

Interview: Michel Robidoux - President and General Manager, Sandoz Canada



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Michel Robidoux, president and general manager of Sandoz Canada, charts the extremely successful journey for this Novartis division. He explains the strategy Sandoz Canada has undertaken to expand its portfolio in the four business segments of generics, biosimilars, consumer (OTC) and specialty products. He talks about the quality of the products, the supply chain reliability and the employee culture that have contributed to the success of Sandoz Canada, and their vision to position Sandoz as the top generics company in Canada by 2022.

Michel, having been president and general manager of Sandoz Canada for seven years now, could you highlight some of the achievements of Sandoz Canada?

Our employees are hugely passionate about the work that Sandoz is doing. As a very personal example, my father underwent open-heart surgery a few years ago. Out of the over 30 different products used in that surgery, 20 of them were manufactured here in our Boucherville manufacturing plant! There is not a single surgery, major or minor, that is conducted in Canadian hospitals without a Sandoz product. Our employees are justifiably very proud of this – and this is reflected in our internal employee surveys. If a family member or a friend is in a position where they need to use a medical product, we want it to be a Sandoz product.

As the generics arm of Novartis, the second-largest pharma company in the world, we see Sandoz as the division that is 'Making Access Happen'. We pride ourselves on our ability to provide savings

and options to prescribers and payers. As an indication of our impact, on the retail side, there are nearly 50 million prescriptions of Sandoz Canada solid oral products per year.

What have been some of the factors contributing to the company's success?

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It has been driven by a few areas of excellence. The first is quality, which really differentiates us from our competitors. Two years ago, Novartis decided to group all manufacturing facilities – regardless of whether they were under Alcon, Sandoz or Novartis Pharmaceuticals – together under Novartis Technical Operations in order to promote a consistent quality standard across the global organization. As part of Novartis, we can consistently offer the highest quality products – and we demand this level of quality from our suppliers as well.

Our commercial excellence focus and trusted advisor mindset, combined with a team dedicated to exceed customer expectation, have translated into significant market share.

We are also the best company in terms of supply chain reliability. For four years out of six, we have been ranked by McKesson as the best generics company in this aspect, with the lowest backorder rates in the industry.

Many of our customers tell us that they really appreciate the results of our strategies of integrity, quality and supply chain reliability.

We continue to be driven by our aspiration to 'Be the Best'. We have expressed a clear vision to become the top generics company in Canada by 2022.

With this bold ambition, what is your strategy to take Sandoz – currently positioned third in the Canadian market – to the top in the next five years?

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Our DNA has been in generics. Over the past few years, we have been transforming the organization by expanding our portfolio into the areas of biosimilars, consumer (OTC), and specialty products – and we believe that these segments will drive growth within Canada as well.

Our move into the Consumer space allows patients to care for themselves, with or without the help of a healthcare professional. Moreover, minimizing the need for doctor-patient interaction, Sandoz helps reducing healthcare costs and makes medicines more financially accessible to patients.

Both within the generics and the OTC segments, pharmacists are the primary influencers. For instance, we are entering the probiotics market in Canada, estimated at over CAD 100 million (USD 78.3 million) in size, because we have seen pharmacists deal with patients seeking better products in this category. The aim here is to bring some new formulations and meet the market needs.

In terms of specialty products, we are looking at branded prescription products. These may sometimes be Novartis brands, the patent of which has either expired recently or will expire soon.

In addition, we are indisputably a global leader in the biosimilar space with five biosimilars marketed worldwide and three biosimilars currently under EMA review, leveraging Novartis' extensive biologics experience. We already have two biosimilars on the Canadian market and we are working to bring more of these great products to Canadians patients.

At the same time, even within the generics space, Canada is expecting various patent expiries worth a total of around CAD 11 billion (USD 8.6 billion) over the next five years. This means that there are still significant opportunities - as long as we can stabilize the pricing environment. This was the objective of the five-year agreement the Canadian Generics Pharmaceutical Association (CGPA) signed with Gaétan Barrette, the Minister of Health and Social Services in Québec, in July 2017. We are hoping to reach a similar agreement with the pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance (pCPA).

We already have an extensive portfolio with nearly 300 different molecules, and more importantly, contrary to most of our competitors, we have more complex products like injectables and patches.

In addition, we also have a Canadian business development team in Boucherville that scans the world globally to complement our portfolio. We are also open to partnerships, even with some of our competitors in terms of cross-licensing opportunities. For instance, in 2016, we acquired the North American products of a local player Euro-Pharm. If a business case demonstrates that we can provide a better access for patients to quality products, we will do everything in our power to make it happen.

What opportunities and challenges do you see within the Canadian biosimilars environment?

There are huge opportunities in this area because Canadian payers are already under significant pressure when it comes to managing overall healthcare spending.

In terms of market approval, Health Canada has adapted well to the new biosimilars environment. The main challenge to increase access to these high-quality medicines now relates to

reimbursement. This is very important given the potential for the tremendous cost savings that biosimilars can bring.

As a market leader, we primarily advocate through Biosimilars Canada and the Biosimilars Forum. What is reassuring is that we can see that regulatory bodies like Health Canada, CADTH and pCPA understand the sense of urgency, and are looking to introduce appropriate policies and processes.

Sandoz is one of the few multinational companies with development and manufacturing operations in Canada. How does this fit within the global Sandoz manufacturing strategy?

The Boucherville plant is approved by the FDA and Health Canada. We produce consistently at the highest standards, as I emphasized.

In addition to our facility here, we also source products from our global network as well as suppliers, all of whom conform to the highest Novartis standards. Being able to tap into the global Novartis organization is a huge benefit. We have access to many health authorities globally, which allows us to stay abreast of the newest developments in manufacturing. Every week, we receive White Papers, new guidelines and information, be it in terms of data integrity in manufacturing, regulatory, sales and marketing, or even industry ethics. There is tremendous value in being part of this global and very disciplined network.

Unlike some of our competitors, we operate on a global formulations strategy, meaning that we can leverage our global manufacturing capacity to meet the needs of the Canadian market. This flexibility of supply is highly important, and has contributed to the strength and reliability of our supply chain.

We also have extremely strong processes and systems in place. All of our manufacturing systems are on the same IT platform so revised sales forecasts are transmitted directly through the systems. In addition to these, our supply chain teams really have the patient at heart and they have the passion and culture to ensure that we have the lowest level of backorders.

Our Development Center in Boucherville also undertakes development activities in the areas of injectables and ophthalmics, for the global organization.

On a more personal note, after seven years in your position, what keeps you going?

The Sandoz purpose is to discover new ways to improve and extend people's lives. We contribute to Canadian society's ability to support growing healthcare needs by pioneering novel approaches to help Canadian access high-quality medicine. The patient is at the heart of our work. We are

committed to doing everything in our power to respond to patients' medical needs. This creates the energy within the organization and a strong culture of performance. We spend a lot of time and effort to nurture the energy and spirit of 'being the best'. We really want to help our employees be at their best, which will help us grow to our aspiration of number one positioning in Canada.

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