

Interview: Daniel Dereser - CEO, Boiron Canada



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Boiron Canada is the sixth largest affiliate of Boiron's global operations (in terms of sales), and under Daniel Dereser's leadership, the company intends to change the perception of homeopathic medicine in Canada, providing a more informed choice to patients. The CEO touches on global homeopathic trends, the stable family environment at Boiron, and the diverse Canadian talent pool.

Daniel, congratulations on 30 years of operations in Canada. Can you provide our international readers with an overview of Boiron's Canadian activities?

We are very proud to celebrate our 30th year of operations in Canada this year, which marks 30 years of being reliable and trustworthy to families across Canada. I would like to emphasize the word trust as one of Boiron's core values. For me, confidence in our brand and the medicines that we offer is crucial: it explains why we are leaders in specific categories such as baby teething, and the worldwide leader in homeopathic medicine. Canadian families enjoy a special relationship with the brand, mothers in particular, who often comment that we are a reliable and gentle solution for their children suffering from minor ailments.

We are a medium-sized business that employs over 50 families (I insist not to say employees given the nature of working with Boiron) and have a tight-knit team. Customer service is essential for any company, but our priority as a company is to ensure that the right medicine arrives at the right healthcare professional. Regarding quantities, we ship roughly 200,000 customized units a year to healthcare professionals who provide support and help to patients. I like to emphasize that

we say patients and not customers, and medicines instead of products: homeopathic treatments are medicines and our customers as recipients of our medicines are patients.

[Featured_in]

We are not just the world leader in homeopathic medicines but also the number one brand of homeopathic medicines recommended by pharmacists in Canada, and this for ten years now. We are highly innovative; we have launched five new medicines over the past two years. Innovation for us means having a vision and adapting the business model to respond to the marketplace.

What was the main focus of the 6 million investment into the laboratory in Saint-Bruno-de-Montarville?

Boiron invested in 2009 because we believed we had room for growth opportunities in the Canadian marketplace. Historically, we have been present on the South Shore of Montreal (The South-Eastern land situated across the island of Montreal), and it was therefore essential to maintain this location when establishing a new laboratory. We chose the Eastern Montreal location because we wanted to ensure that those who worked for us in 2009 would continue to work for us at the new site – hence keeping the company spirit: the environment here is vibrant, healthy and welcoming. Indeed, there is little traffic; the air quality is high, the water is very clean—all critically important for manufacturing medicines we produce in the laboratory on site.

What is the scope of your R&D and manufacturing capabilities in Montreal?

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R&D takes place in the international headquarters in Lyon, France. We have one of the largest upscale manufacturing plants in France with almost 2800 collaborators. The majority of our R&D locally is patient-centric and based on feedback and comments we receive from regular users of our medicines. On the other side, 90 percent of our products are manufactured in France and imported to Canada. The remaining ten percent that we produce in Quebec are customized orders from healthcare professionals. These requests tend to be specific medicine strains for a particular patient, which we carry out in-house and ship on the same day. It is vital to have a quick turnaround in the delivery of our homeopathic medicine.

According to the Professional Union of Homeopaths of Quebec, 2.9 million Canadians regularly use homeopathic medicines. How have you seen the industry develop in recent years?

The survey conducted in 2015 revealed more than numbers of users. Indeed, various surveys indicate that between 73 and 79 percent regularly rely natural health products, and we learned that of the four in ten Canadians who have used homeopathic treatments, their satisfaction rate was 70 percent. The key takeaway from the survey, however, is that of the 2.9 million Canadians regularly using homeopathic medicine, their satisfaction rate is extremely high at over 90 percent. It helps in explaining why more patients should try our treatments.

Nonetheless, skeptics continue to claim that homeopathy does not work, despite the fact they often do not experiment or use homeopathic medicines. The trend here contrasts starkly with the European approach, where the population fully accepts homeopathy. In Europe, reliable healthcare professionals and medical doctors educated in the science administer homeopathic medicines on a regular basis, which are then dispensed by pharmacies across the continent. There is a long history of reliance on homeopathy and an understanding and respect for the value of the medicine. Homeopathy is demystified in Europe, whereas in Canada there is much to be done in educating and communicating positively on the effects of homeopathy.

Of course, there are limitations to homeopathic medicines, and I am steadfast in stating that they cannot treat everything. If you have a staphylococcus infection then of course the usage of antibiotics is unquestionable. There are, however, medical gaps that we can fill with homeopathy, primarily because homeopathy is not known to interact with other drugs and generally does not cause side effects.

What will drive growth in Canada's homeopathic industry?

