Interview: Stefan Jaworski-Martycz – Country Manager Poland and CEE Cluster Lead Théa



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Stefan Jaworski-Martycz, country manager Poland and CEE Cluster Lead of Théa, a leading French ophthalmology company, discusses the intricacies of the Polish ophthalmology environment and the key steps for the Polish government to better value eyecare innovation. Additionally, he highlights the key growth drivers for the affiliate and the close relationships they have with Polish ophthalmologists and pharmacists.

What is your current role and the recent major challenges you have faced?

My position is country manager of Théa Poland and CEE cluster lead. This role allows me to support other Théa nations in the region and help each affiliate benefit from our mutual synergies, despite the many differences that occur across the CEE zone.

Within Poland, we have encountered some interesting obstacles over last few years. Firstly, there has been a surge of local competitors (big players) and huge international companies that have very strong marketing budgets and are focusing more heavily in the therapeutic area of ophthalmology. When Théa was launched, the ophthalmology market was occupied mostly by companies specialized in ophthalmology only.

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Secondly, managing life cycle of our products, we have started to move into OTC and this business is completely different. In certain therapeutic classes, like dry eyes and eye nutrition, we have recently positioned some core products, like Hyabak® and Nutrof Total®, into the OTC class after the introduction of other novel treatments in these categories. This has forced us to build and grow our OTC network and develop an OTC line that deals directly in pharmacist interactions.

All in all, I would say the changes we have made have been extremely successful, and we have market experts and an ambitious team that helps us constantly share and build valuable knowledge.

The company has a very strong presence in Europe, and in 2016 international sales numbers stood at roughly 430 million EUR (530 million USD). How have these numbers been translated to Théa Poland?

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The market is very dynamic, and we have experienced double-digit growth every year since operations in Poland begun in 2006. When I founded the affiliate, turnover stood at roughly 2 million EUR (2,5 million USD), and last year in 2017, was closer to 20 million EUR (25 million USD). In fact, if you look at the Polish healthcare market it is the sixth largest in Europe, and it was a natural process for HQ to invest in Poland as one of the first international affiliates.

In your expert opinion, what is the current state of the Polish ophthalmology landscape?

It is not much different to many other countries and is a rapidly growing and developing sector. Areas such as retinal care, are improving quickly due to large investments into R&D, and hopefully in upcoming years Théa will also have the required products to enter into this treatment sector.

On the other hand, the most spread diseases, such as dry eyes, are becoming more and more common due to the daily activities of the modern lifestyle, such as working longer hours with computers and in an air-conditioned environment.

What are the main growth drivers for Théa Poland?

Glaucoma and dry eyes, both for sales and growth. Equally, we count on the company´s R&D team to bring us new products. The retinal disease area was very difficult to treat a decade ago, though we see more and more possibilities in the market to treat and possibly even cure the condition. As aforementioned, Théa hopes to be in this game shortly and build on the great portfolio we already have.

How would you describe the current innovation landscape for eyecare companies in Poland?

Théa has innovation built into its DNA, and we have always been perceived as purely innovative, with none of our launched products having any similar treatments on the market. Due to this, ophthalmologists have a high expectation in regard to our products.

Nevertheless, within Poland we have had issues around achieving market access for some of our products due to pricing. The prices being proposed by the Ministry of Health are far too low for Théa Poland to remain sustainable; therefore, we made the decision to never launch some of new products in Poland.

To combat this issue, Polish reimbursement policy should have better differentiation within therapeutic pricing baskets, as currently they are far too broad. Products of the same molecule, but preservatives-free, generate higher R&D and production costs. On the other hand, the long-term benefits for patients are priceless. Despite this, treatments are grouped together and priced at the same level.

What more can be done to show the government the importance of eyecare?

Pharmacoeconomic assessments would be useful in showing the government the long-term impact of innovative eyecare. Although, the major issue is ophthalmology is not a priority for the Ministry of Health. This could be because it is not leading to possible death, like cancer or rare diseases.

Nevertheless, recently retinal treatments have been reimbursed on national health programs. This is encouraging, and the government´s proposed policy that aims to increase public healthcare spending to six-percent GDP by 2025 is a welcome adjustment. Hopefully this proposition by the Ministry of Health, will lead to greater spending in ophthalmology and kick start a Polish eyecare evolution.

Education is a key step in building eyecare awareness. What initiatives is Théa Poland undertaking?

Théa is very well known within the ophthalmologist community and we conduct many educational projects addressed to ophthalmic society, especially young clinicians, and we are always well received. Partnership in education with ophthalmic community has always been a priority for Théa and is always encouraged and supported by our global management.

Furthermore, we are very active socially and carry on the work of the Théa foundation in Poland. We are closely linked with the eyecare missions in Africa and with the foundation TĘCZA, which helps blind and visually impaired children in Poland.

How important is brand awareness to build the image of the company?

We have always been close to ophthalmologists, though the next key step is building the products' awareness directly with our customers as we move further into the OTC environment. Here we launched some projects, such as recently the sponsorship of a Gdansk speedway club as this is an extremely popular sport in Poland and helps grow the Théa brand within the Polish population. We also focus our activities to patients through the internet, as this is a must nowadays.

What is your final message toward the government to better value ophthalmology?

We need an opportunity to sit down and discuss the benefits of innovative eyecare products for Polish patients. This is not purely based around fair pricing, but the benefits healthy eyes will bring to Poland and this will allow the Ministry of Health to reach its core objective of a healthier nation.

Where do you want to take the company in the next three years?

Our main goal is to be perceived as the leading partner for ophthalmologists, in their daily practice, driving innovation and education forward. At the same time, we want to closely interact with pharmacists and patients and be recognized as the preferred eyecare company that offers safe and innovative solutions, as their recommendations are key for establishing a foothold in the OTC environment.

Within the cluster it is important to maintain the same business culture Théa has in all markets. Except for Russia and Ukraine, the rest of the nations I support are based through distributors; therefore, Théa must build strong interactions in these markets with the medical community to create a long-term and sustainable business model.

You founded Théa Poland. Looking back all those years ago, what advice would you give yourself when setting up the affiliate?

I would keep the same entrepreneurial spirit and continue the drive to be close with ophthalmologists. Improvement wise, I would be more eager from the very beginning, to allocating wider task responsibility as this would promote faster growth for the start.

All in all, I am very proud of what we have been able to achieve at Théa Poland. The greatest milestone has been the amazing team spirt we have formed and the ability of the team to work

together towards joint goals and maintain the long-term vision of delivering the needs of Polish ophthalmologists and patients.

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