Interview: Slim Chouchane – General Director, Alfasigma, Tunisia



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Slim Chouchane, general director of Alfasigma in Tunisia, discusses the integration with Sigma Tau, the Italian company acquired by Alfa Wassermann in 2016, Chouchane retraces the incredible success of Alfa Wassermann's products over his 17 years with the company and his responsibility for the company's sound growth in the region.

Could you comment on the motives for which Alfa Wassermann decided to merge Sigma Tau?

This acquisition is in line with a managerial strategy intended to reenergize the company. We are looking forward to making Alfa Wasserman one of the best-positioned companies in the Italian and international markets. Alfa Wassermann and Sigma Tau started discussions two years ago. Eventually, Alfa Wasserman acquired Sigma Tau in 2016. Since August 1st 2017, the structure was renamed Alfasigma. It is the second most highly valued company in its country of origin.

It affect on our activity in Tunisia will depend on the strategy chosen by our headquarters. Alfa Wassermann has had a direct presence in Tunisia since 2005. Since, a local partner represents Sigma Tau, it is likely the products they have already registered in the market are included in Alfasigma's Tunisian affiliate.

Being Alfa Wasserman's only affiliate in Africa, could you give our readers a brief overview of the affiliate's history in Tunisia, and explain the reasons that have led the

company to establish itself here rather than elsewhere in the region?

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Alfa Wassermann started its operations in Tunisia in 1994 using the services of Opalia as a distributor. Unfortunately, this partnership did not allow Alfa Wasserman to reach the objectives set by the Italian headquarters. Therefore, in 1999, the company chose to change distributors.

In 2000, Alfa Wassermann had still not found a distributor in Tunisia. Our Headquarters were considering leaving the country. A few months later, Alfa Wasserman found an agreement with MédiS, a large local company. They agreed to create a spin-off of MédiS, with a team of four people, entirely focused on the distribution of Alfa Wasserman's products. By the end of 2004, Alfa Wassermann's annual turnover in Tunisia was 600,000 € (approx. USD 700,000). This was the company's largest in Maghreb, partly because other North African countries had not managed to obtain the marketing authorizations (MA).

This triggered the headquarters' decision to create its first African affiliate. Alfa Wasserman is now the best-positioned Italian company on the Tunisian pharmaceutical market revenue-wise. Indeed, in 2016 we registered an annual turnover of six million euros (approx. USD seven million)

What is your role in the region?

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Currently, I am in charge of Maghreb and Middle Eastern countries. On the other hand, the headquarters manage Sub-Saharan African countries. Indeed since 2007, I am responsible for the development of Alfa Wassermann's activities, notably in Morocco, Libya, and Algeria. As a result we have obtained three MA in Morocco and entered the market in May 2017.Whereas in Algeria we are still waiting three MA we expect should be granted by the end of the year. So far, our products are currently commercialized in Tunisia, Morocco and Libya.

I am also in charge of helping the Middle East regional manager find partners, and conduct MA updates. From our collaboration, Alfa Wasserman has managed to organize the distribution and promotion of its flagship product, Normix®, in Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and in Kuwait. By the en of the year, it will be commercialized across the region

Which of Alfa Wassermann's products are available in Tunisia and how will your portfolio evolve to support the company's growth?

Four products are commercialized in Tunisia. Vessel®, Normix®, and Meteoxane® generate 98% of our turnover. Food supplement complement our product portfolio. Currently these three products are leading their respective reference markets both volume-wise and value-wise.

Generally speaking, multinational's progression is stifled by the launch of new products or lack of thereof. With this in mind, I intend to extend the range of products available in Tunisia. As a matter of fact, In January this year we obtained the MA for a gynecologic product. I hope to launch in the market in July 2018.

Sigma Tau's acquisition is also an excellent opportunity for Alfa Wasserman to extend its foothold in additional therapeutic areas and increase its turnover. Eventually, we will have to invest in new resources adapted to a product profile we are not used to commercializing.

Which elements have been key for Alfa Wassermann's success?

Alfa Wasserman's products were present in Tunisia long before Alfa Wassermann established an affiliate there. Therefore doctors, pharmacists and stakeholders in the pharmaceutical industry knew them well. Having said that, it must be highlighted our product would have not been that successful in the market if it had not been for the excellent work of our 19 medical delegates and the staff supporting them. All these employees have a medical background, either as doctors, pharmacists, or veterinaries.

Our team has solid scientific knowledge and is well versed in sales techniques. Thus, they have been able to build credit on the market and establish good relations with doctors and pharmacists, which are essential for growing the business.

Furthermore, our products have a proven track record of effectiveness and a re recognized as such worldwide. So much so, that in 2014 one of our flagship products, Vessel®, was withdrawn form the reimbursement list in Tunisia. The product was prescribed by so many doctors the social security could not bear the cost of reimbursements. In fact, it was the second largest spending after insulin. Despite its withdrawal from the list and the price surge which followed, Vessel® is still the first product in terms of market share in its category.

A successful launch requires a preliminary analysis of the market. Such analysis allows one to clearly assess the target and define the right strategy to address it. Also, the analysis will help determine which human resources to use. The latter need a profound understanding of the product they are selling so they can use tailored scientific arguments to convince doctors and gain market shares.

Where will Alfa Wasserman stand in five years?

Integrating Sigma Tau and its product portfolio remain my priority. I hope this move will allow us to develop our turnover and join the top20 largest companies in the market revenue-wise. Currently Alfa Wasserman is the 27th largest company in terms of revenue and registered a 2.6 percent growth last year.

The small number of products it distributes hinders Alfa Wassermann’s growth. It appears necessary to bring new products to the market, but these must be chosen in accordance with the pharmaceutical market’s context.

What are you production and supply strategies to target the African market?

Undeniably, Tunisia has great assets for drug manufacturing and their exports in the region. Moreover, many companies have chosen to open a production facility in Tunisia. Despite the fact Alfa Wassermann does not have a production plant in Africa yet, the existing capabilities of Alfa Wassermann and Sigma Tau suffice to cater to the needs of the markets we currently supply. Having said that, our perspective might have evolved in a few years time.

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