

Interview: Héctor Robles Castro - General Manager

Andean Region, Laboratorios Sophia, Colombia



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Héctor Robles, General Manager of Laboratorios Sophia, a leading ophthalmology company, discusses the significant growth of the Colombian affiliate to become an operational center for the Andean region. Additionally, he highlights their highly innovative product portfolio and ambitious plans to expand into new markets.

When we interviewed your predecessor, Luz Elena Orozco, in 2013, she had described Colombia as the “reference point for other countries”. How has the Colombian affiliate evolved in its last four years of operations?

The Colombian affiliate has significantly changed in the last four years and has become an operational center for the Andean region, managing the affiliates in Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela which has led to a significant growth of the operations in Colombia. Additionally, an evolution of the Colombian affiliate has occurred due to the increase of the product portfolio that we are currently trying to expand and assimilate in all four countries.

How did the Colombian affiliate perform for the 2016 financial year?

2016 was a very successful year for Laboratorios Sofia. Comparing to 2015, we achieved a growth of 17 percent in value, which we consider to be of very high value due to the challenging transformative landscape. As the government cut the costs, we expected a decrease in sales. However, we ended the year achieving positive numbers and significant double-digit growth.

Furthermore, we are proud to be one of the most successful affiliate in the region in terms of performance, being the second country after Mexico, in terms of sales.

Laboratorios Sophia is a global leader in ophthalmology. How is the portfolio represented in Colombia?

Laboratorios Sophia has a plethora of products: Mexico's portfolio has around 70 products, while in Colombia we currently have 21. Our priority is to expand the product portfolio, while also advancing the features of our products. We are the leaders in the glaucoma segment chronic therapy aiming to prevent blindness. Glaucoma is a difficult disease damaging the optic nerve and leading to the loss of sight very difficult to control. Laboratorios Sophia has developed a medicine that can control the development of this chronic disease which has led the company to becoming a leader in this niche market.

What are the key growth drivers?

We are strongly focusing on developing highly innovative products. Currently we have breakthrough therapies in the pipeline that are in the process of investigation. We are always very transparent while informing clients, partners and third parties about our business, products and different aspects of our upcoming product portfolio. I see it as a win-win situation where we can offer high quality solutions to the market and in return get feedback to advance our business in the commercial aspect. Transparency is a key to developing and maintaining relations with stakeholders.

In 2008, Laboratorios Sophia opened a 32,000 m² plant. How has this manufacturing capability evolved today?

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The manufacturing plant is located in Guadalajara, Mexico and is supplying the entire region. In terms of our manufacturing capacity, we have evolved when it comes to volume and references. Currently, we have an intermediary capacity with strong growth prospects moving forward. This is the direction we intend to follow to develop our business in the upcoming years.

What are some of the strategic advantages of having your manufacturing in-house?

We are taking care and have the power to control our products from the beginning to the final point of commercialization - the level of responsibility is much higher in comparison to commercializing through distributors. Historically, we used to partner with distributors in some countries, but due to

our desire to have full control over quality and final commercialization of our products, we have decided to change our business model which was a good choice for the company. Afterwards, we opened an affiliate in Ecuador for which I am also the legal representative. Our efforts have been directed towards implementing pharmacology in all the countries with the direct sales unit. It is somewhat fascinating that Mexico is providing for whole Latin America, including central America with headquarters in Panama, the Andean region with Colombia being the centre of operations and the Southern Cone with the centre in Uruguay.

What are the key opportunities and challenges that you face in the market today, especially in regard to the regulatory framework?

We are currently facing the challenge of entering some niche markets where we are not present. We have several products under clinical trial that are looking to hit the market soon. However, Colombia has not always been such an innovative market, and therefore making it a bit more challenging. However, we are focusing on the commercialization of high quality innovative products, while looking to maintain and nurture close relationships with our customers, associations, doctors and stakeholders. We believe this is the best recipe to win over the market in a fast manner.

How have the recent reforms in the healthcare landscape impacted your operations today?

It hasn't impacted us much. One negative impact we have experienced was the decline of our sales when the government decided to cut the costs. However, Colombia is currently facing some challenges that might affect many companies: the government's interests are superseding those of companies. This scenario might limit them to do the research and investment in Colombia. If there is no certainty in the country, it will limit the amount of investigations for development of new products.

How does Laboratorios Sophia differentiate itself from the competitive landscape in Colombia?

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In terms of competitive advantage, our priority is to keep up with the multinationals and achieve same level of quality and requirement. When I say quality, I refer to every step of the business: quality controls, and making sure the product is safe before it reaches the final customer. We implement pharmacovigilance and we monitor our products following the regulatory frame in

collaboration with medical, scientific organisations and the government, and as a result, we have to offer certified products of the highest quality. We have several innovative products in the pipeline to be launched soon and aim to consolidate our existing products. Furthermore, the future looks bright as three years ago, we were ranked fourth best performing company, escalating this year to the rank number two, with expectations to become number one by the end of 2017.

What are your strategic priorities for the next three years?

Laboratorios Sophia has several goals to achieve: expanding to new segments of the market where we are currently not present and participate actively in establishing and developing the preventive medicine segment. We plan to work more closely with the government to participate in the prevention campaigns. This niche market is something we see as an area of growth in the future and therefore, we are aiming to expand and enter this niche market.

On a more personal note, what do you consider to be your key accomplishments since you assumed the leadership position?

I am very proud to be a part of the company that has built a reputation of being a company of reliability and high quality. Quality is at the core of everything we do and our people are our best asset. This is crucial to advance the quality of our products. Therefore, Laboratorios Sophia is collaborating with many doctors that can certify the high-quality of our products and excellent service we offer.

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