Rolando Torres – Executive Vice President of Manufacturing, CooperVision, Puerto Rico



As a company we are committed to environmental excellence, continuous improvement and sustainability, which are key elements to keep our Puerto Rico operations running and growing.

22.11.2019

Tags: Puerto Rico, Manufacturing, CMO, CooperVision, Packaging

Rolando Torres, executive vice president of global manufacturing for CooperVision, explains why Puerto Rico is a force to be reckoned with in medical device and pharmaceutical manufacturing. Moreover, he provides a general overview of their manufacturing operations and their large-scale efforts to make sustainable practices the new global standard.

What makes Puerto Rico an attractive destination for CooperVision's manufacturing operations?

Through my career I have been exposed to many global operations through both our own facilities and partners' sites. I have experience starting greenfield manufacturing plants in different countries, and managing plants in the United States, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico and different countries in Europe. I can tell you, proudly but humbly, that Puerto Rico is truly a force to be reckoned with in medical device and pharma manufacturing. When you talk about sports cars, Italy or Germany come to mind. When you talk about gastronomy, wine and designer clothes, you think of France. When you talk about sustainability and environmental efforts, Switzerland and Costa Rica are leading the pack. And when you talk about medical devices and pharmaceuticals, Puerto Rico is objectively among the best. Puerto Rico has more than 50 years of experience in

manufacturing of medicines and medical devices. The incentives of Section 936 attracted large companies to the island, creating the platform to build this unique knowledge and capabilities in life sciences manufacturing. Puerto Rico has lost some talent because its economy has been tough in the last few years, which is a challenge for any industry here. At the same time, it has retained a large base of good, well-paying jobs in a stable environment that is attractive to many.

Can you explain the presence of CooperVision in Puerto Rico?

Right now, CooperVision is the largest employer in the south of the island. Our operations include both manufacturing and secondary packaging of highly innovative contact lenses that are worn by millions worldwide. This site also houses our Americas Manufacturing Operations, which acts as a centralized, shared services organization for all the plants in the Americas region. Each plant is focused on four elements: people, product, process and compliance. We have engineering teams on every manufacturing site focused mainly on two elements: process optimization and quality improvement of existing product lines as part of our operational excellence program based on the Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma methodologies. In addition, we have the Innovation Center, which includes a team of experts, including PhDs in chemistry, working on qualifying new materials, process improvement projects, process development with R&D, benchmarking studies, and more. This center works closely with the Puerto Rico Development Company (PRIDCO). The R&D program offered by PRIDCO is a unique incentives program model in the world that can represent a significant competitive advantage.

What is the strategic importance of Puerto Rico’s manufacturing and packaging operations within CooperVision’s global supply chain?

The Puerto Rican plant is the largest facility in terms volume within our global manufacturing network. When you deal with advanced medical devices and pharma you need a unique set of skills and technical capabilities. In this type of industry there are some core competences required around the utilities and facilities, the knowledge of designing and developing the right cleanrooms, with the right extraction, utilities, backup systems, and purified water systems are not easy to find elsewhere but more readily available in Puerto Rico.

Regarding quality assurance and regulatory compliance, in Puerto Rico you have access to talent knowledgeable from premarket approval (PMA) submission, design transfer, validation, to quality

control.

The Global Regulatory requirements continues to evolve and are becoming more challenging. Thankfully, the Puerto Rican manufacturing industry has a competitive advantage thanks to the strong expertise in this area.

Other key disciplines are process control and operational excellence, and both are areas where local industry has strong experience and knowledge. In my experience one key element that differentiates a good facility from an extraordinary one is process excellence where specific programs are required like Lean Manufacturing and 6-Sigma. This is one solid foundation on which the pharmaceutical and medical devices industries are built in Puerto Rico.

How does that manufacturing expertise translate into quality products?

In our industry, an imperative is to focus on eliminating product defects. By doing so, you improve your quality, and hence customer perception of the product by exceeding their expectations. You also decrease your waste while increasing volume and reducing costs. But how you do that is the question. The CooperVision Puerto Rican facility produces millions of contact lenses per day and the manufacturing is highly automated. Contact lenses are sensitive medical device, some of them being Class III. When customers visit our facilities, they are extremely impressed with the technology that we use, the level of automation and the Quality Management System required to make a contact lens.

Moreover, our supply chain is extremely complex as we not only manufacture lenses for CooperVision brands, but also for private label partners around the world. We are without doubt the market leader on this segment. Our supply chain is very demanding, but I am proud to tell you that we are focused to exceed our customers' expectations by providing a best in class service.

Since the Juana Diaz plant is such an important site for CooperVision, hurricanes present a risk for the continuity of supply. How do you mitigate that risk?

From the inventory management perspective, we maintain a policy that has been designed to protect our customers. After hurricane Maria hit the island, we re-started our manufacturing operations in just seven days, by phases. We did not have a single back order thanks to many elements. Number one, the global supply chain organization did a fantastic job working with the

other global functions and other manufacturing sites. Number two, our people responded impressively. Thirdly, we have a world class business continuity plan (BCP). Our Juana Diaz site is in a state-of-the-art facility and can run 24/7 with backup generators and diesel. We have our own water well, water backup systems, and an inventory policy for raw materials depending on lead time.

