Mai Hanlon – Country Manager, Tillotts Ireland



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Tags: Tillotts Ireland

Can you give us a sense of the history of this company and its Irish roots?

The company started life in the UK and has always been a GI franchise company.
We specialized in two products when we began: Colpermin®, for the symptomatic treatment of bowel spasms and bloating in irritable bowel syndrome; and Asacol™, for the treatment of mild to moderate Ulcerative Colitis and Crohn's Disease.

Tillotts relocated to Switzerland between the late 1980's and early 1990's. During the mid- 1990's the company was acquired by Maedeva, whom I was then working for. Maedeva then ultimately became Celltech.

In 1999, a management buyout re-established Tillotts as a privately owned company. The organization used distributors to market Asacol™ until 2005 when a network of affiliates was started, and Ireland was the first country chosen to begin this process.

We now have five affiliates that were built on this original model, and we are still using it as a blueprint to begin operations in new countries. The philosophy of the company is to focus on the GI area and to offer healthcare professionals the tools to provide the best care possible to their patients.

Our biggest products is Asacol™, marketed as Asacolon™ in Ireland, which we have over 89 million patients' years worth of data . We are still looking to develop this drug. The diagnosis of Ulcerative Colitis has been on the increase both in Ireland and abroad in recent years, so it is our duty to meet that demand.

Another area we have moved into is diagnostics, and we have recently in-licensed a product called Simtomax®, a point-of-care diagnostic to simply and accurately rule out Coeliac Disease – in only 10 minutes. Our strategy is to grow and develop, by evolving our own products and by procuring new and innovative medicines from elsewhere.

Are affiliates like Ireland part of your business development process?

Yes, very much so. The business development team liaises with our regional affiliates and keeps them informed of our strategy and intentions. We tailor our affiliate programs to suit their relative environments. There are always local practices and guidelines to take into account whenever we choose to move forward in an existing market or expand into a newer one. We use research as well as local knowledge from our managers, to supplement our dialogue with our other branches. We have over twenty different nationalities working for us, so we are a very international company.

Why do you believe this company was a good acquisition target for Zeria?

At the time of acquisition, Zeria had almost no presence outside of Japan, so while they do work in a number of different fields, including gastro, they were seeking a reliable passage into the European market and beyond. While our presence in Europe is still somewhat limited in terms of ‘Big 5’, we could offer Zeria good human resources and an opportunity for continuity and expansion.

You mentioned continuity; when we examine a similar case of an ambitious Japanese pharmaceutical company seeking to move into the European market via acquisition—Takeda’s acquisition of Nycomed—we see that within a year, Nycomed affiliates changed their name to ‘Takeda’. Tillotts, in contrast, has remained ‘Tillotts’. Why do you think that is?

Because the brand identity has been established. We operate in a very niche arena and we are well known in that area. We have modified our logo to incorporate the Zeria logo—however, for the moment, there is strong enough recognition of the brand name Tillotts® to justify it operating under its own banner. Things may change regarding our branding in the future, but for now we’re happy to move forward as Tillotts.

What is going to continue driving the growth of this company?

There are three areas we would like to utilize in order to further our business; one is development of our existing product. We would like to move in the direction of producing higher strengths products. We would also like to improve our labeling, in order to enable patients to have a choice of products to suit their needs.

Do you have competitors trying to copy your products?

In the Mesalazine market, yes. Products vary – in terms of their dosages. Some products have a once daily indication. Our product was specifically designed for the treatment of Ulcerative Colitis and our treatment is PH dependent.

Something our opponents don't offer to the same extent as we do is the help we offer our patients. We fund publications, written by healthcare professionals, on how to cope with this condition and provide these to patient support groups that are active in assisting sufferers from the time of diagnosis onwards.

You previously said in an IPHA article that "the sale of medicines is based on trust, and that the way in which products are marketed is critical." Can you expand on that statement?

According to many surveys I've read, the pharmaceutical industry is one of the top sources of information for health care professionals in terms of information about new products. So it is important to be completely factual when you are presenting a product to a medical representative. They may not have time to fully examine the claims behind your product, which is why there is also a demand for proper regulatory bodies. This is something I feel strongly about, and it is why the IPHA Code of Marketing Practice is so important. It is important that we uphold its principles. Our customers trust us because what we are presenting is correctly reviewed. It is also important that patients are not restricted to using generic products for some of their treatments, which we have seen happening more and more since the fiscal contraction here in Ireland.

How are your company financials looking for this year and what is your forecast for next year?

The new 3 year agreement on drug prices has affected our bottom line. Like many other companies, we have to increase efficiency and do more with less and negotiate with our suppliers. We must also ensure to operate efficiently and effectively.

I don't think the industry's recovery from austerity measures will happen in 2013—but it will happen eventually as volumes continue to grow.

As the first international affiliate, do you think you are 'punching above your weight' within the company?

Yes, we are. For instance, the U.K. is at a different developmental stage, because they are a relatively new addition to the organization. So statistically we are superior to them, for now.

How would you describe your management style?

I'm very enthusiastic and always a team player. I like to bring people along with me. There is a close-knit group of staff working in the Irish affiliate, some of whom have been with me since its inception.

I’m very open and honest and I like to transmit my passion for my work to those around me, by leading by example, regardless of the task at hand. I like my co-workers to share that passion and not to be too easily shaken. I definitely believe in the expression carpe diem.

Do you have any final message for our readers?

My message would be a mantra I’ve alluded to already, which is: “do more, better—with less.” I think we should all buy into that and accept the situation around us in a positive way; then you can make a difference for the better.

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