Interview: Philippe Hügli – Country Coordinator, Boston Scientific Switzerland



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Working to stay ahead in the highly competitive medical device field, Boston Scientific's Philippe Hügli launched a Customer Insight Initiative in Switzerland which has served as a pilot for the European organization.

Considering the immense competition in the medical device industry today, what do you see as the key trends that executives must be aware of and adapt to in order to effectively compete?

The medical device industry is incredibly competitive and under increasing pressure from many sides, due to significant economic pressures. Populations worldwide are aging in terms of demographics and generally the point has been reached that the population of 65 years old and over outnumbers those of 15 years old and under. Moreover, the 65 and over population will double by 2036. Swiss patients also tend to have very high demands in terms of quality of care, seeking treatment from specialists and with the latest technologies. This confluence of factors translates into high healthcare costs, which were at CHF 74 billion (USD 74 billion) in 2016 and are growing at four percent per annum.

As seen across Europe and in other regions, as a result, payers are asking more and more in terms of evidence of outcomes and value for cost. To compete in this environment, you must really make sure you differentiate your business in such a way that you create a triple win situation for all

stakeholders, meaning the best outcomes for the patient, great value for payers, and support for healthcare professionals. For innovative MedTech companies such as Boston Scientific, this means providing more than just products; we need to provide significant value added services that constitute a full treatment solution.

What steps has Boston Scientific taken to adapt to these trends and portray itself as a partner and innovative solution provider to patients and healthcare institutions?

When I took over as country coordinator in 2015, I developed the impression that the environment in which we were working was changing faster than our organization was adapting and that if we wanted to really compete and do more than just “maintain our market share,” some adjustments would be needed. Boston Scientific generally operates as a group of separate divisions which are managed vertically, yet there are some aspects which must be synchronized or coordinated in an individual country, particularly around corporate messaging. As I explained earlier, it is critical that we position ourselves as partners and solution providers to healthcare institutions that clearly provide value beyond the physical device; this needs to be embodied in our corporate message across every division.

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Back in 2015 we launched an initiative across all our divisions to study the differences between them, the respective touchpoints between us and our various different customer segments, and how well we perform considering those touchpoints. Having had the relevant discussions at the corporate level, we quickly found that my impression and conviction regarding the messaging we should be driving homogenously across our divisions was in line with corporate strategy for the coming years: being customer-centric. Thus, when I proposed that we launch an in-depth study of current perceptions of our brand in the Swiss market and develop some solutions to improve it, I very quickly got the support needed from the corporate level.

The resulting initiative was called the Customer Insight Initiative and was centered on interviews conducted by a third-party with 120 doctors, nurses, and various other staff at healthcare institutions such as purchasing directors. The goal was to find answers to the questions of how our customers see Boston Scientific and how we compare to our competitors in the customers’ eyes. In addition, we did internal workshops to study how we viewed ourselves at Boston Scientific and how that compared to how we are actually perceived by customers. We had our field representatives invite their contacts to participate in these interviews and nearly all of those invited were willing to support us and seemed to feel honored to give their insights and help shape Boston Scientific’s

future in Switzerland.

When we looked at the results of the interviews, they revealed some fairly simple gaps and oversights that were easily addressed, as well as some deeper strategic issues. In total, we launched five basic tasks to get some quick wins, and five strategic initiatives. One of the strategic initiatives for instance was to create a local training portfolio that showed the full scope of Boston Scientific's educational activities in Switzerland across all divisions. This initiative not only derives from the touchpoint gap analysis but also addresses some new needs in the market following the new MedTech Europe Code of Ethical Business Practice.

From the Boston Scientific corporate perspective, the Customer Insight Initiative was a pilot program run in Switzerland, a small country where we could complete the program in under a year. We shared our results with colleagues at the corporate level throughout the process, and some points have already been taken out and incorporated into an international initiative known as the Customer Centricity Initiative.

Looking at Boston Scientific's recent performance, what would you highlight as the most disruptive innovations the company has brought to market recently?

One would be in rhythm management where we launched the subcutaneous implantable cardioverter defibrillator (S-ICD), where the leads and device are kept outside your chest and do not enter your heart. In combination with leadless pacing, minimally invasive devices pose a much lower risk of complication.

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Another would be our Lotus valve used in transcatheter aortic valve implantation. Thus far, valves have been mainly self-expanding or balloon expandable. The Lotus valve is mechanically expandable, meaning that its position can be precisely controlled by the surgeon, and even closed again for removal once installed if the surgeon is unsatisfied with the positioning.

What would you highlight as an area where Boston Scientific Switzerland has performed particularly strongly in 2016?

Our divisions beyond cardiology like endoscopy, neuromodulation, urology and women's health all grew by high double digits. This was in part due to having very good products, but mainly occurred thanks to our talented and well-educated people who, led by an involved leadership, are very much committed to our common goal – being customer centric.

What would be the final message you wish to send to our readers around the world?

If asked where I see the medical device industry on a watch with 12 hours, I would say at about half past two. This is to say that while our innovative products may sound very advanced and complex, the complexity is manageable from an engineering standpoint and the functions that these devices accomplish are still “quite basic” compared to what we can hope to accomplish in the future; there is a lot more innovation on the way. While we can already save many lives, our current capabilities are really just the tip of the iceberg.

However, to get this innovation to patients in a form that is acceptable to other stakeholders will require early and close communication and collaboration with our customers. Instead of just bringing a product to market that we hope meets our customers’ expectations, we must seek to find ways to engage them as partners as early as possible during development so that we can develop solutions that meet their needs. To use an analogy from within healthcare institutions, today it is a “heart team” that treats patients rather than cardiac surgeons and interventional cardiologists, because only through working in a true partnership can they deliver the best patient outcomes.

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Finally, as the needs of our customers evolve, as MedTech providers, we must make sure to take a look at our own organizations from time to time, and ensure that we have the right structure and strategy in place. As the environment in which we work evolves, we must mirror the external changes with our own internal adaptations.

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