Interview: Zoya Paunova – Country Director, AstraZeneca Bulgaria



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Zoya Paunova, country director at AstraZeneca Bulgaria, explains how a great combination of an innovative

product portfolio with a skilled and dedicated team has turned the local offering into leading brands in the Bulgarian pharmaceutical market and highlights that AstraZeneca's CSR initiatives are now ranked as the best in Europe.

You have more than 25 years of experience in the Bulgarian pharmaceutical industry. In a nutshell, how would you assess the evolution of the industry during this time?

From a country standpoint, it is fair to say that the last 25 years have been one of the most eventful and exciting times in our history starting with the implementation of our democratic system. Specifically, the healthcare sector has moved from a very basic infrastructure to a substantially more modernized network of hospitals in compliance with EU standards, broader access to innovative medicines, among other multiple numbers of advancements. I want to stress that this progress in the Bulgarian healthcare system would not have been possible without collaboration between all healthcare stakeholders – from government and physicians to patients and industry – and, despite the further need for improvement, such progress towards EU standards certainly deserves recognition.

AstraZeneca has a quite unique history in Bulgaria, being present in the country for more than 45 years by its predecessors ICI and Zeneca Pls. Can you briefly introduce the historical presence of AstraZeneca in Bulgaria?

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Indeed, Bulgaria has been on the map of our operations for nearly 50 years starting when ICI was still there. Expanding more on the recent history of the company in the country, in 2000, when the British Zeneca merged with the Swedish Astra, AstraZeneca was officially established in Bulgaria. Indeed, that year was an important milestone in our history since we decided to become more than just a commercial affiliate and, in this sense, we also opened a R&D department developing clinical operations in the country. The reach and size of our operations have especially scaled up over the last seven years and now we are a team of nearly 130 professionals being ranked as one of the top six innovative pharma companies on the Bulgarian market.

Despite the tough moments the country went through, AZ continued to be a valued and socially responsible partner of Bulgarian society.

AstraZeneca Bulgaria has risen to become one of the Top Six pharma companies in the country. What are the strategic cornerstones behind this success?

We are not only amongst the top pharma companies in the country in terms of sales but also one of the fastest growing innovative firms on the market. AstraZeneca’s key assets are: a highly-skilled, talented and engaged team, a strong current portfolio and a promising pipeline of products.

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The Bulgarian organization is well equipped with top performing team, people with character, a can-do spirit and conviction, crafting the challenges into new opportunities. The skilful team of AstraZeneca Bulgaria managed to shape 7 leading brands from the diverse product range in four priority therapeutic areas – diabetes, cardiovascular, oncology and respiratory diseases. Importantly, AstraZeneca is adding value to the health of approximately half a million Bulgarian patients.

“Be a great place to work” is one of the global strategic guidelines. Considering the HR results of the affiliate on this front and your recognition as one of the Top 10 Managers in Bulgaria, what is in your opinion the best practice to succeed in developing human capital?

Being successful in HR is not a punctual recognition but rather a continuous work. Leadership across the organization, investing and building next generation of leaders. Having said that, “empowerment” is the magic word, despite being a quick word to say, it is far from being easy to implement since it implies many different flows from top-down and bottom up.

AstraZeneca Bulgaria is having unique standing on the marketplace today, with **a strong self-esteem and confidence in our science and our products. We put our hearts and minds in everything we do! A**nd this brings the quality of our operations up to the next level. This passion vibes are certainly felt in this affiliate. As an example of our accomplishments in this front, only 25 professionals within AstraZeneca worldwide are invited to join “Brand’s academy” and I am proud to have one of our team members within such selected Top Academy of AstraZeneca’s professionals.

One of the major challenges that AstraZeneca is globally facing is the patent cliff of some of its key drugs. Considering that prices in Bulgaria are strongly affected when generics’ appear, how is this global challenge of AstraZeneca reflected in the Bulgarian affiliate?

We have approached this global challenge in a smart and wise way in Bulgaria based on deep market research and price elasticity assessments, since the market has one of the highest patients’ copayment rates in Europe. As a result, we have succeeded to keep our established products’ market share value. Furthermore we manage even to grow our mature brands such as Crestor® and Nexium®. That helped to continue adding value to both physicians and patients in a sustainable way. Furthermore, the strong brand equity in the market has also played its role in maintaining this outstanding performance of our established brands.

In the last five years, AstraZeneca Bulgaria has launched 10 products in cardiovascular, diabetes, respiratory and oncology. Considering you strong expertise in this front, what is critical when bringing such innovative treatments to a country like Bulgaria?

One of the top priorities of our organisation is through top class launches to secure rapid emergence of the revitalised pipeline. Coming back to your question, I believe that pre-launch activities are crucial to succeed in marketing medicines in any market in the world. Early start at least two years before the planned launch. Ensure both medical and market access activity to drive engagement and confidence with new treatment approaches. In parallel, cross-functional efforts to build physicians confidence with innovative portfolio through hands on experience.

Expanding on CSR, AstraZeneca Bulgaria has been distinguished as Honoree in International Stevie Awards in Best CSR program in Europe. What are the specific initiatives support such recognition and what are the main impacts obtained through them?

I believe that CSR campaigns need sustainability and long-term vision to create positive breakthroughs in society's health; thus, this is our social responsibility approach in the country. I believe that the long-lasting impact AstraZeneca creates through its CSR initiatives, grounded company current strong and powerful branding on the Bulgarian market.

One of the CSR causes, we embraced nearly two decades ago is "Breast cancer awareness campaign", which has been strongly scaled up over the last 3 years through active collaboration and partnership with Sofia Municipality. More than 20,000 Bulgarian women were screened- which directly translates into saved lives due to early diagnosis. Indeed, AstraZeneca is one of the drivers of sustainable breast cancer awareness campaign in Bulgaria, partnering with a number of stakeholders – medical societies, patient organizations, diplomatic missions, celebrities and media. The key message of all the initiatives in the campaign is detected at the earliest stages the disease is curable.

Early diagnosis and the introduction of innovative treatments has transformed breast cancer from a fatal to a chronic disease.

With care of young people development in Bulgaria we are working closely with the Universities. Since 2009 we are running AZ Trainee program. More than 100 students have joined up to now. In partnership with the Swedish Embassy AstraZeneca Bulgaria developed over the last 17 years a Mini Nobel project recognizing bright Bulgarian students in Medicine and Pharmacy and encourage them to achieve more.

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