Anna Wienner – Country Director, IBSA Hungary



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As an introduction for our readers, could you describe the initial objectives that you set for yourself when stepping into this role last October?

The reason I joined IBSA was the challenge of rebuilding a company. In my previous role, I built IPSEN up from scratch—a truly rewarding experience—but I realized that I needed a change. I believe that the strategic thinking and vision I had for IBSA was the reason I was selected for this position.

My main objective on accepting this position was developing an effective sales force. Additionally, I wanted to increase our profitability and market ranking, launch new innovative products, and develop a strong, motivated team. For me, building something from scratch, as I had done previously, is a completely unique experience because you can select the most fitting people to comprise the team. In this role, I inherited a team, and I have motivated them to achieve and to follow me towards my goals, and in turn, the company's goals.

What was the state of the company when you took over as country director, and where are you looking to take it now?

When I took over, many people were not motivated; they had been waiting for a few years for changes to take place. They had launched very few new products, and really believed that what fit the Swiss market would also fit the Hungarian market. Despite this, they were eager to change and hungry for something new. When I joined the company with my motivated attitude, strategic thinking, and logic, they were very surprised, both at what we could do and how we could accomplish our objectives.

This was very difficult at the beginning; people were nervous when a new MD joined the company, especially with respect to any accompanying staff that would come on board. They were also nervous that they would not be able to perform according to my expectations. However, today, after knowing my aims and goals, they saw clearly that finally we, as a company, have a strategy. Now I can say that they can follow my leadership; they understand our goals and how we can achieve them. They understand my expectations in both the short and long term.

What were some of the most consequential decisions that you initially made?

Clarification was our most important target for the end of 2015 and all of 2016. Secondly, it was important to split the over-the-counter (OTC) sales team from the prescription sales team. The communication and connection between them was not good, as they were competing instead of supporting each other. The splitting of these teams was important to ensure the success of our sales team as a whole.

Prior to my appointment, the organization was almost completely linear, as there was no hierarchy. So, restructuring the organization was also a crucial initiative that I pursued.

Could you share some insights into the current structure of IBSA’s portfolio here in Hungary?

The portfolio is divided into three parts: prescriptions, hormones, and OTC. In our portfolio, the most important segment is prescription, which encompasses rheumatology and endocrinology. Currently, the structure seems to be stable, and I would like to maintain it for at least the next two years. However, we do have plans to introduce new products onto the market, specifically in the areas of pain and joints. Furthermore, we are also looking forward to expanding our OTC portfolio.

Sales and marketing are obviously hugely important to the success of IBSA. What are some of the fundamental lessons that you are relaying to your teams in these areas?

Product knowledge training is the most important lesson that I have stressed. When I took over, there was no system of renewal training or testing in place. It was my sales force that actually suggested for there to be more regular product updates and training; a suggestion that I appreciated. We developed product manuals and began to require extensive knowledge of the products. We began to test this knowledge and required a certain level of proficiency to continue in sales. Secondly, we developed selling skills training, which is something that we are still in the process of conducting. I am proud of the improvements that have been made so far, but we still have work to do. Sales is not simply about the interaction; it is about thinking as a small manager of your territory—a mindset that we've strived to ingrain into every approach.

How would you evaluate your current position in the market, both in terms of brand and product recognition?

Value of the company brand is very important and something that we are continually working to improve. People know our products, but they do not necessarily know IBSA. However, now we are working to build up the image of the company. The value and efficacy of our products are also important, and it is necessary to communicate this. Our products have been on the market for 10 years. However, we need to bring new information on the products to our customers.

The pharmaceutical industry has experienced a wave of cost containment issues and budget cuts recently. Do you see that as potentially limiting to your ability to introduce more innovative therapies into the market?

Currently, we are in the process of launching a new product in IVF, which is a great medicine with new packaging and an innovative active ingredient that provides much more added value for the patients.

We now have to make a price-volume agreement with the National Health Insurance Fund (OEP). This product could improve the effectiveness of IVF treatment, which could contribute to the increase of birthrates—an achievement that seamlessly aligns with the government's population policy.

A key factor in getting a fair price for your products and become included in reimbursement is raising the education and awareness of the product or therapy that you are trying to promote. What is IBSA doing in this regard?

Today we are working with rheumatology and other patient groups, including those groups in rural areas, to increase awareness. To support a patient association is easy. However, the power of patient associations in Hungary is very weak, especially when compared to Western Europe. I believe that this will change in the future and patient associations will continue to become stronger. I think that it is key to also have these groups participating in reimbursement discussions, whereas currently, they are completely shut out. They have to be able to communicate their needs to the government effectively.

Because of the historical relationship between doctors and patients in Hungary, the level of participation from the patient is extremely low. This habit is difficult to break, but patients must take the initiative to improve their own health. If you see some statistics about Hungarian life expectancy, we rank towards to bottom in Europe. I believe that it is an obligation of the pharmaceutical companies to work to increase health literacy rates. For example, AIPM has great, comprehensive initiatives that aim to improve this area as well, which is why I am glad to have brought IBSA back into that association.

This is your second time leading a company. Did you have any unique takeaways from your first experience that you applied this time around?

For me, what is important is to be patient because I am a quick and efficient person but sometimes change needs time. I see myself as the revolution for my new team and I am happy they are in line with me now. To effectively reform old habits requires diligence, consistency and, above all, patience.

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