Simone Maisto – Chief Executive Officer, Chief Commercial Officer, Board Member, Unipharma, Switzerland



This transformation marks a new era for Unipharma, rooted in heritage but aligned with the realities of today's pharmaceutical landscape.

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Once a traditional Swiss pharmaceutical wholesaler, Unipharma has undergone a profound transformation into a globally oriented, strategy-driven partner for hospitals, pharmaceutical, and biotechnology companies. Under the leadership of CEO Simone Maisto, the company has redefined its business model, streamlined its portfolio around high-value therapies, and expanded into emerging markets, all while fostering a culture grounded in trust, accountability, and patient-centricity. Today, Unipharma stands not only as a logistics provider, but as a long-term ally in healthcare access and innovation.

How are you implementing Unipharma's long-term vision, and what strategic pillars define your approach to transformation?

Unipharma's transformation is guided by a clear and purposeful vision: to become a reliable and long-term partner not only for hospitals, but also for pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. At the heart of this vision is a strong patient-oriented mission, to improve access to medicines by ensuring quality, ethical pricing, and outstanding service. In many of the markets we serve, the payer is not always the government; it can be the hospital or, increasingly, the patient directly. This variability reinforces our responsibility to operate ethically, keeping margins as low as possible

to avoid placing additional strain on healthcare systems or individuals.

Since stepping into the role in 2022, I have prioritised expanding our presence beyond Europe into emerging regions such as the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia-Pacific. This international expansion, however, required more than a geographic shift; it demanded internal cultural change, clear strategic prioritisation, and a shared understanding across the company of the importance of speed, client responsiveness, and accountability in everything we do. Operating from Switzerland inevitably involves high structural costs, but we offset this by delivering exceptional service that sets us apart. While pricing remains a key factor in procurement decisions, our experience has shown that clients value support, reliability, and trust and these are the pillars on which we build partnerships.

Our philosophy is simple: a client may return after leaving for a lower price, but rarely returns after poor service. This belief informs our approach and is embedded in our new brand identity and slogan, *You are our priority,* a statement that captures our commitment to placing clients and patients at the centre of everything we do.

What qualities and international experience led to your appointment as CEO to drive Unipharma's transformation?

Although the decision ultimately lay with the board, I believe I was appointed to lead Unipharma's transformation due to a combination of qualities that aligned with the company's evolving needs: a relatively young profile, a strong international background, and deep sector-specific expertise. At the time of my appointment, I was 41, young enough to bring a fresh, dynamic perspective, yet with more than a decade of hands-on experience in wholesale, distribution, and pharmaceutical trading. My career has been shaped by building and expanding operations in emerging markets, particularly across Latin America, where I was responsible for launching subsidiaries in Argentina and establishing a regional hub in Uruguay.

Beyond operational capabilities, I bring a cultural adaptability that has proven essential when engaging with clients from diverse environments – ranging from Japan to the Middle East and South America – ensuring that interactions are not only commercially effective but culturally attuned. Speaking several languages has been instrumental in this regard, enabling me to develop long-term, trust-based partnerships. Ultimately, I believe it was this combination of international reach, entrepreneurial experience, and cultural fluency that convinced the board I could guide Unipharma through a new phase of strategic growth and repositioning.

How has Unipharma redefined its business model to better reflect global healthcare realities and strategic priorities?

Unipharma's business model has undergone a significant evolution, shifting from a reactive, volume-based distributor of unlicensed medicines to a value-driven, internationally oriented pharmaceutical service provider. While many in the industry remain unaware of players operating beyond the traditional pharmaceutical hubs – such as the US, Canada, Europe, Japan, or Australia – our perspective is broader, guided by the belief that patients in less visible markets, from Tanzania to Azerbaijan, deserve equal access to innovation. Ideally, our model resembles a business-to-consumer structure, with hospitals acting as the interface to the patient; however, regulatory frameworks vary widely. In countries like Italy, hospitals can procure directly, whereas in others, including Qatar, recent policy changes now require all hospital purchases to go through local wholesalers, limiting flexibility and altering long-standing dynamics.

