Selim Sezgin – Country Manager and Managing Director, Pfizer Thailand



Pfizer's new tagline is "breakthroughs that change patients' lives" which can be through the medicines themselves or other solutions we create

08.10.2019

Tags: Pfizer, Thailand, Pharma,

Selim Sezgin, country manager and managing director of Pfizer Thailand, highlights the recent transformation of the affiliate to adapt to Thailand's changing climate, as well as the vision of Pfizer in driving impactful partnerships with government and medical stakeholders to drive innovation access for Thai patients.

You have had an extensive career at Pfizer holding many different positions in various countries, however, this is your first time as a country manager in Asia. What excited you the most when you decided to take this role?

When I came in November 2016 we were going through a major reorganization in the business. This was exciting because it is essentially an opportunity to start something from the ground up. Additionally, I have been in more mature markets like the US and Europe and Asia was always one of the regions I was interested in experiencing. Coming from an emerging market myself, Asia is quite unique, especially emerging Asian markets like Thailand, the dynamic and ever-changing country.

What are the skills that you brought from all the different experience that you have had at Pfizer in preparation to lead Thailand?

Having a long background in marketing, I have been learning continuously since I have taken a career path of general management. In Thailand where change is constant, you gain a lot of experience in leading a team by motivating them towards a common objective. This is a completely different experience from leading a developed market.

Additionally, I have been able to bring several experiences with me which I gained through working at different levels of the organization. I have been fortunate enough to work at global and regional levels within Pfizer, and this exposure and experiences I can bring back to the local affiliate has been very impactful.

What is the relevance of Asia for Pfizer globally and more specifically the scope and scale of the Thailand affiliate with the region?

Last year Pfizer had a major structural reorganization in which the company is now broken down into two primary business units; biopharmaceutical which is the business group I am managing, and Upjohn business, a division of Pfizer. Biopharma covers our pipeline of new breakthroughs, innovative portfolio whereas Upjohn division houses Pfizer’s 20 iconic established brands that have been manufactured for years. Bringing these two groups together, Asia accounts for roughly 24 per cent of Pfizer’s global business.

China is the number one growth market for Pfizer globally like many other countries. Within emerging Asia, Thailand is the second-largest market after India. Between Pfizer Thailand’s biopharma and adjunct business, our operations represent about USD 240M annually.

Pfizer just celebrated its 60th anniversary in Thailand last year and we are the leading company in the country’s pharmaceutical market. Although we do not have manufacturing facilities here, we have about 400 employees in Thailand for sales and marketing operations.

After all the challenges, political instability, and market changes over the past years, Pfizer has still been able to retain its top market position. What are the actions that you are taking as country manager to ensure this performance is sustainable moving forward?

Looking at Pfizer globally which is the same case in Thailand, we have four strategic imperatives on which we are focusing our operations. As an innovative pharma company, our DNA is structured on deliver first in class science. Specifically, in Thailand, we have launched three new products within the past year and are planning to launch two more before the end of 2019. Looking forward to the next three years, we expect to launch another 10 innovative breakthroughs in the market. This strategy has allowed us to maintain our leadership in the country and will continue to do so in the future.

Furthermore, since 2016 we have been evolving our corporate structure to adapt to the changes happening in the external environment. The pharmaceutical business is divided into three sectors – public, private, and retail – the public business has been on the decline due to initiatives put in place by the government such as median price which they establish.

On the other hand, the private business sector is very much booming. As part of the Thailand 4.0 policy, one of the aims is to make Thailand a medical hub for the region. Therefore, private hospitals are growing not only with local patients but medical tourists as well.

At the affiliate level, we have been adjusting our strategy to mirror these changes by focusing on our private business for the last three years. Pfizer was the first pharmaceutical company to establish our own standalone private business segment. Additionally, we have been developing innovative methods to bolster communication with the government to continue our business here.

What do you feel is the role of Pfizer to act as a partner to the Thai authorities in creating a more positive healthcare environment and ensuring access to innovation?

We need to be able to communicate with external stakeholders such as policymakers, authorities, and healthcare professionals to create win-win situations within the space. The Industry 4.0 policy of Thailand is clearly supportive of innovation and value-generating research. Pfizer and other innovative pharma companies have been essential in partnering with the government to progress towards this dream.

I have been particularly proud of how Pfizer is active in the conversation to create a space in which we can co-exist between public and local and MNCs private sectors. We hope to help Thailand become a country where real innovation can be supported and valued.

Finally, I truly feel that Pfizer has the best people in the industry who are dedicated to the company through changes and challenges. Our employee turnover is below the average in the industry and

we have many people who have been in the organization for more than 10 years. This is a unique combination of dynamism with new recruits and a sense of commitment and history from our senior talent. Putting an emphasis on developing our team is a key success factor for Pfizer Thailand.

How have you seen the conditions of market access evolve in Thailand within the past few years?

