that it will take time to overcome barriers and fully integrate such tools into the Mexican healthcare landscape. However, we are committed to supporting these innovations as we believe they can significantly enhance patient care and outcomes.

Silanes is looking to grow both organically and inorganically; how do you see the company evolving in the coming years?

In terms of inorganic growth, we are particularly focused on expanding our presence outside of Mexico. Our strategic plan includes targeting acquisitions in markets such as the USA and Europe. We believe these regions offer valuable opportunities for us to acquire innovative products and technologies that can complement our existing portfolio. Additionally, we are assessing whether these acquisitions could also bring added value to our operations in Mexico.

We are not currently pursuing mergers but are concentrating on strategic partnerships. For instance, we have identified significant opportunities in Asia, for instance South Korean companies have developed impressive innovations, often supported by major pharmaceutical firms. However, many of these companies lack the resources or expertise to commercialize their products effectively outside their local markets. This presents a unique opportunity for us to partner with these companies, leveraging their innovations while providing the commercial expertise needed to bring their products to broader markets.

Overall, our approach is to blend these strategies to enhance our capabilities, expand our market reach, and ultimately drive growth both within and beyond Mexico.

Can you shed any additional light on what markets you’re exploring?

Beyond the US and Europe, we are also keenly interested in expanding within Latin America. We currently have a presence in Central America, Columbia and Brazil, both through our own operations and through licensing agreements. This region presents considerable opportunities due to its growing healthcare needs and the potential to leverage our pipeline of products.

Given your extensive experience in both large corporations and now with Silanes, how would you describe your leadership style?

Leadership is a fundamental aspect of driving success in any organization. I hold a master’s degree in leadership, which I completed nearly 20 years ago. This program was quite unique, as there are not many schools specializing in leadership at that level.

One valuable lesson I learned from my studies is that the most crucial asset of a company is its people. A professor once shared that the ultimate responsibility of a leader is to ensure that employees leave work each day with everything they need and return the next day ready to contribute their best. This concept underscores the importance of creating an environment where people can thrive.

In practice, my leadership style focuses on fostering an environment where team members feel valued and empowered. I believe it is essential to support and develop individuals so they can reach their full potential. This approach not only helps in maintaining high performance but also in ensuring that the team remains committed and aligned with our ambitious goals, such as the high frequency of the product launches we manage.

Ultimately, creating a supportive and dynamic workplace where employees feel they can excel is central to driving both personal and organizational success.

Talking about leadership is different from practicing it. It is not always easy to apply the concepts effectively. One significant challenge is ensuring that we have the best team in place and that they remain engaged and motivated. I have learned that having a great team is crucial, and this has been the most important part of our successful.

A few years ago, we faced a situation where we struggled to attract candidates. However, now we receive hundreds of applications for each position, which is a testament to the attractiveness of our workplace. Building a strong team is essential, but it is also crucial to continually nurture and retain the talent we have.

Do you have a final message for our readers?

Looking ahead, the most important message I want to convey is our commitment to not just celebrating our past achievements but also focusing on building the future. As we mark 80 years, our goal is to lay the groundwork for the next 80 years.

The future holds significant changes, especially in healthcare, with advancements in technology, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence shaping our path. We anticipate that people will live longer lives, potentially exceeding 100 years. This longevity will bring new challenges and opportunities, particularly in how we address aging populations and manage chronic diseases.

Technology, while transformative, cannot replace the human touch. I recall a poignant story about a leading AI researcher who faced the loss of a child and sought solace from a machine. The response from the machine was, understandably, limited. This highlights the importance of human empathy and understanding, which technology alone cannot provide.

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