Our sourcing approach reflects a similar shift in philosophy. Where competitors often rely on intermediary distributors, our goal is to establish direct relationships with manufacturers whenever possible, particularly in Switzerland but also globally. This ensures greater transparency, reliability, and control across the supply chain. In markets where direct access is restricted, we collaborate with authorised partners to maintain compliance and consistency.

The breadth of our product offering has also narrowed strategically. Whereas we once responded to virtually every request – including for low-cost generics like paracetamol – we now focus on high-impact therapeutic areas, particularly oncology, rare diseases, and other complex specialties. This transition from volume to value enables us to allocate resources more efficiently, deepen our expertise, and align with partners who share our commitment to meaningful, ethical, and sustainable healthcare delivery.

How are you repositioning Unipharma's portfolio and service offering to support access to innovative and complex therapies?

Unipharma has strategically shifted its focus toward high-impact therapeutic areas – namely oncology, rare diseases, and orphan drugs – where access remains limited and the need for reliable partners is most critical. To support this transformation, we have prioritised the development of exclusive distribution agreements with select pharmaceutical partners across key markets

including Italy, Switzerland, and Colombia. These long-term partnerships offer more than just pricing advantages; they provide the structure and predictability required to move away from the volatility of spot-driven transactions, which, in today's competitive global landscape, are no longer sufficient to sustain growth. While opportunistic demand continues to play a supplementary role, our goal is to build a business anchored in strategic collaboration rather than reactive supply.

This evolution has required us not only to refine our offering, but also to reposition the company's image, moving beyond the perception of a trading house to be recognised as an ethical, quality-focused service provider. To that end, we have invested significantly in our internal capabilities, including the enhancement of our quality management system and the recruitment of specialised personnel. By demonstrating a commitment to high standards and long-term value, we are steadily being recognised by pharmaceutical companies as a reliable partner for the distribution of complex and innovative therapies.

How does Unipharma cultivate strategic partnerships and distinguish itself within a competitive global landscape?

Unipharma seeks to partner with small and mid-sized pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies developing innovative therapies supported by robust clinical data. Rather than competing for the attention of large multinational firms – many of which prioritise partners with established footprints in the US or United Kingdom – we focus on emerging players whose ambitions align with our commitment to ethical, value-driven growth. Innovation is a prerequisite; we only engage with products in which we see genuine therapeutic promise and market relevance.

In an increasingly saturated and fragmented environment, our differentiation lies in the quality of service and market intelligence we offer, particularly in regions often overlooked or deprioritised by larger companies. Our approach is consultative and long-term: we support partners in entering complex markets such as Brazil – where we have established a representative office – not by pushing products commercially, but by building awareness around unmet medical needs. Through scientific initiatives such as advisory boards and preceptorships with local key opinion leaders, we create the conditions for sustainable market development without engaging in direct promotion. This model allows us to present a credible and strategic proposition: one rooted in trust, clinical engagement, and a deep understanding of regional dynamics. In doing so, we position Unipharma not merely as a distributor, but as a reliable partner for companies aiming to expand responsibly into new geographies.

Where are you focusing your international expansion efforts, and how are you adapting to diverse regulatory environments across markets?

Unipharma’s international expansion is guided by a selective, pragmatic approach that prioritises markets with structured healthcare systems and clear reimbursement pathways. Out of more than 200 countries, we have identified five to six key territories for focused development over the next three to five years, based on their potential to support sustainable, payer-backed access. These include Brazil, which, due to its scale, is more a continent than a country; Russia, where complexity and risk coexist with significant unmet need; the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, both characterised by well-organised, high-value healthcare systems; India, where domestic generics dominate but wealthier patients often seek imported therapies; and Japan, which remains attractive despite regulatory acceleration reducing the early-access window. Each market presents distinct regulatory hurdles, pricing dynamics, and stakeholder environments, requiring tailored strategies and engagement with a range of actors, from physicians to insurers and policymakers.

To address these complexities, Unipharma draws on its inherent agility and cross-cultural orientation. We invest in local expertise and place strong emphasis on language and cultural fluency, not as a secondary advantage, but as a core requirement. The ability to engage directly – in Japanese, Arabic, Russian or other relevant languages – not only facilitates compliance and negotiation, but also builds trust and insight at the local level. This cultural proximity allows us to navigate nuanced environments more effectively than larger, less flexible players, enabling a measured yet responsive presence in markets others often hesitate to approach.