After the R&D process of a new drug, there are two important pathways; regulatory registration with the Thai FDA and market access. Generally, the industry thinks of access to products as one lump sum which is not the case; these are different procedures carried out by two separate regulatory bodies. On the positive side, in recent years there was a Thai FDA reform from which we have seen a lot of improvement in terms of regulatory timelines. Thailand has historically been of the countries with the longest registration process which is not the case anymore. We have even had products approved four to six months earlier than originally anticipated.

Where we need to have more dialogue with the government is in access and reimbursement. As Pfizer, I see a lot of opportunities to co-create and partner with the government to increase access, rather than less than ten percent of the population having access to innovative medicines and collaborate on a sustainable model.

Compared to other emerging markets, when it comes to innovative access, we are learning together with the government who has become much more open to dialogue in recent years. Reimbursement is still a relatively new area and I see plenty of opportunities to find these solutions together.

Thai healthcare leaders have the dream to position Thailand as one of the hubs for clinical trials regionally. As a company which aims to bring innovative medicine to the place you operate do you think that Thailand can claim this position?

Absolutely it is possible. However, for this to happen Thailand should make sure to have a full transparency landscape where IP rights are protected, appropriate innovation is valued, and access is possible sooner. If these criteria are filled there should be no issue in MNCs investing in clinical trials in Thailand. As the second-largest market in ASEAN, Thailand has the necessary resources available such as a strong university network that would allow more phase II and III trials to be

conducted here.

As a member of PReMA, we participated in a clinical research study which showed that each dollar spent on clinical research in Thailand generates an economic return of three-fold. As a local affiliate, we try to communicate to our headquarters the strengths of the Thai landscape and advocate for more late-stage trials in the country.

Pfizer is highly involved in promoting medical education in the country. Could you highlight some of the most successful project put in place by Pfizer?

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a major medical crisis being faced globally. Pfizer historically has over 20 products in the antimicrobial space, and as one of the historically leading companies, we have publicly announced our collaboration with the Southeast Asia One Health University Network (SEAOHUN). This partnership along with other participants of other pharma players aims to help universities raise awareness among healthcare professionals, public stakeholders, and the public about the threat of AMR.

Additionally, under the Pfizer Thailand Foundation, we recently completed a three-year project with the Kenan Institute around healthy ageing. The ageing population is a challenge in Thailand and about 15 per cent of the population is at the brink of this aged demographic. This will rise to 30 per cent in the next 15 years to make Thailand a fully aged society. The Pfizer Healthy Ageing Society, therefore, focused on physical health, mental health, and savings to help prepare for old age.

What are some key solutions beyond the pill that Pfizer is developing in Thailand, such as in digitalization?

Pfizer Thailand is one of the only few pharma companies actually investing in our digital capabilities. For example, we were the first to create an entire team of e-representatives who educate healthcare professionals from our offices through digital channels. While this had already been done in Europe for several years, this was a brand-new concept in Thailand. Moreover, we have been working on an app that allows healthcare professionals to have quick and easy access to pharma resources through their devices when they need it.

Looking forward, what are the future objectives you are aiming to achieve and country manager of Pfizer Thailand.

Pfizer's new tagline is "breakthroughs that change patients' lives" which can be through the medicines themselves or other solutions we create. To align ourselves with this ideal in Thailand specifically, our objective is to double the number of patients we serve which can even be achieved as soon as next year. Last year, we were able to reach six million Thai patients through medicines and vaccines, nearly ten percent of the population. Through these solutions, we aim to increase the benefits we can bring to the health of the Thai people.

Second, we need to continue to work with authorities to ensure there is a more favorable environment for innovation in order to bring more new products to Thai patients. This is a joint effort in which it is not only the government who should be more open, but the industry must also be available to come up with new solutions to deliver innovation.

Finally, I want to make sure we continue to develop the best environment internally where our team will feel proud and dedicated to work with Pfizer. If we can maintain a culture that is collaborative, competitive, and educational we will be able to succeed in any of the business challenges we face.

What is your motivation to continue on this career path you have chosen?

Personally, the team I have in this office, their families, and the larger Pfizer enterprise is what motivates me. I have spent so much time here with my time and more than just colleagues we become family. Being with Pfizer for 17 years, there have been many opportunities to help people on their career path and help them to grow in their professional life. Furthermore, there is nothing more important than to be able to bring essential medicines to those who need it.

What has kept you loyal to Pfizer for so many years?

I genuinely believe we have good-hearted people in Pfizer which is an important factor of having such a positive culture in the company. In any workplace situation, you can build the skills necessary to perform a task, but you cannot build an attitude. Working with the right colleagues not only improves the experience of daily life in a company but also creates opportunities to learn from each other. Pfizer pushes you to learn and if you are open to these opportunities there is a constant development in growth which is very dynamic.

See more interviews