CooperVision is committed to minimizing its environmental impact and operate more sustainably. For instance, the group's new 100,000 square-foot Costa Rican plant was recently awarded the prestigious LEED Certification. How are you implementing sustainable practices in Puerto Rico?

Sustainability is one of the key priorities not only for CooperVision manufacturing, but for Cooper Companies globally. Our Juana Diaz plant has become a standard to be followed by the Puerto Rican manufacturing industry when it comes to sustainability. Over the last several years, we have received several honors and awards in sustainability, recycling, and water and energy consumption reduction.

As a company we are committed to environmental excellence, continuous improvement and sustainability, which are key elements to keep our Puerto Rico operations running and growing. We continue to make several efforts to further cement our sustainable initiatives. Most of our intense focus is on operation efficiency to reduce waste, water and energy consumption. We believe that sustainability can be a catalyst for innovation, business success and responsible community partnership. Some of these initiatives are:

Reduce, Reuse and Recycle, with which we have reduced by 60 percent the amount of material needed to make a contact lens, generating over three million dollars annually while decreasing the amount of raw supplies we require.

Since water is a valuable and meaningful resource, we understand the need to protect it and use it wisely. Our extraction and hydration machines have been re-engineered to operate using 55 percent less water. We also repurpose process water from some of our utilities, representing a daily average of more than 70,000 gallons. We implemented a Water Reuse Project which was the reason for us earning the Environmental Innovation Project of the Year in Puerto Rico. In this project we focus on diverting process water for reuse in cooling towers. Since the project began, it has saved 16,800,000 gallons (63 million liters) of water per year and reduced our demand for city-provided water by 35 percent.

Regarding Energy Conservation, since Puerto Rico is a tropical island, we have designed several areas where we take advantage of the natural lighting and use LED lighting to reduce the amount of electricity needed. Every year we look for sustainable projects that will help us reduce our electricity consumption while continuing to operate and maintain our building efficiently. And we are currently pursuing LEED for Building Operations and Maintenance certification.

These efforts among others, certainly have a positive impact in our supply chain as well as for our customers, contact lens wearers, the community and our natural resources. We have served as a model for other sites on how sustainability projects and initiatives are a smart and a successful business model. It's good for the planet and good for the business.

Puerto Rico has an excellent reputation for producing world class talent in the life sciences manufacturing field. However, many young professionals are leaving the island and life sciences companies are in a fierce competition for talent. How do you attract, develop, and empower the best talent in that context?

It certainly is a challenge that the whole industry faces. The economy has impacted everybody on the island. But, at the end of the day, what defines a company is its culture and their people. How we attract talent to this operation? There are three elements that come to mind. Number one is stability, we must demonstrate that we are a company that is stable and is here to stay. We have been expanding our footprint throughout the years like few other companies have. As we speak, we are expanding our capacity to support our company growth. Outside Puerto Rico, we are in the middle of an expansion in Costa Rica and we are also investing in our manufacturing facilities in New York State, Hungary and the UK.

Number two is our culture, the CooperVision culture is the way our people are linked through the same values, behaviors and performance standards. When you deal with professionals, trust is essential. If you are transparent, people will stay engaged, and when people are engaged in what they do, everything is easier. Every problem becomes an opportunity. We integrate our values, dedicated, inventive, partners and friendly, in all we do, from the most strategic activity to the daily tactics. Our people, our culture and our values represent our most important source of competitive advantage, since everything else could be copied. This is what really make us unique.

Lastly, career growth. While we need to be competitive in our compensation schemes, we also need to ensure that our employees are motivated to stay and grow their career in our company. Some people want to develop their technical abilities, others their financial acumen or their

management skills. We have to offer the adequate career development opportunities to our people. Our organization development programs create a continuous cycle of improvement whereby strategies are planned, implemented, evaluated, improved and monitored. It is a proactive approach that embraces change and leverages it for renewal which is totally aligned with our Continuous Improvement Philosophy.

How do you promote interest in medical device manufacturing among the young generation of Puerto Ricans?

One example is how we work with a nearby high school to show them what medical device development and manufacturing is about. Students are able to familiarize themselves with the kind of careers available to them in the medical device field and CooperVision, and then we take them through a tour of the facility to see the all manufacturing process.

Every year we go to the University of Puerto Rico's College of Engineering in Mayaguez, which ranks in the top 20 in the US, to promote our company. Our facility has over 100 engineers and more than 90 percent of them graduated from Mayaguez. We have a program to develop talent internally where we select the top people and craft an individual development plan based on their assessment and performance evaluation.

Another important activity is a joined effort with the University of Puerto Rico in Ponce where we bring approx. 50 female students on the last year of their bachelor's degree. Every year we shared the different positions that women occupy in our company and the program that we use to develop them. This activity is perfectively aligned with our Inclusion and Diversity program.

What is your vision for the future of the Juana Diaz site?

We have a state-of-the-art facility, world class processes and a best in class team. Our employees demonstrated their resiliency, flexibility, and commitment to the company in different challenges, including hurricane Maria. We are using the local talent to the best of our abilities for the benefit of the broader company. We have the Americas Operation Services (AOS) center that support all the manufacturing sites of the region. AOS provide services around project management, automation, new technology introduction, high precision tooling, supplier quality and procurement between others. CooperVision has a significant investment in Puerto Rico and will continue to do so. I see a bright future for CooperVision, and the Puerto Rico operations will play a critical role in that

success.

See more interviews