Interview: Kamal Abichandani – Chairman; Deepu Bhatia – Director; Hersh Abichandani – General Manager; Richard Mayani – Information Systems Manager, Ambica, Philippines



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In an exclusive interview, Kamal Abichandani, Deepu Bhatia, Hersh Abichandani, Richard Mayani, the Chairman, Director, General Manager, and Information Systems Manager of Ambica tell their story and reveal their key to success: quality partnerships.

As a former engineer without previous experience in the pharmaceutical industry, what were some of the ambitions that you had in founding the company?

We started the company due to the opportunity in the industry. I was originally in the garment industry where we exported to North America and Europe. We had a competitive advantage in the Philippines in comparison to other countries due to the established quota system. When this quota system was abolished, our company was left without an advantage and without a future in the country. At the same time, the Filipino government was combating the high prices of multinational pharmaceutical products and there was an executive order to bring generic medicines to the Filipino market. Our business started due to the executive order of the Parallel Importation Trade Channel (PITC) and by importing and distributing affordable generic medicines in the Philippines.

Your focus is primarily on distribution. Could you give our readers a brief overview of your operations?

We procure medicines from manufacturers that are very reputable in the industry, our goal has always been to partner with the top manufacturers who posses either US FDA, UKMHRA, EUGMP or any other form of PICs Certification. In the long-run, we decided to have manufacturers that could maintain the ability constantly to innovate and to adapt to any new laws that could be applied to the industry. The laws are continuously changing in the pharmaceuticals industry, meaning that we need to partner with the best manufacturers that have the necessary infrastructure and documentation in place.

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When we first began our operations we partnered with the top manufacturing giants from India, JB Chemicals and Wockhardt. We then focused on launching innovative products that were recently taken off patent. Our strategy was to capture the first mover advantage with these new products, and we were able to make an impact in the industry because we had molecules that had just been taken off patent. In turn this allowed us to provide affordable generic versions of a multinational product. We also changed the way the medicine was sold. Not everyone in the Philippines can afford to purchase an entire box of medicines, and we made it possible with our packaging to purchase individual pills. This is a unique way of selling and it is customized to the Filipino market. Our competitive advantage is our affordable pricing coupled with high quality medication that comes from highly certified manufacturers and the unique promotion and branding that we sell the products with.

We were the first ones to launch a generic yeast-based insulin that had just been taken off patent. This launch made us the first entrant of a biological product in the largest drugstore in the Philippines. We have been the first to launch numerous products in the Philippines. The moment patents expire, we are prepared to launch.

Partnerships with reputable partners sound like the key to much of your success. How does Ambica differentiate itself from other competitors in the market?

A phrase I like to use is that we do not compete with anyone in the market; we let them compete with us. In my opinion the market is large enough for everyone to enjoy. What differentiates us is that we have quality suppliers and Ambica is prepared for the stringent audits, even if it is conducted by US FDA. Our manufacturers pass quality requirements and this differentiates our products. We also have local partners here that are strong, and this allows us to ensure that our

quality-sourced products are able to reach the end patient. The goal is to get the medicines to the patients and within their budgets. Initially we faced negativity in the market because people did not trust the goods sourced from China or India, but we have been able to prove through testing and the support of doctors that our generics are of the same standard as the innovative drugs and we have greatly reduced the costs of medicines for the Filipino people.

Additionally, we are able to do things that other local companies cannot. We launched stem cell innovations and also RDNA-based-testing, which is very exclusive to a handful of companies globally. This test is used to diagnose patients for a number of diseases they may come across in their lives. These tests are 100% accurate and can only be found in developed countries where they can identify more than four-hundred diseases that we can. Our tests are more accurate than lab tests because lab tests rely on antibodies that develop to fight the disease. It takes time for the body to develop the antibody. Our product tests the DNA because the DNA modifies as soon as the pathogen enters the body and there is no need to wait until antibodies have developed in the body in order to make the diagnosis. This is a Nobel Prize winning technology that is both faster and far more accurate which has been endorsed by the College of American Pathologists (CAP).

Which areas in the company are providing the most growth?

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We are well known for our anti-infection drugs, which drive the most growth, followed by endocrinology, hypertension, nephrology and oncology. Aside from being the 2nd largest local company in the country, Ambica is the only distributor that has the complete portfolio covering of all the therapeutic areas. In the future we see more growth in life saving drugs including in oncology, and orthopedics.

Looking past the growth in the Philippines, you have also recently expanded to Vietnam. Could you elaborate on what makes Vietnam an attractive market for Ambica?

We started in Vietnam in 2015 because we saw an opportunity. The laws in the south pacific region of Vietnam are becoming more stringent, and we have the capacity to follow these laws. We have begun registering the products of our reputable manufacturing partners while knowing that they have the ability to sustain our operations. We see the strict audits, quality control, and registrations as an opportunity for Ambica because we are able to follow these regulations.

What is your goal for Ambica for the next five years, and how are you going to achieve this goal?

It is our goal to be the second top pharmaceutical company by 2020 and by 2025 we are going to continue driving and sustaining that growth. We will reach this by leveraging our competitive advantage of reputable sources that are PICs compliant and by continuously expanding and maintaining our product portfolio. One thing is for certain, and that is that you will see the four of us still together, and that is the most important measurement of success.

It is evident that Ambica is a partner for the entire Filipino population through providing a full portfolio of products that are high of quality and affordable. Ambica has also offered free hypertension and diabetes medicines to patients in need. What are some of the other ways that Ambica works to improve the lives of Filipinos?

Ambica is proud of our partnership with local, regional and national charities in organizing missions to provide medical check-ups and medicines free of charge. Our medical director also organizes similar missions and will diagnose patients that have not been able to see a doctor. There are some remote regions in the Philippines where they do not even have electricity, and the “local” drugstore can be a two to three hour drive. It makes a huge difference for them when we are able to bring medicines and medical attention to them, and they are very appreciative of this.

Since the founding of Ambica, what has been your proudest achievement?

The biggest achievement has been in our sourcing of niche products and the expansion of our portfolio. We have some products that have no competitors, even the innovators do not distribute in the market. Of course, our proudest achievement is in putting a smile on the faces of the patients that are able to afford medicines that may have been previously unattainable. We have brought down the prices of some basic medications by over five fold.

Do you have any final message for our international and local readers?

We do not compete, we compliment. The basic philosophy of Ambica is no short cuts, and everything that is done at Ambica is done with integrity. This is our philosophy from every step of the process from the procurement to the patient. We focus on developing a brand that people can trust and rely on. We are patients ourselves and we know the quality of our products. This year’s tagline is: Your medicine is my medicine (Gomot mo, gamot ko).

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