Diana Mereu – CEO, Romanian Association of the Self-Care Industry (RASCI)

Romania is following the footsteps of other European countries when it comes to digitalization in the self-care market

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The Romanian Association of the Self-Care Industry (RASCI)

was established in 2016 as the "voice" of the Romanian consumer healthcare industry. Diana Mereu, CEO of RASCI, discusses the association's mission, the impact of Romania's political volatility on the industry, the future impact of digitalization on the self-care market, and the importance of disseminating good self-care practices.

Diana, could you begin by introducing the story of RASCI?

In 2015, while I was still working with GSK Consumer Healthcare, local self-care companies were faced with a bill aimed at banning over the counter (OTC) advertising in Romania on all audio-visual channels. Industry players, media agency associations and pharmacy chain associations came together to fight this bill, which would have otherwise deprived Romanian consumers from receiving information about consumer healthcare products.

Fortunately, the bill was dismissed in 2016 due to continuous efforts and persuasive arguments. Moreover, in order to overcome future challenges, the self-care industry decided to organize itself under the umbrella of a local association, following the examples and best-practices of other European countries.

RASCI is the only trade association in Romania to represent manufacturers, importers and distributors of non-prescription medicines, food supplements and self-care medical devices and ever since its establishment has been committed to promoting self-care as a positive and effective solution to the health and wellbeing of Romanian citizens while preserving and improving the integrity of the self-care industry.

Due to the perseverance of its staff and the expertise of its members, RASCI has managed to position itself as the “voice” of the Romanian self-care industry in only four years. Furthermore, RASCI has become a solid partner for relevant authorities, a driver for consumer education nation-wide and a benchmark of a competitive, transparent and fair environment for all players in the Romanian self-care market.

Could you give us an overview of the self-care landscape in Romania?

Self-care is an important part of the primary healthcare sector and it has a positive impact on multiple beneficiaries: consumers (who can manage minor ailments by themselves), healthcare professionals (who can focus more on advising and treating those suffering from chronic diseases) and the healthcare system (through helping optimise healthcare expenditure).

Self-care is an emerging market in Romania, with excellent growth potential. RASCI is here to support market players in their endeavours and contribute to the improvement of consumer health education.

Although the Romanian self-care market is developing rapidly and there are plenty of opportunities for companies operating in this sector, there are still legislative and regulatory challenges that must be addressed. Accordingly, RASCI is invested in contributing to the sustainable growth of the industry and its alignment to European and international developments.

While RASCI is actively working for a fair and competitive environment, it also holds its members accountable to the highest business standards, in an effort to set relevant benchmarks and good practices locally. RASCI has developed its own Code of Ethics to ensure that all member companies are aware of the importance of providing accurate and objective information about self-care products in their portfolio so that consumers can make informed and responsible decisions regarding their use.

The Code also embeds a comprehensive set of guidelines for the commercial communication of food supplements and self-care medical devices, in an effort to create a unitary standard with

regards to the promotion of these categories of products, not only at the level of members of the association, but also at industry level.

The Romanian OTC medicines and supplements market is around 25 percent of the total drug market, a lot lower than the European average of 35 to 45 percent. What are the trends influencing this disparity?

The low consumption of OTCs is very much linked to the degree of health literacy of a population. Health literacy is important in helping consumers to self-care. Greater knowledge and skills lead to higher confidence and willingness for them to take responsibility for their own personal health. This is why citizens need to have access to accurate, relevant and easily accessible information originating from reliable sources.

RASCI helps improve healthcare literacy locally by launching and developing the first of its kind long-term campaign, *Despre sanatate, cu responsabilitate* ("About Health, With Responsibility"). The aim is to educate and empower Romanian citizens to make informed and responsible decisions about the way they manage their own health.

While it is clear that consumers have a growing interest in healthier lifestyles and better health management, RASCI wants to make sure that it lays the proper foundation for future healthy behaviour.

Due to the association's continuous efforts over the past few years towards the improvement of healthcare literacy in Romania, RASCI is definitely closer to its goal. Romanians are increasingly more aware of how to seek and apply self-care principles. There is still a lot of work down the road, but all of us at RASCI are passionate and determined in our endeavour.

