

Interview: Olaf Weppner - General Manager, AbbVie Switzerland



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Olaf Weppner, General Manager of AbbVie Switzerland, highlights AbbVie's intended foray into oncology, the importance of immunology to the group, the challenges and opportunities of the Swiss market and his own motivations for working in the industry.

Mr. Weppner, you were appointed General Manager of AbbVie Switzerland less than a year ago. What is your mandate for the Swiss affiliate?

We are already a pretty successful company in the therapeutic area of immunology, which is a main growth driver. What is even more exciting is the new horizon of oncology. Globally, we are planning to enter the oncology market, with a portfolio rolled out for hemato-oncology in the next 12 to 18 months. We are technically already present in oncology in some countries because of the acquisition of Pharmacyclics, through which we have one of the leading compounds in chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) already on the market, but this is not marketed by AbbVie in Europe.

In parallel, we are also preparing our entry into solid tumors within the same time frame. Oncology is a completely new space for us as an organization, but I am confident because we have a very strong approach.

We want to be a meaningful player and transforming our organization is one of our key objectives. That means we have to constantly open our minds to change. Currently, the therapeutic area of immunology is our most important asset. But soon, these new compounds will need space and

support for successful entry. This will require realignment in terms of resourcing and process organization.

Speaking of which, more than half of AbbVie's revenues comes from immunology; this heavy reliance on one drug therapeutic area could be a source of stress. How has this affected AbbVie's Swiss operations?

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The sales breakdown for the Swiss market reflects the global numbers, but this is not a source of concern for me. The reason for this is simple: We are engaged in the field of immunology, because we can still continue to expand our existing broad portfolio. It is currently being used for ten indications and we are continuing to increase this number. In spring the number of indications could be increased by an eleventh. Patients suffering from Hidradenitis suppurativa (acne inversa) can also be treated successfully since then. This was a remarkable milestone because it is the first and only specifically approved drug for this indication. The only treatments that had existed prior to this were antibiotics, useful only for less severe cases, and surgery. This fast expanding portfolio has been a true success story – not least because it continues to surprise the market with its impact on a variety of diseases.

We made a substantial innovation step in the therapeutic area of immunology. It goes without saying that we are constantly looking for the next breakthrough, but we will not need to invent new drugs for the sake of simply expanding our portfolio. For instance, with a condition like rheumatoid arthritis, there is limited value in introducing yet another drug providing comparable efficacy. We are focusing on true innovation and our strategy of expanding into oncology reflects this commitment.

We are in the land of oncology and Swiss heavyweights like Novartis and Roche enjoy the home turf advantage. What is your strategy for successful entry into oncology?

Our mission is very clear: 'to have remarkable impact'. Ultimately, the solutions we are providing will make a difference. If our products are not innovative or do not offer added value, it is going to be difficult to gain ground in any market, much less in somewhere like Switzerland. We do not compare to Swiss-based global players. We just want our stakeholders to understand our mission and vision, and collaborate with us for our reputation and competencies. In the areas where we are present, we have established great relationships.

We are dedicated to some of the most devastating diseases and our research is very targeted and focused, backed by a clear acquisition strategy. We are confident that our solutions will make a significant difference in some of those diseases, and we are committed to investing in this field, which has been clearly defined as a leading growth driver for the company for the next decade.

Increasingly, pharma companies are touting a patient-centric approach, and AbbVie is no different. What does ‘patient-centricity’ mean to you?

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To be patient-centric starts with our mission to have remarkable impact and bring innovative treatments to market. It is becoming apparent that drugs form only one part of the success healthcare story. Supporting activities like care-coaching and patient support programs can help to solidify or even increase outcomes.

To really make the difference, you need to understand the patient’s entire experience with the disease to learn how to shape standards of care. To provide an example, take the case of Hepatitis C. We now have, for the first time, a cure for the disease. However, only 15 percent of Swiss patients affected by Hepatitis C have been treated with those novel interferon-free treatments. Very often, this is blamed on the cost of drugs. But companies significantly lowered the price in Switzerland last year in order to expand access, but paradoxically, we have seen a decline in the number of patients treated in 2016!

