Interview: Dimitri Brink – Country Head of Marketing & Sales and Senior Vice President, Panalpina, Canada



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Panalpina's Dimitri Brink speaks about the main highlights of his first two years of tenure in the Canadian affiliate and how he brought the fully closed GDP (good distribution practices) supply chain network to the local operations. He speaks about his intentions of growing the healthcare vertical as well as differentiation points over logistic providers.

Dimitri, you arrived in Canada in 2015 after an extensive career with Panalpina in the Netherlands and Belgium. What have been some of the main highlights of your first two years at Panalpina Canada?

First and foremost, Canada in its sheer size is not even comparable to my previous work locations. Although Canada is one country, each of the thirteen provinces and territories has different regulations, which makes for a very complex work environment. Within Canada, we have six offices and over 250 employees. What we tried to build here is a supply chain that does not differ by province or territory. Even looking beyond Canadian borders, we have the same requirements for our network, whether that is in Canada, Europe or the Far East.

When I arrived in Canada two years ago, there had not been a full GDP (good distribution practice) supply chain solution. We witnessed varying degrees and attempts but nothing concrete had been in place. What Panalpina did in 2017 was to set up a fully closed GDP supply chain network, in both Montreal and Toronto. This is important for our customers on both the local and global scale. For example, in Europe we have already witnessed the establishments of fully closed GDP supply

chains for a while.

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Essentially, GDP guarantees that pharmaceutical products and medical devices are distributed without any deviation of their original properties, including temperature, moisture or light.

Today, biopharmaceutical manufacturers are faced with increasing challenges to comply with rules and regulations, not only for general healthcare cargo but especially for temperature sensitive medication. These requirements oftentimes vary by country and in Canada, even vary by province. For that reason, we brought the fully closed GDP supply chain solution to the Canadian market, to act as an extended arm for the GMP (good manufacturing practice) pharmaceutical companies.

What are the key success factors for establishing the GPD supply chain network in Canada?

Audits—both internal and external—become a key component in setting up fully closed GDP supply chains. We will only work with suppliers that are equally GDP certified or at a minimum GDP compliant. Not only do we audit our vendors on a regular basis, but our customers also audit us, at least once a year. Before we start working with a particular supplier, we will inform our customers that we will be collaborating with that supplier, ensuring it is 100 percent audited by us.

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Within the Panalpina organization, globally and in Canada, we have our GDP certified staff. I am GDP certified myself, and in Canada, we have different people across our office locations that are fully GDP licensed as well. This means that only those employees will process the necessary documents and perform any actions that have to do with GDP regulations and only those people can audit our vendors.

What is the importance of the healthcare vertical within the Panalpina group?

Panalpina globally is set up in different industry verticals, such as high tech, perishables, healthcare and others, totaling twelve different verticals.

Healthcare is one of the fastest growing verticals globally and in Canada, we want to bring this vertical truly to the next level. The local biotech industry is continuing to grow with an expected growth of 65 percent from 2014-2020. Thus, it is absolutely crucial for us to be at the forefront of the market and to anticipate market needs. We have already had a significant number of customers within the Canadian healthcare vertical and we believe that it is going to be a booming business. If the industry grows at this rate, I believe I do not have to add any further arguments as to what it means for us as an organization.

While we are certainly not the biggest player in the field, we always want to be the main player for our customers. They need to know that if Panalpina handles their cargo, all GDP process will be followed.

How does Panalpina differentiate itself from the competitive healthcare logistics industry?

Our global network is our key differentiation point. While a lot of our competitors claim that they have a global network, Panalpina can truly offer a global network to its clients. Especially from a GDP perspective, we can track and trace the pharmaceutical cargo all around the world and determine not only its exact location but also whether there have been deviations. If so, we take needed actions and coordinate with our customers for a positive outcome.

Our clients want to see us as an extension of their organization and they count on us to execute flawlessly. Price is of course an important factor for healthcare logistics but service will always trump price, because only the slightest deviation of temperature for example will destroy an entire load of medicine. That is why our teams in Canada and around the world are working around the clock to ensure the highest quality service for our healthcare customers.

Finally, our expertise in healthcare is second to none. If you wanted to work with one of our competitors that is just starting out in the healthcare vertical, you might be experiencing a lot of pain points, as it is impossible to provide the best service when you are just starting out. At Panalpina, we have over 15 years of healthcare expertise, we have a well-established global network and working with Panalpina equals buying expertise and quality. That is why many of the big multinationals pharmaceutical companies have chosen to work with us over many years. Our service does not differ by region or country, you will have the same customer experience everywhere around the world.

Panalpina is working in a supply chain solution environment. We are heavily investing into being a one-stop shop for our clients, taking over the logistics completely from the drug manufacturers, which means that the main business of the manufacturers becomes the sole production of the actual pharmaceutical drug. We are relieving them of a major headache if you will, so they do not even have to think about transportation. We are very customer-focused in this regard, combining this approach together with high visibility of their entire supply chain to provide value added solutions.

What are the different challenges your customers have when they approach Panalpina?

Our clients approach us for a multitude of supply chain problems that we can provide them solutions for. For example, smaller but fast growing companies are often times struggling to find the right set-up and that is where our expertise can support them to set up a network.

Multinational companies on the other hand sometimes experience challenges connecting the Americas with Europe for example, as they oftentimes cannot rely on commercial carriers. With our closed GPD network, we can then minimize potential risks and bridge the gap, using our own Panalpina plane, if needed, which also has temperature-controlled capabilities.

What will be your key priorities over the next few years?

A focus for Canada is healthcare and taking it one step at a time. Ten years ago, our business plan was broader in focus comparative to today where we are looking at the next one to three years. In 2018 and 2019, I want Panalpina to be extremely successful in growing the healthcare business, together with our current customers and new entrants to Canada.

We want to jump on the growth wagon the biopharmaceutical industry will be experiencing over the next few years, which is why we introduced the GDP network in Canada. In addition, we are seeing a trend that companies that have previously been primarily focused on Europe or the Middle and Far East are looking at penetrating the Canadian market as well, which offers great opportunity for Panalpina.

What do you find most fascinating about healthcare logistics?

The innovation in our industry is immense. Whereas some might look at logistics as ‘moving boxes’, every single day for me is different. With more than 23 years in the industry, not one day is the same, whether in Europe or Canada. For healthcare logistics specifically, we are dealing with a highly dynamic industry. As this is a rapidly changing environment, we need to keep abreast of market changes. We are an extremely entrepreneurial organization and oftentimes, if Panalpina is not able to offer you a certain solution, no other logistic provider is able to do so. We always go the extra mile and our customers praise us for that, which is a key motivational factor for me personally.

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