Interview: Tom Coogan – General Manager, Grünenthal Ireland



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Grünenthal Ireland's General Manager discusses the incredible growth of the Irish affiliate over the past twelve years, their comprehensive pain portfolio, the innovation they are bringing as pain specialists to the industry, and his strategy for increasing revenues in the next five years.

You were the founder of Grünenthal's Irish affiliate and have been General Manager since then very successfully, with Grünenthal growing 51 percent in 2015! What have been the key milestones for you in the past twelve years?

In the middle of 2004, I was approached by Grünenthal to found the Irish affiliate. At that time, it was just a one-person operation, reporting to the UK office. The critical task was to reacquire the market authorization (MA) for the product Zydol® (Tramadol) from Pfizer. On 23 December, 2004, this was accomplished and, in January 2005, we began the relaunch of Zydol® in Ireland under the Grünenthal banner.

Since then, we have had a fantastic decade with a series of successful product launches. After Zydol, it was Ixprim®, a combination product with Paracetamol and Tramadol. We were fortunate in this segment because the launch coincided with market challenges for existing products, namely the restrictions placed on codeine and codeine-containing products, which represented our main competition. Ixprim®'s market share grew significantly and still remains the number one in its segment. Furthermore, the molecule Tramadol itself is still the top molecule in this segment.

In 2011, Grünenthal launched Versatis® and Palexia®. Versatis is the seventh best-selling product on the Irish market according to IMS rankings and has undoubtedly been the growth driver of Grünenthal Ireland. Palexia® has also been an outstanding success. More recently, in 2013, we collaborated with MSD to promote Arcoxia®.

Overall, I am very proud of the twelve successful years we have had here and of the organisation we have built up to support the expanding portfolio.

What explains the success of the Irish affiliate?

Fundamentally, we have excellent products in our area of expertise. They are very well-accepted, and our brand is also widely respected in Ireland. Once the affiliate got past the initial hurdles of getting a product onto market, with the attendant pricing and reimbursement issues, the commercialization phase has gone very well for us.

For some context, pain is a very complex phenomenon and loosely divides into ‘nociceptive’ (non-nerve-related pain like bone pain, tissue pain, among others) and ‘neuropathic’ or nerve pain. We have effective products across the entire pain spectrum – not just for both types of pain but also for both chronic and acute pain, and across the moderate to severe spectrum, as well.

Our products offer real solutions to patients and are thus very well-received. We also have a fantastic team here and a very tight but comprehensive organization: sales, marketing, medical and finance. Everyone focuses on their jobs.

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Pain management is a very niche area and different approaches are needed for chronic and acute pain. As a pain specialist, how is Grünenthal driving innovation in this specialty area?

As a leader in the area of pain management, it is incumbent on us to provide advice to physicians on the rational prescription of opiates. For instance, in terms of the types of patients, appropriate dosages and the duration of treatment, as well as to advocate restrictions on their use.

Grünenthal is also at the forefront of developing innovative drug delivery systems to reduce the inherent potential for drug abuse and make pain products safer. For instance, in the US, we have introduced tamper-resistant products. This is a tablet that is impossible to break down into a powder substance, which can then be mixed with water for injection.

Grünenthal prides itself as an “entrepreneurial specialist”, investing almost a fifth of its revenues globally in R&D. Will this be the growth driver for Grünenthal in the next few years?

Grünenthal invests almost a fifth of its revenues in R&D globally. This would be a huge percentage of turnover, even for an international conglomerate. For a family to be willing to invest that amount demonstrates their commitment. Currently, we have molecules in the pipeline and we are certainly hoping to make some exciting breakthroughs.

As with all companies, there is the pressure of patent expiry and ensuring a healthy pipeline. Grünenthal is investing heavily and we are constantly monitoring external opportunities outside of our own portfolio, either in terms of new molecules for in-licensing or new devices or technologies.

Beyond the loss of product exclusivities, what other challenges do you foresee for Grü nenthal Ireland in the coming years?

As already mentioned, with the maturity of our product portfolio comes challenges associated with loss of exclusivity, which triggers price decreases and the implementation of further cost saving measures.

There are challenges in the area of market access, both with obtaining market approval and achieving a satisfactory pricing and reimbursement agreement. There can be delays in the process, which affects us as an affiliate of a global company.

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Moving forward, what role do you think the pharma industry will continue to play in Ireland?

As an industry, we will have realized savings to the exchequer of almost EUR 2 billion over the lives of the last three agreements. This is designed to create space for new, innovative medicines to reach the market. We are now at the stage where we accept that the pharma industry will have our window of patent protection, and when we lose it, it is time to move on to a new molecule. Having accepted that we used to be behind the rest of Europe in terms of pricing, especially in the loss-of-exclusivity (LoE) space, we have caught up very quickly. This has been painful for Irish companies, with massive implications in terms of consolidation, job losses and redundancies. On the manufacturing side as well, we have contributed to job creation and economic growth with so many of Big Pharma companies basing significant manufacturing operations here. Finally, as an industry, we also provide the perfect platform for the training and development of a bright, educated and

talented workforce. In that sense, the pharma industry is really a partner for a small country like Ireland, which depends heavily on foreign direct investment (FDI).

You have been described as a ‘change agent’ and a ‘fat converter’. What is your strategy for dealing with the challenges ahead?

As a company, we have built a team able to embrace change and keep ahead of the game in terms of strategies for promoting, selling and commercializing our products. We have brought in young, dynamic and energetic people with creative ideas. We are constantly focused on staying at the forefront of the industry. We were one of the first companies to use iPads to promote our products to doctors, for instance. We invest heavily to keep up-to-date on the latest technology and latest ways to get our messages out to our customers.

Pain is a very complex syndrome yet we need to challenge existing mindsets around identifying and managing pain. Doctors find it difficult to treat because they sometimes see pain as a symptom of a larger condition that they want to treat. To engage both physicians and patients, we need to make the story interesting, engaging and very creative. For instance, we have recently developed a very strong visual on the various types of pain – cold, hot, sharp, creepy-crawly, for instance – to help patients visualize and articulate the type of symptoms they are feeling. The chronification of pain is a real issue and in order to better treat patients and improve their quality of life, we need to tell the story of pain in a better way.

Looking back, Grünenthal Ireland is very much your baby. Moving forward, what are your chief priorities for the next few years?

My main priority within the organization is to bring new pain solutions to patients.

We have a number of really exciting projects in the pipeline. The delivery of pain medication is really advancing, for instance, in the specialization of pain delivery, not just in terms of pain type but also individual patient delivery systems, and we want to be at the forefront of this exciting development.

More broadly, I also want to maintain our leadership position as pain specialists. Healthy growth would also be a bonus – realistically, we expect to significantly increase our revenues over the next five years.

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