Interview: Yolanda Gimeno – Managing Director, Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Italy



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The MD of the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Italy takes stock of the prevailing business winds between the two countries as both economies complete their emergence from the shadow of the global financial crisis. Citing the important contribution of entities such as Banca Farmafactoring in providing liquidity to pharmaceutical and biomed companies, she observes a return to normality and flourishing of bilateral trade relations.

Yolanda, in your experience as Managing Director at the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Italy, how would you characterize the trade relationship between Italy and Spain?

The trade relationship between our two countries has always been of an excellent nature. Historically, we have been very close, not only on an economic level where each is one of the other's largest trading partners, but also on a political level. Given the environment in both countries after the crisis, especially today with growth returning to our economies, we are seeing a lot of interest from Spanish companies willing to invest in Italy. This is further helped by the fact that there are also a lot of cultural similarities between Italy and Spain, especially in the corporate world. For example, the corporate structure of our companies is very similar in that both countries have a lot of SMEs and family-owned businesses. The average size of a pharmaceutical company in Spain is well below that of most European pharmaceutical companies, another similarity to Italy.

Finally, both countries were forced to implement heavy austerity measures which, although painful, are now starting to pay off with the recovery gathering momentum. Encouraging economic data in both countries is improving the business environment, which is leading to a simultaneous increase in foreign investment.

Do you believe then that the reforms both countries implemented during the crisis have led to an improved business environment?

I think so, the crisis led to a structural change and this has now eased access for foreign investment as well focusing the actions of both our governments on pushing through serious measures to boost the economy and facilitate the conducting of business.

What services does the Chamber offer to help ease the entry of Spanish companies into the Italian market?

Our Chamber was founded in 1953, and has today become an indispensable organization representing and promoting the interest of our companies. Despite the crisis we have significantly increased our membership base including the addition of some of the most important and influential Spanish and international companies. Our members are companies which have established or are establishing operations in Italy and in Spain, and we help them carry out their business in the most efficient manner possible. To that end we offer each company customized services to fit their individual needs including administrative and promotional services in Italy. Our real strength however lies in our network of well-established Spanish and international companies in Italy upon which new members can rely for advice and support during their transition and expansion period. The Chamber has a strong relationship with the General Managers and CEO’s of its member companies and can help new members gain access to their experience and advice through events hosted by the Chamber.

These events can be thematic in nature, or general meeting points. We also put our members in touch with events in which they might be interested and which are hosted by other member companies, such as an event held recently on the new patent regulations which might be relevant to our pharmaceutical and innovation-oriented members.

What elements do you view as crucial to new companies, especially SMEs looking to penetrate the Italian market?

When many people think of investing in Italy, the first thing that comes to mind is the importance of knowing the right people. However more important to success is a good understanding of the

market. Every market has its own characteristics, and companies often come with the often mistaken belief that as this is another European market it will be quite similar to that of their home country. This is where the Chamber can play a major role, in helping them to a better understanding of the key success factors and unique characteristics they will have to face when doing business here.

What are some of the challenges Spanish companies face when entering the Italian market?

They face much the same challenges as any company looking to enter a new market. They need to understand the regulatory framework first of all, which can appear quite convoluted on arrival. The Chamber helps here again, not only by providing them with information ourselves but also by putting them into contact with reliable third-party specialists within our network capable of helping them through their difficulties. These can take the form of legal aid, consulting or existing members of the Chamber who have had the same challenges in the past.

How do you do you see the business environment for innovative companies specifically?

We as a Chamber focus heavily on innovation, and for Spanish companies this is an essential growth driver. They have realized the importance of investing in the development of innovative capabilities in order to sustain and improve their competitiveness further down the line.

Just to give you an example, Almirall entered in the Italian Market over 10 years ago, and today is well established thanks its dermatological prescription portfolio and some innovative treatments as Sativex the “first in class” treatment indicated for muscular spasticity in SM patients.

How does Banca Farmafactoring, a bank started by pharmaceutical companies in Italy, help provide financial support to pharmaceutical and biomed companies?

Banca Farmafactoring has been a member of the Spanish Chamber in Italy for a number of years. Being leaders in Italy, they approached the Chamber at a time when they were entering the Spanish market. They specialize in providing liquidity to pharmaceutical and biomedical companies by purchasing their credits towards public hospitals in Italy, Spain and Portugal, which tend to have long payment terms.

Governments across Europe are trying to reduce payments terms of the public administration, but, given that these initiatives take time, Banca Farmafactoring provides an effective and efficient solution to its customers.

Banca Farmafactoring has been active in Spain since 2010 and in Portugal since 2014.

On a general basis, I think SMEs in both countries are having an easier time gaining access to capital now that stability is returning to the markets. Governments are also looking to promote employment and investment among these companies which has led to systems and tools target at boosting their ability to help drive growth in this regard.

Moving forward, what is your vision for the Chamber and its role in stimulating trade between Italy and Spain?

I think the level of trade between our countries will continue along the historically excellent levels we have seen. The Chamber will play its part in ensuring this by working closely with its members, institutions and other key stakeholders in our markets with the aim of boosting foreign investment for both countries. Our aim is to become the leading business organization for fostering ties between Italy and Spain and to continue to increase the value we generate for our members.

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