The key to homeopathic growth in Canada is education. Without educating healthcare professionals and consumers, we will still be sitting around the table in 20 years, talking about how homeopathy is neither accepted nor integrated into society.

Education has to be accessible and easy for patients and consumers to digest. I am a firm believer in e-learning and understand the role social media can play in increasing understanding. I have trust in the role The Center for Education and Development of Homeopathy (CEDH) can play. It is a worldwide, comprehensive crash course for physicians in homeopathic medicine, taught by physicians to physicians and pharmacists; this center will increase awareness globally but also in Canada.

Closer to home, Boiron takes a leading stance on investing in education. The majority of our institutional prerogative occurs on interaction with patients face to face, and on social media platforms. The principle is to promote our medicines by offering informed choices on homeopathy.

Has there been a shift in perception in Canada towards homeopathy to align with the European approach?

If we consider Canadian parents across the nation, then yes. Canadian mothers, in particular, look for natural health product solutions for their kids. Our next challenge is to bridge the gap between awareness of the effectiveness of homeopathy on children and what that means for use in adults; if it works on kids, it works on adults!

For the broader medical community, there is a lot to be done before we approach European tendencies. I understood the depth of this challenge when I arrived at the role in Montreal three years ago. I arrived from California, where homeopathy is very much accepted. In Canada however, there is a powerful movement of media sceptics, who make a lot of noise against homeopathy.

An evident feature of the homeopathic industry in Canada is its incorrect perception as alternative medicine. It is complementary medicine, because allopathic and homeopathic medicines work well together, which is why we need to focus on changing the core perception of this myth.

As I have said, I advocate for antibiotics where its use is necessary and where initial treatment with homeopathic medicine ceases to work. It all boils down to our ultimate goal of delivering a choice to Canadian families: freedom of choice is crucial for Canada.

How do you reach out to Canadians to illustrate the benefits of homeopathic medicine?

Canadians and especially Canadian parents tend to spend a significant amount of time on their mobile devices. To reach this audience, we need a unique social media presence. It is essential to relay the right information to the right people, and social media allows us to do so.

We provide information and educate as best we can on positive outcomes and health benefits of homeopathy. We also use these opportunities to demyth misunderstandings on homeopathic research. The usual rebuttal we hear is that there is 'no research into homeopathic medicine.' Yet PubMed (a free search engine accessing database on healthcare topics), lists over a thousand publications on homeopathic research.

In September 2016, Health Canada introduced a new framework overnight, significantly impacting labelling for homeopathic medicines. This was the first time in 30 years that there had been no collaboration with the government. How has the dialogue between government and homeopathy evolved over the past two years?

Naturally, we were concerned about the new framework that suggested removing essential product information from the package, because this would mean that Canadians would get stripped of their freedom of choice.

However, the dialogue with authorities is evolving and at Boiron Canada, we are present in this exchange through our membership at CHPA, the Canadian Homeopathic Pharmaceutical Association our work with the former General Director of Natural Health Products Directorate at Health Canada.

We are advancing into the right direction, and because of Health Canada's desire to improve the system, I believe that we will see progress ultimately. We want to establish freedom of choice, eliminate any unnecessary health risks and ensure that we service diverse cultural communities across the country.

Human capital is central to Boiron's operations. How do you ensure that you attract, retain, and develop the right team?

Our core values at Boiron are what attracts the top talent in Canada. Boiron has been a family-owned company for 85 years, and as such, respect is a core value whether across all aspects: colleagues, the environment and work-life balance. Flexibility is celebrated here and we encourage our employees to work from home or adjust their hours where required. This results in high employee retention: 45 percent of our employees have been with the company for more than 10 years, and 16 percent of our employees have been with Boiron Canada for over 20 years; many stay on for even longer. Personally, I think employees find purpose in working for Boiron and see the value of what they do on a daily basis.

On top of that, I am proud that 72 percent of our employees and 78 percent of our management are women. We benefit from Canada's diverse talent pool: we have eleven different nationalities in our workforce.

Attractive pension plans, profit sharing, wellness days, and regular events all contribute to happy employees. We are also the world leader in homeopathic medicines and number one brand of homeopathic medicine recommended by pharmacists in Canada. We are also highly innovative; we have launched five new medicines in the past two years. Innovating means having a vision and adapting the business model to respond to the concept within the marketplace.

Innovation is active in Canada, and we have leading products that Boiron established here. For instance, Boiron's baby line started in Canada with Camilla® (teething). It was a launch we undertook after listening to the needs of Canadian patients.

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