Price is only one part of the battle for disease eradication and we need to target all the structural hurdles in the Swiss healthcare system, starting from increasing awareness. For instance, Hepatitis C is not part of regular blood testing here, which is simply unbelievable because Switzerland has the resources to do it. This is what we mean by patient-centricity.

Switzerland ranks second globally in terms of research expenditure and investment, right after the US. As an American company in Switzerland, how is this reflected in AbbVie’s activities?

Switzerland is one of the leading countries on innovation-friendliness. That is an important part of our environment that we want to leverage and contribute to. This is helped by the fact that access to innovation is highly valued not only by politicians, regulators and the pharma industry, but also by the entire population.

Research and development (R&D) is an important part of our activities, particularly as we want to gain entry into new fields. Even though we are an US-based global player, there is a clear

appreciation of the world-class research and science being conducted in Switzerland and we see collaboration with leading academic institutions and actors here as essential to our success.

We are very happy that we have a strong unit here to run our clinical trial programs, most of which are done in-house. We do not outsource R&D for our core pipeline projects, and currently, we are collaborating with more than 40 sites in Switzerland, running 20 different clinical development programs. This is a clear demonstration that Switzerland is an important country for AbbVie's R&D efforts.

Finally, our R&D support is not limited to clinical trial programs. We are also investing in research awards (e.g. in inflammatory bowel disease and rheumatology) to support young researchers and scientists.

What challenges do you foresee for AbbVie Switzerland in the future?

Switzerland's consensus-driven culture where the pharma industry is very welcome to participate in the broader healthcare dialogue is remarkable in comparison to some other European markets, where we have seen a drastic increase in tension and an overall confrontative atmosphere, particularly in recent years. This is a huge mistake because the pharma industry is not a problem; it is part of the solution.

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However, the Swiss market is experiencing some fragility as a result of the political situation. As a dedicated member of Interpharma, we are fully supporting its approach to clearly protect the relationship between the EU and Switzerland, so that those critical R&D networks across Europe are not harmed by political actions.

In addition, I think Switzerland could still benefit from a more competitive regulatory environment, in terms of specifically access to innovation with respect to time. On average, a new compound or an expansion of an approved compound into new indications takes much longer compared to the EU or the US. When we are looking at fast-changing environments like oncology, where science is changing at a much faster pace, the current regulatory processes are not flexible enough.

Innovative companies like us have to operate under the premise that for every product, there is a clear value proposition, and this needs to be accepted by the regulatory bodies in order to achieve

market access. That can be difficult sometimes because in the early phases of R&D, prior to market access, the value arguments may not be apparent or easily proven because of a lack of data. Switzerland needs more flexibility in order to benefit more from innovation. For instance, in the US innovative drugs can receive conditional approval, which gives companies the opportunity to prove their drugs' added value, once sufficient real world evidence is available.

On a more personal note, you had previously worked in Global Brand Management in AbbVie's US headquarters. Managing a product is different from managing a country's operations. How have you found the transition?

A career that spans both positions is very exciting because it helps you to grow in two parallel roads, and actually, this is a common approach for our company as it facilitates the acquisition of different skill sets. Working in HQ gives clear exposure to strategic development processes, primarily around global brand strategy development, exposure to senior management decision making and portfolio management, for instance. You also learn to understand different types of markets and their needs and different approaches to strategy implementation, and that gives you a broader perspective when you take over country operations.

In a country manager position, you have to cover the whole operations and are responsible for the entire organization. This also entails a much higher degree of external representation, including advocacy roles within the country's regulatory and policy-making framework.

To deal with this, the crux is always to be humble and open to learning. We will all meet great professionals throughout our working life and as a manager, I have learnt to trust their competencies and learn from their expertise. Ultimately, my job is to creating an environment where they can excel.

This is what motivates me in my current job: the talented people I work with, and the extraordinary ability to influence the transformation of an organization like AbbVie as well as the broader healthcare landscape in which it sits.

I firmly believe that AbbVie will push into those new areas to become a respected and meaningful player in those segments; being valued for high ethical standards and a clear understanding of the overall picture; and actively contributing to sustainable healthcare concepts.

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