Interview with Emily Cheah, General Manager, BRASS

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Tags: BRASS

Biomedical Research and Support Services Pte Ltd. is an NUS University spin-off that has been around for more than 14 years; last year the company name was changed to BRASS. Why was this decision taken and what is the new image that Brass wants to project to the industry?

We have come a long way since we started. We were primarily set up to do preclinical safety testing of medical devices and at that time we were based in NUS. Since then the company has been growing in leaps and bounds and last year we have decided to change the name to BRASS, as that is how our customers remember us. The shorter moniker emphasises our strong branding and dynamic growth plan. We currently serve not only medical technologies companies but pharmaceutical and biopharmaceutical industry leaders in the region. As we can see from the trends, there is a shift from small molecule drug production to large molecules drugs and some of the services we offer are meant to reflect this growing opportunity in the industry.

What is the role that companies like BRASS plays in light of the shifting trends?

With the patent cliff and strong pressures of healthcare cost, pharma companies will have to focus on their core business: drug discovery and drug development activities. Therefore, by partnering with an outsource partner, what we call “clever outsourcing”, companies get to accelerate their time-to-market and keep their focus on innovating new products by tapping into the expertise that outsource companies like BRASS can provide.

What are the solutions that you provide to the industry?

We provide services in contamination control as well as release testing for medical devices and pharmaceutical manufacturing. Our core business still supports the manufacturing industry in Singapore.

In the past years, we diversified and started performing customized R&D work for MedTech and pharmaceutical companies. For example, if a company has a novel antimicrobial coating we can perform some of the in-vitro trials on the coating materials.

Our strength is also in our rapid solutions since we understand that for manufacturers there is a need to get products out to the market fast. Therefore, we pride ourselves in our fast turnaround times as well as for providing the best strategies to enable our customers to develop their products into commercial entities.

What would you say is the uniqueness of your solutions?

In Singapore, we are the only specialized services provider focusing on pharma, biopharma and medtech, we don’t tap into other type of products such as food, cosmetics or nutraceuticals. Having this very focused approach gives us the advantage to understand in-depth the regulations, the processes, and the technology required by our clients.

We look for long-term partnerships with our clients. Therefore, we work closely with them right at the beginning to understand their products, regulatory and commercial needs and thereby assisting them to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, although we don’t manufacture products all our policies, R&D plans are geared towards the safety of the patient. The core of our philosophy is that at the end of every device or product cycle is a patient. We view ourselves as the gatekeepers of product safety so that all products that come through our doors are safe to be released into the market.

What clients form your portfolio?

We have a broad client base ranging from start-ups, small medium enterprises and large-industry leaders in medtech, pharmaceuticals and biopharmaceutical industries. Today more than 60% of our business comes from large industry leaders located in Singapore, Malaysia as well as other countries in the Asia Pacific region.

Apart of the aforementioned solutions, Brass also represents NAMSA and Charles River Biopharmaceutical Services. Do you have an exclusive partnership with these companies?

For Charles River, we started as the sole distributor for the Endosafe brand of endotoxin test reagents in 1999; until today we hold the exclusive distribution for Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Last year we further strengthed our collaboration with Charles River by successfully attaining the agency to market their Biopharmaceutical Services portfolio including biosafety testing for vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, biosimilars and cell therapies. We currently represent these services in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.

As for NAMSA, we started the partnership in 2002 to market biocompatibility safety evaluation and functional studies for medical devices to their clients in the South East Asia region plus Taiwan. This is also a growing segment of our business as the region is seeing more innovation and growth in medical devices industry.

What do you think is responsible for attracting one of the most important CRO companies in the world, Charles River, to partner with BRASS?

All companies are focused in growth and especially growth in Asia, therefore, it is very natural for companies to seeking a foothold in this market to partner with a local player that has intrinsic knowledge of the technology and also connections into the market. This is what BRASS has to offer. We have been in the market for 15 years, solely specializing in the lifescience market and we have built up extensive technical expertise in the field.

