Interview: Sandra Cifuentes – General Manager, Astellas Farma Colombia



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Sandra Cifuentes, General Manager of Astellas Farma Colombia, one of the most recent entrants in the Colombian market, explains the strategic priorities for establishing a strong position in the country, where the prime focus is on bringing a collaborative approach that can unite the industry towards a more sustainable healthcare system in the long-term, while improving access to medicines for Colombian patients.

You just recently joined Astellas' newest affiliate in Colombia. What is it like to work for a Japanese company applying the "Astellas way" of doing business? How does it differentiate the business ethos?

Astellas is a unique global pharmaceutical company with Japanese roots. It is a very disciplined culture, a culture of respect, which results in a spirit of collaboration that is paving the way Astellas is entering the Colombian market.

As a recent entrant to the Colombian market, what have been the main challenges and opportunities in the process of setting up the affiliate?

The region presents certain challenges, but at the same time a lot of opportunities, that drive Astellas into taking an active role within the system. Instead of being only an observer, it is of critical importance to identify the opportunities to help shape the healthcare system. It is about helping the government build a sustainable healthcare system that always puts patients at the

center; only then can companies take their business to another level.

Astellas Colombia is the second affiliate present in the Latin American region, after Brazil. Why was Colombia chosen as an optimal location for the establishment of its operations within the Latin America region, instead of Mexico or Argentina, given the size of the market?

Colombia has proven to be a stable country for business. Additionally, the quality of the healthcare system in Colombia, as well as the government's incentives influenced our decision. The country offers three important incentives: the establishment of a strong regulatory framework to protect patients, the implementation of efficient processes within this context and the commitment of the healthcare community in increasing access by going through the first step – providing coverage to the population. Additionally, Colombia has a skilled workforce and an impressive talent pool. These are the predominant reasons for Astellas' entrance into Colombia.

What is the significance of the Colombian affiliate within the global strategy?

Astellas has been working on expanding its footprint in the emerging markets. Establishing a strong presence in Latin America is an important step for the company's strategy and, as mentioned before, Colombia is a country with a very positive outlook. We believe Colombia can help us consolidate our presence in the region and we are committed to listening to the healthcare system's needs to jointly help overcome those issues.

Can you give us an overview of Astellas' operations in Colombia and how the company is doing today after one year in the Colombian market?

We have envisioned a very clear role in the country, which has been consolidated by our highly professional team and skilled workforce. Our current focus is on bringing two therapeutic lines to the country -oncology and immunology- while bringing our constructive and collaborative approach in starting a dialogue with all stakeholders in the country. To give a specific example of our cooperative approach, the opening day of the affiliate was marked by an educational event that we organized to gather together the industry, government, organizations and academia. The fundamental topic covered at this event was access to medicine, aligned under the name of the forum: "Access to healthcare, the path to a new country."

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Part of the active role that Astellas wants to take on in the country relies on the dialogue we want to start between the different actors in the healthcare system. The essential idea behind our

business model includes the vision of promoting collaboration between stakeholders to achieve the common goal we are all working towards of a sustainable healthcare system providing access to all patients. Our strategic priorities do not apply only to educating the community and starting a dialogue, but also instructing and obtaining knowledge on how to approach the market and identify the main opportunities and trends to grow Astellas' operations in Colombia and support patients.

In the market, where the topic of access is particularly relevant, how do you evaluate the state of market access and what benefits can Astellas' innovative solutions bring to Colombia?

As the healthcare system is making adjustments to provide greater access to the population, the industry is learning how to adapt and integrate those changes within their business models. Astellas is no different. As a new participant in the Colombian market, we are learning about the procedures to accordingly adjust and recognize the opportunities that may arise. In the meantime, Astellas' philosophy of leading the way towards innovation of our healthcare system involves having the right treatment and medication with the right patient at the right time. Therefore, one of our projects is to form a strong educational platform for physicians in order to support patients and showcase the benefits of our medicines. If we join our forces in starting similar incentives, we can provide financial sustainability which finally leads to increasing access.

Since Astellas is committed to addressing unmet medical needs, what are some of the exciting products you are looking to introduce in Colombia?

We are introducing products for metastatic prostate cancer for patients with great need. Certainly, in the future we will bring different therapeutic lines to the country. Nevertheless, we are already in the process of introducing new products in the next year.

When we met Mr. Ermanno Buratti in Italy, he told us that the vision for the company by 2025 is to expand into new therapeutic areas to truly become a global and diversified company opened to all possibilities in this regard and to better serve patients. How is the Colombian affiliate contributing to this goal?

Currently, we are placing effort into setting the future foundation of Astellas Farma Colombia. Putting in place its operations, evaluating new products to bring to the country and making the company function to be able to support the growth of the global corporation is our first concern. The first step for setting the foundation for the future includes being specialized in immunology and oncology. Indeed, we are very optimistic we can establish a strong presence here and deliver on our promises.

Astellas has been experiencing a trend of acquiring biotech companies over the last few years. What impact will this strategic move have in Colombia?

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These acquisitions will allow Astellas Farma Colombia to bring new therapies into the country. We are also working towards creating a structured way of bringing new medical technologies to the country. Presently, we are in the process of understanding the government's requirements for the entrance of new technologies.

How does Astellas Farma in Colombia differentiate itself from the competition?

First, by having a strong culture paving the way to an innovative approach in addressing the challenges and opportunities within the environment. A culture of collaboration indeed highlights our differentiated business philosophy in terms of compliance and close collaboration with the government, medical community and stakeholders. Secondly, Astellas is turning innovative science into value for patients. Having a strong scientific approach in this case is supported by patients' input and their view on the solutions provided by Astellas that can further assist in improving our products and capabilities. This finally results in the delivery of a distinctive direction formed by the "Astellas way," a set of values and principles guiding how Astellas' employees do business around the globe.

How would you like to be perceived within the Colombian innovation environment?

We want to position ourselves as a company working closely with stakeholders to demonstrate our desire to be a part of the solution benefiting patients and the system overall. Indeed, Astellas will be a company applying a unique approach, while demonstrating the value of its products with a strong support and segmentation strategy to deliver the right treatment for the right patient at the right time.

What is your vision for Astellas in three years?

We hope Astellas will be a point of reference for other startup companies establishing their presence in the country. In the meantime, we want to be recognized for bringing value to the healthcare system and doing business the right way. We also want to be recognized as a company bringing innovative science to the country and collaborating with the government to increase patient access.

As a specialist in market entry strategies and to ensure a strong presence within the country, what advice would you give to companies in the same situation?

It is imperative to have a strategy that balances opportunities and challenges, while ensuring the right expectations for the company and the country. Furthermore, building trust internally and externally is essential to ensure resources and investments are set in place. Finally, I would advise to acquire local market knowledge to build an approach and gain the information on how to sell the country internationally with a proper balance on setting the expectations aligned with the promises one can deliver.

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