How are digital tools and data solutions improving Unipharma’s operational performance and service quality?

Digitalisation has become central to Unipharma’s ongoing transformation, driven by the imperative to deliver faster, more reliable, and more transparent service in a sector where time is often a critical factor. Recent efforts have focused on the implementation of smart tools and automated solutions that support both internal efficiency and external responsiveness, ensuring our teams can react swiftly to urgent requests, particularly when patients and clinicians are awaiting essential therapies. Although still in the rollout phase, the impact has already been tangible. Between 2023 and 2024, our average delivery lead time improved by 40 percent, enabled by new key performance indicator (KPI) tracking systems and automation of routine communications. These

advancements are not simply technical upgrades but strategic enablers, allowing us to provide a higher standard of service across increasingly complex logistics.

That said, external challenges such as customs delays, courier disruptions, or regulatory checks remain inherent risks in our supply chain. This is where Unipharma’s crisis management experience and agility come into play. The COVID-19 pandemic was a defining moment that placed extraordinary pressure on our systems but also instilled a lasting capacity for high-stakes adaptability. Faced with surging demand for critical products – ranging from vaccines to protective equipment – our teams were forced to make rapid decisions under unpredictable conditions. This experience has shaped a culture of urgency, flexibility, and preparedness that continues to inform our approach today. The post-pandemic period has reinforced not only the importance of technological investment, but also the human readiness to apply it effectively under pressure.

How are you cultivating Unipharma’s corporate culture and building a team equipped for a mission-driven, high-stakes environment?

Shaping a cohesive and high-performing team at Unipharma has required far more than simply hiring talent with strong résumés; it has meant identifying individuals who align with the demands, mindset, and purpose of a lean, mission-driven organisation. While it may seem intuitive to recruit from large pharmaceutical companies, the transition from a structured, highly compartmentalised environment to a hands-on, fast-moving setting like ours can be difficult. In large corporations, responsibilities are diffused and mistakes can pass unnoticed; in a company of 20 to 25 people, every decision has immediate and visible consequences for colleagues, for clients, and, ultimately, for patients. This heightened sense of accountability is something I stress clearly during interviews. I make no effort to sugar-coat our expectations: we work hard, we move quickly, and we serve a mission that demands availability, sacrifice, and care. A message sent at midnight to a hospital or caregiver awaiting critical treatment may seem minor, but for the recipient, it can mean everything.

I look for people who are not only capable, but genuinely committed, emotionally intelligent, and driven by purpose. Of course, building this culture is not without difficulty. Letting go of individuals who do not align with our values or vision is never easy, and some of the most difficult moments in my career have come from such decisions. But in the end, it is this culture – based on trust, ownership, and human empathy – that defines Unipharma and drives the quality of service we provide every day.

What are your top strategic priorities for the next phase of Unipharma’s development?

Looking ahead to 2025 and beyond, our primary objective is to strengthen Unipharma’s international presence by establishing local subsidiaries in key strategic markets. Being closer to our partners and end clients will not only enhance our responsiveness but also reinforce the trust and proximity that underpin long-term collaboration. Internally, we are still navigating the second phase of transformation. Over the past three years, approximately 80 percent of the team has been renewed, and while the structural foundation is now in place, the current focus is on cultural alignment, bringing together a diverse, international team under a shared mindset defined by accountability, cohesion, and purpose.

My leadership philosophy centres on empowerment, trust, and calm consistency. I believe in offering autonomy while fostering a supportive environment where expectations are clear and pressure is filtered, not passed on. The corporate culture we are building is rooted in openness, inclusion, and transparency, where every team member understands the company’s objectives and feels personally invested in its success. The new Unipharma is not only more structurally agile but also more human at its core, designed to inspire ownership and resilience. As I often say, if the garden is healthy and well-tended, the butterflies come on their own. We are no longer chasing opportunity, we are creating an environment where opportunity comes to us.

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