Interview with Gernot Köhler, CEO and Owner, Dr. F. Köhler Chemie

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Tags: Dr. F. Köhler Chemie

Your father was the founder of Dr. Franz Köhler Chemie – that carries his name – and was a very well respected doctor among the German medical and pharmaceutical community. What have been the main challenges you faced when taking over the company 25 years ago and becoming its General Manager?

When I first took over Dr. Franz Köhler Chemie I already had a long experience inside the company. For over seven years I was responsible for the quality control department and implemented new techniques and new technologies on methods, analysis and quality insurance. For another two years I was responsible for education and product information for our representatives in the market; therefore my ascension to Managing Director of Dr. Franz Köhler Chemie was a step-by-step approach to leadership.

When my father passed away he was mainly responsible for all research and development matters and, in fact, it became an activity I needed to add to my responsibilities. Another change was my early decision to hire experts in different therapeutical areas. My father left to me a great foundation of business, enabling me to take the business even further by installing new facilities in 1990, complete the equipment modernization and to finally move our headquarters to brand new offices in 2009. This could not have been done without my father’s groundbreaking work in setting up such a strong fundament for the company.

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie is a leader in organ protection solutions with a widespread portfolio. What have been the main growth drivers and most promising therapeutical areas for the company?

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie is a leader in organ protection solutions and was the first to launch this type of product in 1964 with Cardioplegin. Since this cardioplegic solution, Dr. Franz Köhler has developed other products such as antidotes, contrast media, electrolyte solutions, zinc and other therapeutics, e.g. for anaesthesia, which has / have been developed in very close cooperation with a wide variety of experts ranging from surgeons to pharmacologists. These products benefit from the highest degree of expertise.

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie has entered important markets such as the USA in recent years. How do you expect your internationalization process to continue?

It is difficult to say. In the USA we have well covered markets thus giving the company a good chance to succeed; but unfortunately this is not the case of all the markets worldwide. A lot more must be done to extend our global shares from the present 35% to the 67% we are aiming for.

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie is a medium size player with a considerable level of innovation. How has the company faced the current scenario of financial crisis and economic stagnation and kept on investing on its future ambitions?

Fortunately for the group, the current financial crisis did not affect our company, but it might just as well in the long-run, so we have to continue to be careful. Sales increased six to eight percent worldwide in the recent years, which is a successful growth rate considering the circumstances we operate in.
In order to keep our innovation level and growth rate high, we works very closely with institutions and universities and limitedly with CROs as they involve high costs and a level of success inferior to the in-house operations of Dr. F. Köhler Chemie. Our personnel are qualified accordingly, so that our development is focused on a narrow screening operation. We cannot afford a wide spread screening operation which is a very cost and time consuming procedure. On the other hand, we have to accept the risk of failure. But I am glad to say that we have always been successful, whether due to skills or just luck, I don’t know.

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie is currently partnering with various institutions. What are the main partnerships for the company and what are their main guidelines?

We partner / cooperate with international universities from Germany, the USA, India, China and others where you can get partners to work on the same issues. We help them to create ideas and

make their pre-clinical trials from scratch, giving as much support as possible. With a direct approach, I have close contacts with our partners, allowing Dr. F. Köhler Chemie to fully understand the needs of its partners and build a relationship that no big global player could ever do.

We also benefit from institutions and funds for scientific work such as the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and other European scientific development funds, even though they don’t account for much of the company’s revenues.

What does being the son of Dr. Franz Kohler mean for you? Has it impacted the way you run the business and the philosophy of the company?

It means a lot of responsibility but at the same time it is a task I greatly enjoy. The most challenging aspect would probably be the competition the group faces with big multinational companies. We are a company which ultimately has the intention to stay private, with goals and a philosophy that cannot be compared with other companies in the industry.

Looking towards the future, what would be your future projects for Dr. F. Köhler Chemie for the next five to ten years?

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie intends to remain the leading provider of organ protection in the German and international market. This can be ensured by the new pipeline of products underway ready for international launch. Besides, the group is committed to the German market.

We are very competitive in organ protection solutions and we look forward to remain the number one in the future. The company has a lot of interesting aspects to come along successfully without the need of external loans. Dr. F. Köhler Chemie has no creditors, not even banks, hence there are no debts. This is a great differential / difference and better positions the company to continue its expansion in Germany and abroad.

What would be the final message from a company that is successfully celebrating its 50th anniversary and has the ambition to stay strong within the German market?

Dr. F. Köhler Chemie cannot be compared to most global players. Although we can be considered slightly old fashioned we work on very modern ideas with state of the art technologies. Profit is not our sole objective; the group also has a great social responsibility towards its employees and we are recognized by that.

Secondly, not having shareholders in charge of the company enables a certain degree of freedom and flexibility in our business model. Freedom and flexibility are the key words describing our work philosophy. I am proud of what has been achieved in the group and Dr. F. Köhler Chemie will

continue to show that quality and innovation are not a privilege of the big players.

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