Interview: Sirilak Suteekul – Managing Director, Boehringer Ingelheim Thailand



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Sirilak Suteekul explains the organization's success in Thailand over the last couple of years, Thailand's untapped potential as a regional center in Southeast Asia and how innovation adds value to society.

As managing director of the organization for nearly two years, what have been your major challenges and accomplishments since taking on this role?

I joined the organization September 2013 and there have been tremendous accomplishments for our organization here in Thailand due to the double-digit growth we experienced the first year. We introduced our new DPP4 inhibitor (oral anti-diabetic agent) in the market, although we were one of the last companies to introduce our product in the market it was very well received by our customers because of the advantage of the product itself and growing reputation we have here in Thailand. We have also introduced other innovative products in the market for growing diseases here in Thailand, such as new oral anticoagulant, which has helped with consistent steady growth since I joined the team. Colleagues in Boehringer Ingelheim are well motivated with winning spirit and supported me to drive the positive growth that managed to bring better direction to our products. With that said, Boehringer Ingelheim has experienced its fair share of set backs due a changing market dynamic, which caused us to re-strategize the products we carry in the market. For example, we no longer have HIV drugs out in the local market because there were more than enough products for local consumers. We have since have looked at new market trends, such as for

the aging Thai population, and released new products that work for our customers and fit with the mission and value of our organization ‘Value Through Innovation’.

What new ideas are you instituting at a local level to ensure that Boehringer Ingelheim reaches its full potential?

We are a global innovation company with German origins, but our Thai branch is making tremendous strides to ensure that Thailand’s local spirit transcends into our business dealings and eventually becoming the most preferred healthcare solutions provider. We plan on achieving this by truly understanding customer insights, delivering what we promise through professionalism, simplicity and remaining proactive. Furthermore, we want to continue adding value-to-price quality by providing new and innovative products and services. Our company prides itself on delivering trust, respect, empathy and doing our work by remaining committed and passionate!

What challenges and opportunities is the Thai branch of Boehringer currently facing?

Boehringer Ingelheim Thailand has a diverse portfolio covering pharmaceuticals, consumer health and animal health. Although our Thai branch is relatively small compared to the global picture of our organization, we believe our Thai branch has long term potential to grow. Currently, there are regulations set in place requiring CPP from reference countries to submit license applications the screening step, which lengthen the time in which a product can be approved and sold in the local market. Pharmaceutical companies sometimes miss out in reaching their true potential because the lengthy process limits opportunity to utilize global investment that may affect the amount of profit an organization can make. More importantly, it can delay patients’ access to innovative treatments Moreover, there is a reshaping of the pharmaceutical industry in Thailand in which generic products are being provided by the government at a very affordable rate for consumers, which leave multinational companies needing to readjust and change their strategy in Thailand. All in all, I believe Boehringer Ingelheim is a strong company that carries with it its German roots of organization and structure, but as executive director of the organization I am bringing forth policy changes that work hand-in-hand with the Kingdom of Thailand. As a Thai leader in the health sector, I believe we have a strong government in place and we are slowly working towards improving the system!

What products is the Thai branch of the organization currently focusing on?

Traditionally, Boehringer Ingelheim Thailand was involved in respiratory and cardiovascular products, but we are continuing to develop and provide new products for our customers. Our foundation brand Berodual, as well as Altiplase (Actilyse), were listed on the National List of

Essential Medicines (NLEM) for many years, but this trend has shifted a bit. It is our personal mission to ensure that we meet the needs of our local customers through innovation and collaboration. Being innovative for our company means that we consistently reassess and decide which products are suitable for our customers. Currently, we still provide respiratory products, but we also have products now focusing on diabetes, anticoagulant for preventing stroke, hypertension products and lung cancer. Lung cancer is a completely new therapeutic area that the organization is exploring here in Thailand, but because there is a demand in the local market we believe we are contributing to the greater good of Thai society by providing access of our innovative products for our customers.

What piece of advice would you offer to potential investors looking to Thailand for business investment?

The Kingdom of Thailand is going through some growing pains at the moment in its efforts to ensure that Thai citizens have access to healthcare and life science products under the Universal Healthcare Coverage and other government funded scheme. What we see is a strong government in place that wants to help its people, while promoting Thailand as a potential regional center for Research and Development (R&D) and investment. Moreover, we see continuous improvements with regards to policies set in place regarding intellectual property rights, as well as an effort to hasten the time in which products can be released into the market. Additionally, Thailand has many private sector hospitals in which both local and foreign patients demand high-end and brand name products. As a Thai executive and advocate for domestic growth, I believe all individuals who want to positively contribute to the nation’s growth, and the growth of the vibrant Southeast Asian region, to consider Thailand as a serious place to business in.

How important is Thailand for the organization’s work with clinical trials and what possibilities for growth does it see in this sector?

As a research and development driven company, Boehringer Ingelheim conducted over 1,414 studies with approximately one million patients in 95 counties from 2005 to 2014. Thailand does not make up a huge part of clinical trials for the organization at the moment, but because there is a diverse population of 67 million people the nation has become a center for clinical trials for Pharmaceutical companies. Thailand has highly trained scientists at the university level and our facilities are top notch. We have international and domestic contract research organizations (CROs) that are doing fantastic work here in Thailand already, and we can always improve. I believe this comes down to speed and getting processing approvals quickly so we remain efficient and competitive with other Asian nations. Over the last 10 years many policies have already changed,

which have allowed for early stage (phase II) studies to grow at an exponential rate and for the development of phase one studies to start. If Thailand is able to rally up a bit more support from the government, by way of incentives for multinational companies to be based here, I believe it would lead to massive expansion of growth in the local healthcare and life science and pharmaceutical sectors. This potential growth is good for all of Thailand because innovation can add significant value to society.

What is Boehringer Ingelheim Thailand doing to gain and retain the best talent?

As the organization's regional leader I see not only innovative potential in Thailand, but also the potential to develop talented individuals. 25 years ago, I was a young ambitious person who also wanted to grow professionally and opted to move around Asia, but now that I am back in Thailand I believe Boehringer Ingelheim can play a role in the development of our talent by partnering with local universities and help them institute a curriculum where business acumen and marketing plays a vital role in student's courses.

Moreover, as an organization we believe we view things from a global perspective, which helps our organization gain the brightest talent around. The trainings I mentioned earlier are also an incentive for young professionals to join, plus we offer competitive compensation for experienced employees and a friendly environment that welcomes participation so that we can become a top 10 pharmaceutical companies in the coming years. Finally, as a family-owned and not listed company we believe in the long-term investment of our employees so we can learn and grow together.

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