Interview: Fabienne Le Tadic – Executive President, Product and Brand Protection, SICPA, Switzerland



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"Robust solutions, the capability to implement them and the ability to do so globally" – The executive president of product and brand protection solutions at SICPA explains why the company is the right partner for companies in the pharmaceutical, healthcare and life science industry to fight counterfeiters.

You joined SICPA in September 2014 as executive vice president of one of their key businesses units, after having worked for quite a diverse group of companies, in various roles and positions across Europe. Why was it the right time to move in your career and what attracted you to SICPA?

I joined SICPA in 2014 because it was an opportunity to apply the accumulated experience I had made throughout my career across different types of industries. Moreover, I knew that SICPA's work was defined by fighting illicit trade and – quite frankly— it is dear to my heart to know that what I am doing has a positive impact on society and thus gives me a sense of purpose. At SICPA, we literally help shape a safer world. This is the key element which motivates, drives and encourages my team and me every day.

You head one of SICPA's three businesses, referred to as "product and brand protection solutions", which serves about a dozen different industries. What exactly does this line of business entail and where do healthcare and life sciences fit into the picture?

SICPA’s expertise is derived and built upon a strong history of innovation and client focus in our field of business. Indeed, our company has been around since 1927. For 70 of those years, we have been providing secured identification, traceability and authentication solutions and services. Originally in the commercial ink business, the company developed into providing security solutions for banks and ultimately evolved into a security technology company serving public and private sectors across the globe.

For public authorities, we provide solutions which enable governments to protect their people from counterfeited and dangerous alcoholic beverages and tobacco for instance. The private sector we serve is highly diverse in terms of industries. However, it is worth highlighting that the pharmaceuticals, healthcare and life sciences industry was the first to partner with us to enhance security for patients and consumers—and there is a good reason! This industry is highly attractive for counterfeiters, as these criminals earn 20 to 25 percent more profit from counterfeiting pharmaceuticals than the production of narcotics. The unfortunate reality is that custom officers are often faced with an immense workload which leads to counterfeited medical products too often reaching the market; that makes it an easy and financially attractive target for counterfeiters.

Could you please introduce the portfolio of services and products you provide to the healthcare industry?

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The most important aspect in this sector is collaboration. We are not ‘just a provider of technological bandages’, we are engaged in a much larger business spectrum. What we provide is the ability to work in collaboration with customers to identify risks and where they originate. Once this is established we go ahead and provide the best solution according to the individual need; this is derived from on-going research and development in combination with our decades of experience in the business.

Our solutions will always provide our customers with the ability to authenticate the product in question in a robust manner. We use invisible marking, for instance, which cannot be seen by the human eye, hence making it nearly impossible for the counterfeiter to detect or replicate it; some of these marks have a unique signature which is detected by even more complex machines authenticating whether the product at hand is real or counterfeit.

How important are your clients from the pharmaceutical, healthcare and life sciences industry to the success of your business?

For security reasons, I cannot disclose any numbers or names. However, I can say that this is indeed a critical sector for our business. Several of our staff constantly collaborate with the sector and develop new solutions for clients from leading pharmaceutical, medical device and biotechnology companies.

Historically, these clients seek three aspects: robust solutions, the right partner to implement these solutions and the ability to do so on a global scale. The latter two are not a given; it is never as simple as just ‘putting a security feature on a product’. Quite the contrary, different industries and different customers are subject to certain constraints inherent to the nature of their business. Moreover, these may change in different regions around the world. This is why it is imperative that we can adjust and tailor our solutions to the crucial differences that may exist for our customers in various parts of the world.

Last year at CPhI and again last month at PharmaPack, SICPA – in collaboration with Clariant – announced the development of a new plastic-based brand-protection system for pharmaceutical products and medical devices, PLASTIWARD™. Could you please talk us through this innovation and the value that it brings?

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The vision behind the development of PLASTIWARD™ is that we wanted to ensure that no patient comes into contact with an unsafe medical device. We understood that with the demographic changes currently underway in developed and emerging economies, chronic diseases – which often require medical devices operated by the patients themselves to deliver safe doses of a medicine – will rise. Therefore, the need to increase safety features in this product category is immense. The challenge in this area is that we needed to implement the safety feature into the device rather than the packaging, and that an early stage of the supply chain.

The PLASTIWARD™ value proposition comprises an end-to-end brand protection solution for plastic medical devices. At its core, PLASTIWARD™ brings together SICPA’s trusted expertise in brand protection technologies and processes, and Clariant’s recognised expertise in polymer modification with colour and performance additives. The mission of the pharmaceutical company is to provide access to safe, effective medicine; ensuring the medicine reaches the patient in a safe manner is ours. The result of our partnership with Clariant, PLASTIWARD™ is a prime example of how we allow our customers to focus on their core business as we implement security features—without disrupting their supply chain—at the core of their product. Medical devices by nature are already challenging to counterfeit; by adding invisible barriers within the product we have reached a new

mindset within the business.

How challenging is it to stay the “extra mile ahead” of counterfeiters?

We have a research-and-technology (R&T) team within the organization combining more than 50 different disciplines, and they are constantly working on this topic. Furthermore, we partner with the wider ecosystem; we learn from clients and collaborate with leading universities in this field, benefiting from the leading science institutes in this domain. We grow this knowledge, constantly assess new technologies and are not afraid to be in touch with people in the start-up sphere. There are some very good ideas out there; and it is important to keep abreast of them.

At the end of the day, what differentiates us significantly from our competition is the experience and capacity to be connected to the world. These two key elements are vital for keeping ahead of counterfeiters. We often see start-ups emerge that are good with one certain technology, but they do not have the capacity to implement it globally. This is when we at SICPA, which has this global reach, can partner with such start-ups to elaborate the right solution and deliver it at a global scale. That being said, the fight against counterfeiters is endless. Counterfeiters are global and they are like viruses attacking the most successful brands across the globe and on a constant basis.

Younger generations are more and more inclined to trust the internet enough to purchase their healthcare products through this channel. From your perspective, what risks do you identify in pharmaceutical e-commerce?

Recently we partnered with Zurich Insurance on a report on supply chain integrity and how to protect companies’ blind spots. In the research we did in preparing this report, we found that there are people who will buy medicine online despite being fully aware that they run the risk of getting hold of counterfeits. These people are simply desperate enough to obtain these drugs either cheaper or without prescription through these channels, even if the consequence is death. Or worse, some of these people are aware that they are consuming counterfeit pharmaceutical products but are not aware that this can be lethal.

Frankly, I currently do not know how regulating the online trade of pharmaceuticals can be done effectively; nonetheless, I do know that we will continue to innovate and develop solutions that enable our customers to authenticate their products and thus shape a safer world for patients and consumers.

To what extent is e-commerce a growth spot for you?

As a company, we will always be there to help our partners—in this case manufacturers—to make sure they can distribute their products in a secure manner and ensure safe access to their product for patients around the world. Nevertheless, every stakeholder must be aware of the fact that, when it comes to product security, there is no ‘magic bullet’. Whatever the problem, we have to understand its root cause, identify the loopholes, identify who and where authentication can be done, and then explore the needed technologies. As a company, we have a strong focus on technology, but we do not promise miracles, knowing that we are not in the ‘geek technology’ business, but in the ‘save someone’s life technology’ business.

What are the typical concerns your partners from the pharmaceutical, healthcare and life sciences industry bring forward to you?

Very often these go back to the basics: getting a solution that is easy to operate, that is not too complex to implement and that is robust so that it does not have to be done again.

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