Interview: Ali Achouri – Founder and CEO, Generika, Tunisia



"The Tunisian pharmaceutical industry is one of the most important in the Arab world after that of Jordan."

17.10.2017

Tags: Tunisia, Generika, Generics, Pharma, Strategy, Manufacturing

Ali Achouri of Laboratoires Generika in Tunisia discusses his success story, his attentiveness to the satisfaction of its customers, the importance of geographical and cultural proximity with pharmaceutical companies in Maghreb, and how Generika will soon offer its services for the production of inhalable dosage forms as well as various practical training courses on high-performance health products.

Could you give our readers and introduction to yourself and the company you created?

I am the founder of Generika. Before that I was a scientist, responsible for a laboratory. Having noticed that local generic producers did not have the skills to pursue industrial transition for the production of drugs, I took the initiative to create my own business in 2010. For the time being, Generika specializes in the development of marketing authorization (MA) applications as well as analytical validations according to international conference for harmonization (ICH) standards for the production of liquid, pasty and semi pasty generic drugs in all therapeutic classes.

How would you describe the Tunisian Pharmaceutical sector?

The Tunisian pharmaceutical industry is one of the most important in the Arab world after that of Jordan. It really developed as a result of its privatization in the 1990s, though important investment efforts had already been pursued to develop the healthcare sector since the Bourguiba era.

The production of generic drugs is highly developed in Tunisia because Tunisia is a small emerging country and the local legislation does not allow companies to export licensed products. In light of the relatively small size of the Tunisian market, companies needed to integrate export operations into their businesses to grow sustainably and therefore chose to specialize in the production of generic drugs that could be exported rather than in the production of licensed drugs. As such, Tunisia has an extensive industrial network of expert laboratories for the production of generic drugs. Nonetheless, certain companies have built partnerships with multinational companies to produce high quality licensed drugs for the Tunisian market.

What challenges had you to overcome when you created Generika?

Starting as a pioneer is not easy. With regards to the fact the company positioned itself on an unexploited market with a focus on less common drug form than the solid dosage form, convincing companies collaboration with Generika would be beneficial to them required a lot of perseverance from my part. Furthermore, I created the company months before the revolution in Tunisia. When the revolution burst, I had no other choice than to orient my activities abroad. I updated the company’s statuses, respected legal implications linked to being an export company. For example, the share of revenues coming from activities in Tunisia should not exceed 30 percent of my total revenues. For this reason, most of my first clients were Algerian and Moroccan.

Being particularly attentive to the satisfaction of my clients, especially with regard to the quality of services provided, I managed to build an excellent reputation as well as a strong network of clients that led me to collaborate with multinational companies. To this day, the company works with local Tunisian companies as well as large multinational companies. I remember, one of the pharmacists that had been recruited by a big Moroccan laboratory telling us how impressed he was with the quality of the MA file we had prepared for him.

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Also, I’ve had to compete with parasitic agents to the system that would resell corporate medical information on the black market. Generika distinguished itself by the quality of services as well as by a much higher level of industrial technological and analytical transfer than the one attainable through the use of a stolen file. One should remark the phenomenal work that has been undertaken by local governmental authorities across Maghreb to marginalize these types of practices.

How do you distinguish yourself from your competitors?

I operate on a niche market. While I do not face any local competition, European and Asian companies offer the same types of services. I am confident with the fact Generika's offering is the most competitive. It is more affordable than the European offering, and geographically closer than the Asian one. I think our cultural proximity with companies working in Maghreb appeals to North African company managers. Furthermore, my experience in pasty, semi-pasty and liquid galenic forms is undisputed. Last, we always ensure an expert is present during the industrial transfer phase to prevent any failures in the implementation. Additionally, our compliance with ICH standards allows us to work with companies from all over the world.

Which service segments would you like to develop?

There are a couple of projects under development, notably the diversification of the galenic forms in which Generika can bring its expertise. More specifically, I am considering extending my portfolio of services to inhalable drugs because they require highly specific expertise and the offering remains relatively limited in this domain. On the other had I do not consider extending services to dry forms despite regular requests of certain partners because competition in this segment is extremely intense.

In parallel, Generika is the only company that has started offering practical training for high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). Generika also offers practical training for preparing MA applications, analytical validation as well as production and control of pasty drug. These training sessions were already available in Europe and necessary in Maghreb because young graduates working in the pharmaceutical industry do not yet master certain concepts. These training courses have been available since September 2015 but I intend to increase Generika's focus on them starting October 2017. They attract young graduates, pharmacists, and chemists with little experience as well as people working in the pharmaceutical industry that are looking forward to acquiring experience and necessary skills in this domain.

Tunisians and Algerians are very much interested in these training courses because they are less expensive than those available in Europe. Indeed, the costs associated with transportation and accommodation are cheaper in Tunisia than in Europe. It is of the foremost importance these training sessions remain practical and attractive for the trainees.

What development strategies have you put into place these last years?

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Generika’s reputation was built over the years through the quality of services provided to our clients. Our customers are satisfied and loyal. They consult me every time they develop a new drug to determine whether or not I can help them. In these cases transparency is key. If Generika can help provide these services then I should let them know quickly, if not, also. This is one of the guarantees that have allowed me to place myself above all competition, because my customers are sure that when I answer favorably to their request, the service’s quality is guaranteed.

This loyal customer base constitutes a referral base for my company. Employees and managers of drug production companies discuss the various partnerships they have between themselves. They tell each other which partnerships have been successful and which ones have not. This practice has led to numerous partnerships Generika has been involved in. In fact, word of mouth was the reason for my collaboration with Sanofi Aventis.

Last, my company is looking forward to developing its presence on social media such as Linkedin®, and professional fairs such as the CPHI or the Maghreb Pharma in Algiers. The latter are events that enable me to encounter raw material suppliers that are likely to recommend certain clients to me.

What type of partners are you looking for?

We are looking for medium-sized companies that produce generic drugs in pasty semi-pasty, liquid or inhalable dosage forms irrespective of the type of therapeutic class they produce. Our main decision criterion is the respective ability to make the other win. It is essential to work on a win-win basis to establish long-term business relationships.

The criterion of successful collaboration is the mutual trust that emerges from it. As a matter of fact, Generika now has the habit of dealing with certain partners without singing a contract. This is the case with many of our Algerian customers.

As an accomplished entrepreneur, what advice would you give to someone looking forward to engage in this career path?

Any entrepreneur who wishes to succeed must show courage, initiative and perseverance. Creating a business is a not easy, but the sense of self-fulfillment is worth it. Professional experience in a specific sector will be its best ally.

More specifically, building a market study sufficiently detailed to understand the issues and its customers is essential. Finally I would tell the future entrepreneurs not to hesitate to start small to grow rather than build too big from the start and not be in a position to hold everything together.

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