

Ferring Mexico - Rafael Suarez, Country Manager



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The Mexico country manager of the Swiss biopharmaceutical company discusses the recent restructuring process the subsidiary has been going through, the strategic importance of Mexico as a logistic and clinical research hub for the region as well as how the company is going digital.

In the past ten years we have witnessed Ferring's firm commitment to strengthen its position in Latin America, with the acquisition of the drug manufacturer Dupomar in Argentina in 2004 and the company is now looking to acquire companies in Brazil. What can we expect next?

Worldwide and not only in Latin America, Ferring is either looking for new products or to acquire local companies to expand its presence and product portfolio. A couple of years ago, for example, it bought companies in Scotland and in Israel and their products are currently sold in Mexico as well as all over the world. As a matter of fact, to strengthen its commitment to Mexico - the second market in the region after Brazil - back in 2008 Ferring bought a manufacturing facility in the State of Mexico, where we repackage imported bulk products for the local market as well as for Ferring subsidiaries in Central and South America. The idea of Ferring is to remain a private company and continue its growth path. The company has a very clear idea about where they want to be - globally, regionally and locally.

What is the most important therapeutic area in Mexico in terms of sales and why?

Mexico is a very important market for women health. On the one hand, we have witnessed an important growth for obstetric products. In the past, Ferring used to sell this drug category only to private clinics. This changed a couple of years ago, when we started working more closely with public institutions by having a specialized sales force targeting this channel and by investing time and resources to do continuous medical education. It is very important that physicians and nurses know the diseases and how to use the treatment options. One of our top sellers is Lonactene (Carbetocin), used to prevent haemorrhage in women in labor. It's a very important product especially taking in consideration one of Mexico's priorities in terms of women health is decreasing the maternal mortality rate. Fertility is another important area for the public sector and private clinics. In Mexico 15 percent of couples have fertility problems, and it's a growing trend driven by several factors, such as pregnancy at more adult age, work, stress and smoking, among others.

Ferring has established R&D centers in China, India and the US, but so far none in Latin America. Why is this the case?

Even if we do not have direct investment in R&D facilities here in Mexico, it does not mean that we do not participate in R&D. We do participate in clinical trials and actually one of the objectives my medical team and I have is to try to take part in a larger number of trials in the country. Regulatory authorities are increasingly requesting data with Mexican patients and medical support for drug approvals, especially for high-specialty products. We are actually raising our hands because we would like to participate in a couple of studies due to take place in the next couple of years.

CANIFARMA (National Chamber of the Pharmaceutical Industry) and AMIIF (Mexican Association of Pharmaceutical Research Industries) want to position Mexico as a hub for clinical trials in the region. What should be done to make this happen?

In the past one of the main challenges was that it was very difficult to get a clinical trial approved by the ethical committee of the IMSS (Mexican Social Security Institute). By the time the global trial would start, it would probably still need to be approved here in Mexico. I know currently the chamber and the association are both working with IMSS to make sure the approval time is shorter. Once this happens, Mexico will have huge potential to become a hub, because we have public institutions with a large number of patients who are willing to get access to innovation.

Ferring recently implemented a new digital platform. What was the objective of this relaunch?

This year the company decided that digital would be an important aspect of all our operations and go-to-market strategy. As a result, today all our sales force use iPads to visit clients and capture product and client-relevant information. In addition, we have a new corporate website (www.ferring.com.mx) featuring a section for patients and one for physicians, as well as additional mini sites targeting specific diseases. The first is the website www.bbencasa.com dedicated to couples, who cannot afford to pay for fertility treatment. They can go to the website, fill out a questionnaire and if they fulfill specific requirements, they receive a preferential cost for fertility treatment. Today, we are proud to announce that more than 70 babies have been born under this scheme. It's a good way to help people fulfill their dreams. A further initiative is the website www.pipienlacama.net, which started in Mexico and was then extended to other markets such as Colombia and Dominican Republic, targeting children who suffer from bedwetting and their parents. The site features a questionnaire, a list of specialized clinics as well as a drawing section for kids. The idea is creating platforms, which support patients as well as their families. The interesting aspect is that the websites are also integrated with social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+.

We may say the key word for 2012 was 'restructuring', in 2013 it was 'increasing sales force'. What would be the key word for 2014?

I would say 'consolidation'. In the short term, Ferring's priorities in Mexico are to continue growing, organically and possibly non-organically through acquisitions and licensing, and keep on developing clinical data which can help us sell and differentiate our products in terms of quality and efficacy.

You joined Ferring in 2012 after more than ten years at MSD. What have been your most important milestones so far?

When I joined the company, there were several challenges to take care of. First, Ferring had a pipeline of several new products to be launched on the market. Second, the Mexico office needed a decision maker to run the local operations, as the former country manager was managing whole Latin America, thus travelling a lot and not always available for the daily operations.

One of the first important milestones was restructuring the company into two business units, one focusing on specialty products (including fertility, urology and gastro) and the other on hospital products (obstetrics and one gastroenterology product for the emergency room). The rationale behind the change was to focus on the different distribution channels, meaning the private market on the one hand and the public sector on the other, to make sure we could have specialized

resources. By 2013 we saw that this new strategic approach was working well, so decided to also grow sales force by 20 percent, mostly for the hospital products business unit – and it paid out very well.

Why Ferring?

My ten-years experience at MSD was great: I had the opportunity to know different areas and different mentalities within the company. Yet, the next step in my career would have brought me out of the country, probably somewhere in South America to come back to Mexico only in 10-15 years, and I did not want to leave the country. I thought Ferring would be a great opportunity because it's a multinational company established in Mexico since 1997, thus with a solid base. Moreover, the company offers niche products that target specialty physicians. Last, but not least, being a medium company, it's less bureaucratic, so you really get the chance to have an impact on the business.

You spent more than ten years at MSD, a multinational drug manufacturer. What are the main learning points from this experience that are helping you in your current tenure as a country manager at Ferring?

MSD relies on a large number of processes. That has been a very good learning because it helps structuring a company and defining operations. One of the responsibilities I was entrusted with when I joined was creating a solid base to help Ferring move from a small company to a medium company, and the only way is to have processes, clear rules and defined objectives for each area without having too much bureaucratic burden – it's important to find the balance.

What would be your advice for people taking the position of general managers?

The market is very dynamic, so it's very important to go out, talk to customers, physicians and wholesalers, participate in the chambers and understand what it is going on in the industry, because it's very easy to get lost. People should not be afraid of asking questions.

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