How does RASCI work together with key stakeholders in the government to ensure it meets its goals?

Romania has recently experienced major political changes: the government fell, presidential elections were held and the National Agency for Medicines (NAM) went through a reorganization process. This year is also challenging as two rounds of elections are scheduled – local and parliamentary.

Given the recent change of government, there is now a new leadership team in the Ministry of Health. RASCI has organized meetings with the team to discuss the priorities of 2020 and to see how self-care can be integrated into the MoH prevention strategy for 2020. Previous strategies, such as the National Health Strategy (2014-2020), had a limited focus on self-care. I can say that there is an open dialogue, and I remain confident and hopeful that progress in this area will be achieved in the near future.

In this complex environment, RASCI continues to deploy its best efforts in order to achieve a continuous dialogue with Romanian authorities. Through its actions, RASCI has always promoted transparency and predictability of the legislative framework as core operating principles. We continuously advocate for sustainable health policies in the self-care sector and we are perceived as one of the key dialogue partners by the Romanian authorities in this respect.

How do global producers of self-care products view Romania?

Today, the constant market growth of self-care products in Romania is accompanied by an increased interest of companies to be in this market. Of course, this is a result of the increased attention towards prevention, the increasing purchasing power of the population, the diversity of products available, the development of new products, as well as their increased efficiency, among other factors.

As an association, RASCI upholds the right of Romanians to unrestricted access to safe and high-quality self-care products. However, RASCI opposes business practices that neither provide accurate information nor promote the responsible use of their products.

In order for the global healthcare system to remain sustainable, we need a paradigm shift from treatment to prevention. In addition, healthcare education efforts need to be intensified and healthcare spending has to be optimized. I believe that the future of healthcare is self-care and I hope others will join RASCI’s efforts in driving self-care further.

In a press release at the ZF Health & Pharma Summit event in September 2019, Răzvan Bosinceanu, President of RASCI, emphasized the role of digitalization in the pharmaceutical market. What opportunities and challenges do you see for the online commerce of non-prescription drugs? Is it already being pursued?

Digitalization is on the tip of everybody’s tongue and it will revolutionize the way healthcare services are being provided. Digitalization in healthcare is directed towards improving quality of life, quality of interactions with healthcare professionals and quality of the overall health status. While patients in the past have acted as passive recipients, today they play an active role in managing their own health.

Romania is following the footsteps of other European countries when it comes to digitalization in the self-care market. The law allowing pharmacies to carry-out online sales of OTC medicines passed in 2018. Subsequently, the norms regulating the procedure and requirements for such licensing were approved in April 2019.

Unfortunately, the implementation of the law is very slow due to the many restrictions imposed on such an activity. Although eCommerce has a huge potential, it is yet not profitable due to high transportation costs and low consumer awareness.

What is RASCI’s new year’s resolution?

The association, through the effort of its staff and members, has tackled high-interest self-care related topics since its establishment. These include OTC social media advertising, umbrella branding, switches from Rx (prescription drugs) to OTC, product classification change, medical devices advertising, eCommerce, novel food, food supplements advertising, etc.

In 2020, RASCI will continue to develop activities aligned with the top five objectives that lay at the bottom of RASCI’s 2020 Strategy House: build RASCI brand equity, increase RASCI engagement, improve self-care literacy, create a fair competitive environment and shape the regulatory framework.

As a last question, with a remarkable CV in multinational companies, what was your motivation for establishing RASCI in 2016?

I am a pharmacist by profession, who had an NGO calling from the very beginning. If you asked me a few years back what I would be doing today, RASCI would probably not be the answer. The main reason being that RASCI was not even established five years ago. Nonetheless, I have always tried to find solutions in order to make people’s lives easier, happier and healthier and I believe that self-care provides the right balance of those three.

The two main forces that motivated me to establish and develop RASCI as a CEO were to advance people’s knowledge of self-care and to drive the industry in an ethical and responsible manner. As a CEO, I have grown alongside the association and the Romanian self-care sector.

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