

Interview: Günther Aschenbrenner - Managing Director, Théa Austria



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Günther Aschenbrenner, managing director of Théa Austria, a specialist French ophthalmology company, discusses the development of the company's Austrian office since 2011 and how a strong portfolio acquired by Théa from Alcon has assisted them in growing rapidly. Furthermore, he provides an insight into the importance of long-term strategic thinking, in terms of customer relationships and the strive to be the leading Austrian ophthalmology player.

What was the vision behind founding Théa Austria in 2011?

In 2011, Théa acquired a range of ophthalmology products from Alcon, a division of Novartis. In light of the newly acquired wide product range Jean-Frederic Chibret, Théa's President, decided to establish a direct presence in Austria by opening an affiliate. I was proudly offered the position of managing director, following onto my line of work in ophthalmology as previously I had opened Alcon's Austrian affiliate in 1997. Setting up a new affiliate requires experience and knowledge; therefore, I reached out to my former colleagues to join our team, making it all a relatively smooth process.

How have you been able to develop Théa Austria so effectively in such a short period of time?

The Chibret family have given me full responsibility to conduct business in Austria, always allowing me to choose my own resources and the possibility to develop a tailored strategy. We have a streamlined and efficient approach to our operations, thriving on the multiple skills of each staff member. As a result of our management's trust, we are able to make decision much faster than our competitors. By the time other companies have sent a suggestion to headquarters, and heard back from them, Théa has already rolled out a new project. Additionally, the small scale of our operations facilitates quick information exchange; therefore, our team members are able to have regular discussions to keep up to date on daily challenges and successes.

All in all, we find ourselves in a fantastic situation that gives us the ability to maintain great relations with consumers by educating and discussing topics with them in an energetic and enthusiastic manner. We believe having an approach based around long-term stability allows our customers to trust and rely on Théa, and this will continue well into the future.

Most of the time it takes two to three years before a company's operation kick start.

How has Théa Austria grown since 2011?

Indeed, generally starting an affiliate from scratch takes two to three years to break even. Fortunately, the Alcon products we acquired sold autonomously – although – the strategy was for our sales team not to promote the Alcon brands, but to promote the drugs as new products offered by Théa.

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This strategy worked well and our turnover that initially stemmed from the sale of Alcon's brands slowly switched towards Théa products. Our 2011, objective was to have the Thea brands accounting for the majority of our revenues and driving the growth of the company; we were able to achieve this! Thus far we have reached double digit growth since the first year of activity.

We still acknowledge there is still plenty of room to grow, despite great early results. We believe soon all Austrian consumers will move from Alcon products, to Théa's, but in this case patience is a virtue. Our objective is to continue to strive to reach our goals and build our great team atmosphere, which will inevitably lead to steady growth and long-term success.

How do you maintain close relationships within the Austrian ophthalmology environment?

There are around six hundred specialists and we maintain very close ties with all these ophthalmologists. We view them as our long-term partners, unlike other companies that only have

a short-term vision. We organise events regularly, and our CEO has even been a contributor. As a result, doctors have built strong bonds with us and now really trust our company.

Additionally, global management view the Austrian affiliate from the perspective of the quality of our business, rather than the size of the nation. This allows us to openly invite Austrian doctors to the headquarters' annual event organised in France, despite our relatively small size. It is a gratifying sensation and makes me proud to work for Théa.

How is Théa able to gain market access for its innovative products?

Firstly, Théa Austria is very fortunate as the cutting-edge products and medical devices launched by headquarters allows us to continue being a very competitive player in the Austrian ophthalmology market. The world-class quality of our easily able to retain customers over the long-term.

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Secondly, the company have set a fair pricing policy across Europe, making the pricing transparent and identical for all our customers. In this way, even smaller buyers we deal with can offer the same quality of service to their patients. For our large consumers, rather than giving them an advantageous pricing because they order 500 units, we give them an advantageous pricing based on the 50 million units we produce annually for the European market.

From a regulatory reimbursement perspective, headquarters have realistic expectations about product prices, trusting my recommendations on adjustments for the Austrian market. If the government does not offer us a sufficient price; we do not enter the market. Unfortunately, this is at the expense of Austrian patients, as one of the most innovative glaucoma products the company has developed was not launched into the Austrian marketplace. Nevertheless, we must continue to prove Théa's innovative value in the market so we can navigate the Austrian healthcare system – although – at times it is shame that one of the richest countries in Europe is not willing to reward innovation properly.

In another sector, nutrition, we have found consistency. We first tried selling our products to practitioners and pharmacist, but this failed as there was no immediate need in the saturated market. Convinced of our product's value, we engaged in an information campaign, delivering elevated content on a regular basis for two years to the targeted doctors. This brought success and the close ties we constructed over time has led to our nutrition brands selling in good numbers three years are being initially launched.

You are currently the 2nd placed ophthalmic company in Austria. How do you intend to become the leading player in the market?

Clearly, this is our objective of course, but we must patient. Our priority is to maintain our quality standards and customer satisfaction. This will inevitably lead to us growing and becoming the leading Austrian ophthalmic company. This long-term goal is based around a well-managed workforce that works in an efficient manner, despite our relatively small size. Furthermore, we must endeavour to persist in launching multiple products on the Austrian market every year, like we have done since we opened the affiliate, allowing Austrian patients to leverage Théa's innovative portfolio.

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