Interview: Joanna Gatt – Managing Director, Vivian Corporation, Malta



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Joanna Gatt, managing director at Vivian Corporation, describes the key strategic focus she has set for her family's marketing & distribution company as well as the strong values and reputation Vivian Corporation has acquired with experience.

Can you begin by introducing yourself and the main milestones of Vivian Corporation, one of Malta's leading healthcare wholesalers and distributors?

Vivian Corporation was founded within my father's pharmacy way back in 1952 when he sourced a medicine unavailable in Malta at the time, to satisfy a German patient. That was the start of his exclusive representation of pharma companies in Malta.

Nowadays, answering to the needs of patients before anything else, is strongly embedded in the company's culture. It has spread across our work ethics in healthcare and as we are dealing with patients' quality of life and recovery, we are very proactive and on the lookout for new opportunities and products that fulfil this goal. In that sense, we have extended our reach from medicines to baby care, cosmetics, dietary supplements, infant feeding as well as food and Beverage.

Vivian has been at the forefront in making biologicals accessible to Maltese patients and the introduction of the first biological in Rheumatoid Arthritis 16 years ago is one of our greatest milestones. A milestone we continue to develop and provide added value to all stakeholders.

We endeavour to create synergies between our divisions, however healthcare still remains the main revenue driver with around 60 percent of our turnover coming from this segment.

As for my background, I started working as a medical representative 37 years ago and developed personally thanks to the training programmes offered by the pharmaceutical company I was assigned to. I then became team supervisor and the psychiatric specialist representative, days I cherish immensely due to my exposure to patient advocacy groups and totally dedicated healthcare professionals. The ‘on the field’ experience gave me foresight on how to establish strategies for Vivian Healthcare, when in 1999 I joined Vivian’s administration team as the Director responsible for Vivian Healthcare.

The company since then has experienced a steady growth and the forever evolving environment we work in, has moulded Vivian into a company that reacts swiftly to change and one that embraces change to ensure growth.

When Malta entered the EU in 2004, the country had to update its regulatory framework and processes. Therefore, in 2007, it was a priority for us to create a proper and robust Regulatory Affairs and Quality Unit which could handle any of the upcoming changes. Vivian was one of the first distributors to do so with the assistance of highly esteemed and qualified colleagues and this solid and autonomous structure is today Vivian’s backbone, the one dictating our conduct and not the other way around.

We are also the pioneers in working with and partnering with, patient advocacy groups, key opinion leaders and policy makers to provide a holistic approach to improve patient outcomes whilst considering sustainability.

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In what way has Vivian Corporation established itself as one of the key players in Malta?

Our company is characterized by its long-term vision. Indeed, we have been in the market for nearly 65 years and since the beginning we have introduced very good governance practices and key values such as transparency, honesty and patient-centricity. Vivian remains a strong family business whereby, our clients choose us because they identify in us a solid company which is professional, trustworthy and we give them peace of mind, especially on the regulatory aspect as we take our responsibilities to another level. We take compliance regulations very seriously and all our employees are trained on the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and Anti-bribery Act. Moreover,

we are totally transparent in all our interactions and this garners respect. Our latest Customer Satisfaction Survey conducted by an independent third party is testimony to the above.

They also like to choose us for our passion, our creativity and cross functional approach. Our marketing activities are done directly to the end consumers but also to our clients through a B2B communication strategy. Indeed, we are one of the front runners in digital marketing, social media awareness and information campaigns. We are also moving away from the traditional sales representatives' framework and approaching our clients in more diverse ways.

Our final aim is to be perceived as the partner who can bring integral solutions to its clients and in this regard, we are counting on our expertise in various fields. For example, in the medical devices segment, we have introduced the INR testing (for people on Warfarin treatment) at a point-of-care setting such as that at our public health centres. Prior to this, the service was centralised within the hospital facilities with many patients blocking the system with their requests. Our approach was to show a better decentralized system to the Ministry for Health that will, on top of that, help reduce costs and reduce traffic at the major public hospital. help them save some money.

What challenges do you face in supplying what is admittedly a small domestic market?

Market access of new drugs in the public sector whilst parallel importation in the private market are key issues apart from Brexit and the Falsified Medicines Directive. It is our responsibility to bring new drugs on the market and make them accessible to the right patients at the right time when they are needed, however we thrive to find ways to be innovative and risk share, so we can achieve our goal. There is a certain scepticism towards the entrance of Malta into the cannabinoid segment. There are a few misconceptions about the medicinal cannabis, so it is also important for patients and healthcare professionals to know more about the cannabinoid products and what they entail. As for Vivian Corporation, we are still analysing our position as, if there shall be many players in the country, we may not see the viability of entering an overcrowded segment as well.

For every challenge that we face each year, we overcome it with innovation and effective key account management. We also ensure to bring added value to our services. For example, when it comes to medical devices and laboratory equipment, we have a team of four highly trained medical engineers to educate and train the user on the equipment whilst servicing and maintaining the equipment to ensure the equipment works as it is meant to work at all times.

We are also promoting the collaborative approach to overcome challenges. Our policy is to always be unconfrontational as we want to understand what is happening on the other side to reach a desired result for all parties.

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What is the legacy that you would like to leave from your tenure as managing director?

We are looking to solidify and create more synergistic and lean teams. We have already started last year to amalgamate our portfolio according to their target audience and distribution channel. In fact the marketing of healthcare OTC and our well known Vivian Baby, which is composed of infant feeding and Babycare, are under one umbrella to be able to capitalise on synergies and possible cost savings.

We are also consolidating our organization by working in a smarter way. We will be focusing internally in restructuring our company, so we can take the next giant step forward to solidify and develop further our existing partnerships and be in a favourable position to create new ones to overcome the challenges of economies of scale that a small nation like ours faces. Malta is a hub for distribution within the Mediterranean countries and North Africa. Vivian has already started to internationalise its medical engineer services, our team has worked overseas and we are seeking to expand this project as we clearly have an edge due to our highly trained and dedicated medical engineers.

We are currently rebranding Vivian as a company. We have set up some key guidelines in line with our upcoming strategy to reinforce our company’s values. Our clients will be seeing a company being lead in a way that empower people to enhance their leadership skills and creativity. Indeed, we give our employees space to grow and express their ideas which allow us to retain talent. With our great history, Vivian has earned a strong reputation in the country, so it needs to be reaffirmed and our newly launched website will contribute to this.

Vivian’s new motto will be “Together through life” to underline our care for all people living in Malta. This is my legacy.

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