How important is it for the growth of the company to forge new partnerships to enhance the portfolio of products and services that you currently have?

When we talk about the Singapore market, we have to think of it as a strategic centre and the access it provides to other markets in Asia. As BRASS expands, we would naturally also look for partnerships to gain us access to these markets as well.

Co-branding and forming partnerships with larger companies become mutually beneficial to both parties. A company like ours can leverage on their experience and know-how, and these larger companies can also learn from local market demands and tap onto regional growth.

How has the company performed in the past 2 years and 8 months that you took over?

We have grown both in terms of physical growth and fiscal growth. We have doubled our capacity in the last 2 years and have since relocated into a 10,000 sq ft facility, which we are still expanding. We have also reported consistent growth over 3 consecutive years.

Looking into the future, what will be the strategies to implement to keep growing the company?

In the current economy there is an even stronger focus on growth. For one, there would be a keen interest on taking advantage of our presence in Asia and penetrating larger markets like India and China. Being a home-grown Singapore company has its advantages as the Singapore brand is synonymous with quality. Another important contributor to growth would be to innovate. We are keen on developing our innovative solutions under our brand name to provide to our customers.

Where do you see BRASS 5 years from now?

We will be bigger. We are looking to grow our repertoire of services for the industry and grow in terms of market shares, revenues, service offerings and innovative solutions.

What brought you to Brass?

I wanted to sink my teeth into something that could provide a challenge as well as the opportunity to carry out my vision. What attracted me to an outsource company like BRASS is that it provides a bird’s eye view of a rapidly changing industry. Joining BRASS provided the opportunity to be creative with the current outsource model and move the company from just a regular subcontract laboratory to a household name in the local market. Ultimately the company is well-poised to really help the industry as instrumental to strong growth in the pharmaceutical or medtech industry, is a robust support industry. And this is where BRASS fits like a piece to the puzzle.

Coming from an R&D background, how will you grade Singapore’s R&D capabilities?

The Singapore government has been very successful in bringing foreign direct investments in manufacturing and research they are continually making efforts to attract R&D talents to make Singapore an R&D hub. This is a good thing since since MNCs do develop a skilled workforce (as can be seen from the biomedical manufacturing sector) and bringing in exposure to top-notch technology.

However, to truly succeed as a biomed R&D hub, innovation has been driven from within – local, indigenous companies would have to lead the charge. What the government could do would be to create platforms to foster cooperations between foreign research institutes and local firms. Mutual collaboration, and not simply supply chain relationships, would allow a thriving and eventually self-sustaining biomedical ecosystem to be developed. We are already seeing some positive signs in this direction and eventually when the industry is driven by local R&D, I believe that Singapore has made it as a biomed hub.

On a broader note, most of the executives that we have interviewed mention that one of the biggest challenges they face is talent, is that the case for “clever outsourcing” companies?

Asia is experiencing such a high growth that there are many so many opportunities available. As a result, is it not surprising that employee turnover is high. Acquiring talent specialized skills has always been a challenge, however, outsource service providers like us are also benefiting from the consolidation of the pharma industry, which allows us a greater access to this talent pool.

Also in the past few years we have seen that outsource industry has changed significantly, with contract test organizations (CTOs) also being view as the key drivers of technological change. Again due to current trends in outsourcing whereby CTOs now offer highly scientific solutions, scientists are less resistant to joining a CTO. Companies like BRASS also offer the “big picture” and this can be appealing for some employees.

What is your final message to our readers?

The outsource market is expected to see vibrant growth due to the biologics focus, and is expected to grow much faster than the pharmaceutical industry, particularly in Asia. Without a doubt, outsource providers will be one of the key drivers of the industry. We cannot neglect the scientific contributions that outsource providers, such as BRASS can provide in driving, growing and revitalizing the industry, because we provide a specialized set of skills.

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