

Interview: Linda Tibbits - General Manager, Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmétique, Canada



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15.12.2017

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Linda Tibbits, general manager at Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics in Canada takes us back to the beginnings of the French company in the country, where its initial success was driven by the harmonic relationship between Pierre Fabre himself and Jean Coutu, founder of Canada's largest pharmacy network. She further talks portfolio management and perception of the brand in Canada, as well as upcoming ventures in the pharmaceutical sector.

What were the first steps in the establishment of Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics in Canada?

Canada is a market that is at the same time big and small. It has only 35 million inhabitants but in terms of size it is the second largest country in the world. The entrance points can be challenging, with high prices and a difficult geographic expansion. Nonetheless, Pierre Fabre established its presence in the country early on. The main reason for this was the unique relationship between our founder, Pierre Fabre, and Jean Coutu, founder of the Jean Coutu pharmacies, the biggest chain in Quebec. They met and took an immediate liking to each other, both pharmacists, about the same age, very humble and believing in a greater mission they had, to ensure public health.

Jean Coutu became Pierre Fabre's first partner in distribution and this was really a lucky fact, since it turned out to also be the dream partner. Pierre Fabre's brands rely exclusively on pharmacists and dermatologists in their marketing strategies. A strong network of pharmacies is therefore

essential to the company when first establishing itself in a new market. Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmétique was thus able to quickly introduce the majority of its brands to Canada.

What is the strategic importance of the Canadian affiliate for Pierre Fabre globally?

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While Canada is not the easiest market to navigate and only the 18th cosmetic market in the world, for some brands, it is ranked much higher for Pierre Fabre. Canada is the ninth market for Avène, and the eight for A-Derma. Our ranking is in partly due to our longstanding presence in the country, but also to our commitment and focus, and foremost the incredible partnership we have with healthcare professionals here. Moreover, there remains an important potential for growth in Canada, as dermo-cosmetics represent only three percent of the overall cosmetics market in Canada, while that number peaks at 23 to 25 percent in France.

Our Canadian affiliate has also proven a pronounced capacity in pioneering when it comes to internal initiatives and positioned itself as an exporter of best practices. We might be small, but very experienced and still very agile, both qualities highly appreciated by global management.

Can you give us an overview of Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmétique portfolio and how it is adapted to the needs of Canadians?

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For Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics, the most important brand in our portfolio, globally and in Canada, is Avène. Within the Avène line, the new technology of sterile cosmetics we have developed has been one of the major launches of the last years. Not only does this technology embody perfectly everything Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics stands for, it provides dermatologists in the country with a real tool to fight atopic dermatitis. Dermo-cosmetics are not a medication, but they ensure the physician obtains the desired results in a treatment.

Atopic dermatitis is, as in many parts of the world, a condition more and more recurring within the population. In Canada, it is further amplified by the weather conditions. XeraCalm A. D is one of the products in this line that was met with great enthusiasm by the public and healthcare providers community, as a sterile cosmetic with a real soothing and healing effect. The prescription is completely safe, and the cream preserves the natural microbiome of the skin, as it is also preservative-free.

Furthermore, there are other trends in the Canadian market we have adapted to. For instance, something we repeatedly need to explain to our French headquarters: despite the long and rough winters, Canadians use a lot of sun protection products, and they are very aware of the differences in quality between various brands. Canadians also often enjoy winters in the South, and prefer to leave well equipped, as they know the quality of some brands cannot be matched locally. Pierre Fabre has been leader in sun protection in Europe for the last decades, so we already have the expertise to meet local needs.

Overall, Canada is a very interesting market, also because of its demographics. There are many people with Asian heritage in Canada, with skin types that require specific care. Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics has adapted its portfolio and communication strategy to reach the Asian communities in the country. Playing in our favor is the fact that Avène is already market leader in Asia, and the concept of thermal water as a medical treatment not uncommon in this part of the world, whereas in North America we first have to establish the notion.

Pierre Fabre is a company that invests significant portions of its revenues globally in research and development. What will be the next innovations brought to the Canadian market?

We just launched last year a sunscreen that was developed specifically for the North American market, in collaboration between the USA and Canada. We will bring more sun protection to Canada, as well as products responding to different skin types, in atopic dermatitis and anti-aging.

Pierre Fabre has the particularity to be both cosmetics' and a pharmaceutical company, hence our motto: from beauty to health. This dichotomy is something that we will live out more in Canada in the future. We just launched Hemangiol® in Canada this year. This will be a very different venture for us, since this is a medication for an orphan disease, and we have for now solely focused on cosmetics, as one of the only markets in the world for Pierre Fabre. Hemangiol® treats Proliferating Infantile Hemangioma, it acts as a betablocker for children between five weeks and five months. This move will also allow us to position ourselves as not only a cosmetic company, but the pharmaceutical laboratory we are. We are very excited, especially since the product we are introducing is such an innovative product. The compounds of propranolol have been used by physicians for some time, but with Hemangiol® it is the first and only approved medication by Health Canada for this treatment. The objective was not financial, but to allow us to master an unmet need in Canada.

For the marketing of Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics' products, you target specific pharmacists and dermatologists with educational, thus establishing good relationships with dermatologists is very important. How does Pierre Fabre Dermo-Cosmetics maintain strong continuing partnerships?

From our very beginnings in the country in the mid-nineties, we have continuously been a dedicated partner to pharmacies and dermatologists in Canada. Working in close partnership with healthcare professionals is one of our main differentiation factor and really the base of our model. However, there are only very few dermatologists in Canada, some 600 overall. In a country geographically as big as Canada, they are moreover spread out, and it can take long months before a patient can see a doctor. We try to be a help in those situations. By providing adequate training to pharmacists and cosmeticians—those the patient will turn to when he or she does not get an appointment with the doctor—we make sure that the information about our products, related symptoms and indications, reaches the patient.

How is Pierre Fabre's brand perceived in Canada?

The notoriety of our brands is still lower in North America than in Europe, because the segment in itself is newer. When we introduced Avène in Jean Coutu stores in the mid-nineties, the trend had been going on for 20 years in Europe. Nonetheless, the Canadian market is fast catching up, spreading out from Quebec to Ontario and further East, as is the way with French brands. The public is increasingly demanding of high quality cosmetics and interested in the ingredient-composition thereof. Our products containing only safe ingredients and being very efficient, we see demand from customers and practitioners rise. A-Derma, our latest line launched in Canada, has met immediate success, Canadians being appreciative of its natural, efficient and dermatological dimensions.

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