Interview: Cristhian Antonio Salamanca García – Executive Director, Colombia-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Colombia



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Cristhian Salamanca, executive director of the Colombia-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry discusses the ties between both countries, the important role of the chamber in attracting Indian companies to Colombia, and the ease of doing business for pharmaceutical companies in the country after obtaining INVIMA approval.

Could you please provide an overview of the chamber's presence within Colombia?

The Colombia-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry was created in 2008 as an initiative to help strengthen the connections between India and Colombia in both directions. Colombia-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry is a non-profit organisation; Support is available to all companies and academics wishing to do business in Colombia or India. The chamber has received the support of the Indian Embassy in Colombia since its foundation. Though, our chamber is still young compared to others that have been in the country for longer, but we do offer a vast array of services to the affiliated members.

First, we provide information. The Chamber has allies in India called Export Promotion Councils, a mix of the Indian Government and Privates companies that promotes exports from India to the World, in different sectors like: pharma, textiles, plastics, etc. In the case of the pharmaceutical

sector, the chamber of commerce has set up ‘Pharmexcil’, which is an Export Promotion Council from India which we work closely with. For example, on August 23rd a delegation of 50 people will come to Bogota from this council. Second, we advise and create the right networking opportunities. Up to date, we have received many delegations from India, accounting more than 500 companies When receiving a delegation of a company wishing to invest in Colombia, we understand their needs, research the profiles matching to their demand and arrange for logistics. When a company requires it, we’ll also accompany them during the setup of their business activities in Colombia. In the case of an Indian company looking for ways to invest, we offer the right connections with the investing agencies of the country, such as Invest in Bogota. We’re also capable of providing connections with brands, ministers, or representatives of any sectors. Finally, we support their scope for investment.

In addition, we aim to have our members cooperate with each other as it is a win-win situation. In the Chamber, we have created the “All India in One Box” package, a set of services offered by our Chamber in alliance with our members, like: special courier services with discount (DHL); two hours free of lawyer consultancy (8Legal Services); accommodation packages (NH Hotels); travel discounts (Aviatur), and more. The chamber facilitates Indian companies setting up their activity in Colombia while helping Colombians build their business in India.

Why is the chamber an ideal platform for Indian companies for navigating the complexities of the Colombian market?

We act as an intermediary for any company looking to do business in Colombia. We provide a centralised point of information and our market knowledge. Most importantly, collaboration is a lot more efficient when stakeholders understand each other. In the case of an Indian company wishing to implement itself in Colombia, dealing with the Colombia-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry is the best option since we understand the culture and needs of the Indian companies.

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Additionally, Dr. Jaime Mantilla, the executive president of the chamber, has a seat at Bogota’s Chamber of commerce board. For this reason, we are capable of providing the right connections efficiently. Finally, our services are available for a small contribution. In fact, it’s common for members to recommend us or ask for help over an extended period of time. Eventually, our members support each other, while new members will receive the support of our current affiliated members and return the favour eventually, when needed.

What is the significance of India to Colombia? What is the significance of Colombia to India?

Both countries have relations for over 53 years now. The trade relationships grew from 2012 to 2015 but in 2016, it didn't. Nonetheless, both countries have remained very strong allies. India has a lot to offer to Colombian entities, most notably with regards to the size of its economy and its development pace. For example, Colombians have seen the tremendous opportunity for generic medicines in India. On the other hand, Indian entities have not hesitated to expand within the Colombian market.

In Colombia, during the year 2009, with a group of enthusiasts, we created The Friends of India Association, which is the largest Latin American-Indian friendship online association, with more than 17000 members. This organisation has organised seminars in several universities, and organized several events such as Diwali, Holi, and Movie festivals throughout Colombia promoting the Indian Culture across the region. It is interesting to notice the similarities both cultures share, especially with regards to family and music. In the last decade, India's perception on Colombia has evolved alongside with the increasing presence of Indian companies in Colombia. While Colombia remains a relatively small market in the eyes of the Indians, its stability and growth have made it a destination of choice. In light of the recent turmoil, Colombia is replacing Brazil and Argentina as the second most important business partner in the region, while Mexico remains the first.

Indian FDI into Colombia is strong and increasing year-on-year. What is the reason for this trend?

I believe the Indian presence in Colombia started when the government developed its IT education agenda. The connectivity agenda brought many Indian companies, such as Tata Infotech (Now Tata Consultancy Services). Back in 2005 the Indian companies brought up DCS (data consumer services) in which they were more successful. This experience allowed Indian managers to witness how hard-working Colombian people were. In addition, Colombia offers good locational advantages and tax returns. Indeed, the country is a gateway to both North and South America. More specifically, the Colombia-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry supports eight pharmaceutical companies involved in Colombia, that are from India or have sourced from India. These companies have found the health sector to be well organised. The universal healthcare system covers most Colombians and is in demand for affordable generic products. These conditions perfectly fit Indian companies to successfully operate in the market. The perspective of selling generics to a population of around 50M inhabitants should attract more players to the market.

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The government is now more supportive of generic medication; do you think this is the reason why more Indian companies are looking to invest in Colombia?

In fact, the Indian Government has been approaching the Colombian government showing the benefits of generics for quite a few years now. From time to time, when a delegation from India visits our country, officials of the Indian government meet with officials of Colombia showing their interest and concerns. These discussions are focused on improving the system in Colombia. This lobbying has a positive effect on the Indian investment levels. The lasts three Indian ambassadors in Colombia have had a role to meet with the minister or vice minister and promote Indian products.

How would you describe the ease of doing business in Colombia?

In general, doing business in Colombia is easy. But in the pharmaceutical sector you need to consider some points: first, before importing any pharmaceutical product the company should have an INVIMA sanitary registration for every product. The INVIMA registration can be obtained in two ways: homologating your product registration from another country like FDA from USA; if this is not available the company should request a technical visit from INVIMA to certify the plant, which can involve a very high cost. Not all registrations from other countries are valid in Colombia. All this can be done through a representative or by setting up company in Colombia; this last part can be done in around 15 days. After all this has been exhausted, the items can be imported. Affiliated members to our Chamber like Vesalius, HB Human Bioscience or Cipla, have successfully gone through all these steps, and it has been worth it.

What are your strategic priorities for the Chamber in the next three years, by 2020?

Our affiliate members, always look for more services. We are aiming to strengthen our voice in both countries. We are working on improving our services and we would also like to set up our footprint on the Indian Territory, which is not easy. Certain things can be managed from abroad; however, having someone on the field will help us being more efficient.

What advice can you give to Colombian companies wishing to enter India and Indian Companies wishing to enter Colombia?

For Colombian companies looking at India it is important to have patience, and assess who is the right partner for you. India is a niche market, which is challenging to enter. Products need to be tailored to India. Moreover, they need to be aware there is more paperwork in India than in

Colombia.

For Indian companies investing in Colombia, there are great opportunities and once the INVIMA barrier is crossed it is easier to do business here. There are indeed many examples of successful Indian companies in Colombia.

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