

Andy Suter CEO, A. Vogel



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25.06.2021

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A. Vogel CEO Dr Andy Suter outlines the Swiss herbal medicine market leader's expansion in recent years, why it is prioritising R&D more than ever, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has created a renewed focus on phytopharmaceuticals and preventive medicine.

Bioforce changed its name to A. Vogel in 2020; what has changed and where does the company stand today?

The company has always produced A. Vogel branded products, having been founded by Alfred Vogel, so for both marketing and legal reasons it made sense to unify behind the A. Vogel brand.

In recent years, the company has become more modern. We have invested over CHF 25 million into a new production facility, which is now up and running. This new building is a good metaphor for our modernisation push and desire to position the company as a forward-thinking, GMP-compliant, natural products leader.

Does this new production site alter the company's area of focus?

Our focus, and where we excel, is in the production of high quality, herbal medicinal products, mainly made from fresh plants. The new facility does not significantly change this focus or our core portfolio, but it allows us to be totally compliant with all regulatory standards and work with larger volumes.

Within our portfolio, our main strength remains in cold and flu products, including those made from the echinacea (red coneflower) plant such as Echinaforce, which is our main growth driver. We also have other strategic segments, including men and women, where we have products indicated for prostate problems and menopausal complaints. At the end of the day, our main buyers are women, so we want to build up our footprint in this field. A final area is nerve and sleep, which we are looking to build up in the coming years. Additionally, in our French factory we produce a food salt which has evolved into quite a significant product.

Having previously been the company's head of R&D, you took on the CEO role in the middle of a global pandemic. What mandate were you given?

After training as a biologist, I started out in the company's medical research arm and have moved through the ranks over the past 20 years. Two years ago, I became head of R&D and, last year, I took on my current role. My mandate is to lead the company here in Switzerland as well as all of our global affiliates.

75 percent of A. Vogel's production is exported to over 30 countries across Europe, North America, and Oceania. What are the company's key markets?

Our biggest market is the Netherlands, followed by Switzerland, Canada, and the UK. In general, we have a strong footprint in Western Europe – apart from Germany – and we are also strong in South Africa.

How do you leverage the company's Swiss heritage in international markets and use it as a differentiating tool?

Our brand stands for quality, which is associated with Switzerland, and allows us to stand out in the market, along with the research and clinical trials we are conducting.

Where are A. Vogel products being sold and how does that influence your strategy?

We are very much an OTC company and in a lot of our markets, we have managed to move our products from health food stores to pharmacies, where qualified professionals are able to make recommendations. In some countries, including Switzerland, South Africa, Greece, and Slovenia, our products are even prescribed by doctors. We are still at the beginning of this journey, but our longer-term strategy is to get A. Vogel products into the hands of doctors and pharmacists.

How do you prove the efficacy of your products in order to strengthen the company's position with doctors and pharmacists?

Herbal medicines, in general, are plants that have been used for centuries and are well known. Therefore, for regulatory purposes, it is not necessary to show efficacy in most cases, only safety. Nevertheless, we carry out around three clinical trials a year with our products and new product developments to show their efficacy. We never put a product out onto the market without first conducting a clinical trial on it.

For Echinaforce, our biggest product, we have several clinical trials. These include two large prevention trials, the most challenging type of trial to conduct. Concurrently, we are involved in a lot of laboratory work around mode of action, predominantly in conjunction with universities and specialized labs. Over the last 20-30 years, the understanding of herbal medicine has really evolved and â?? using highly sensitive biological methods â?? we can define much more precisely what these substances do in the body. This drives a lot of insights that can help improve our products and allow us to tell a better story about the field.

This investment in R&D seems bold, given that â?? as you have mentioned â?? it is not strictly necessary for herbal medicine.

Absolutely. R&D is a core part of our strategy. It is important for our credibility as an individual company, but more broadly it is beneficial for the entire phytotherapy field to see a company putting out good quality publications to show that research being done. Additionally, as a researcher myself, it is simply interesting. There is so much to discover.

How challenging is it to find new applications for plants and innovate in the phytopharmaceutical field?

It is difficult, because the European regulations state that work can only be done on plants that are already known in Europe. However, there is a bypass where new plants are introduced as a food supplement. Therefore, we are bringing in some new developments via this route and disseminating our research with the eventual aim of bringing new innovations to market.

We work with ethnobotanists and specialists in this field who bring us stories about lesser-known plants.

Phytopharma is increasingly being seen as a complement rather than a competitor to traditional synthetic medicines. Is this something A. Vogel is cognizant of in its work and what is the companyâ??s positioning in relation to synthetic medicines?

We are fully appreciative of the progress of modern medicine and are continuously astonished at the medical breakthroughs that are being produced. Therefore, we do not position our products against synthetic medicines, but simply share our offering, our studies, and our story.

COVID-19 has brought about a renewed focus on preventive healthcare; do you see this as a trend on which natural remedy companies can capitalise?

For sure. We have already profited from this trend in countries like Switzerland with Echinaforce, for which prevention is in the indication. There, we have something to offer which synthetic medication

cannot. In general, the pandemic has taught people a lot about viruses. Previously, I was giving between 50 and 80 talks per year to pharmacists, doctors, and laypeople and was always astonished how little they knew about viruses. However, general awareness is now quite good and there is a segment of people looking to take better care of their immune systems through healthy food, preventive measures, supplements, vitamins, and physical activity. Within this new landscape, we have a lot to offer.

Last year, Echinaforce was touted as a “miracle cure” for COVID-19 in Switzerland; what kind of stakeholder communication initiatives did you have to engage in to ensure expectations for phytopharmaceuticals remain realistic?

In September 2020, the biggest tabloid newspaper here in Switzerland took up an in-vitro study which we made on COVID-19, which caused a rush on Echinaforce. However, this rush was in no way directed or influenced by us; indeed, as soon as we knew the story was in the pipe, we informed the authorities and assured them that we were not involved. By Swiss law, we are not allowed to engage in direct-to-consumer marketing using scientific data. We are instead going into the pharmacists with our sales reps, detailing the scientific data we have.

While we now have some ongoing clinical trials on patients with COVID-19, we shall have to wait and see what the results are. Our aim is always to remain credible; coming out and touting a miracle cure is never a good idea. Additionally, touching again on the complementary medicine field, it is very interesting but there is a lot of over-promise.

How does the fact that women are the primary buyers of natural health products influence how A. Vogel markets its products?

It is important not to pigeonhole the consumers of our products; for example, a lot of young people as well as older people are now purchasing Echinaforce. Additionally, younger men are increasingly exposed to healthy living and lifestyle topics via social media. We are now engaged in the process of refreshing our brand with a focus on how we can continue to be attractive for young people.

However, in general, I agree that women are our main segment and will continue to be the primary buyers of our products both for themselves and their families.

What kind of talent profiles does A. Vogel look for in a segment that seems to toe the line between science/R&D and fast-moving consumer goods?

In every field there is a need for people who are experienced, well educated, motivated, and passionate about what they are doing. A. Vogel is a small company, but one which does everything from scratch – from the plant through to production, which is GMP certified and at the same quality level as any synthetic product. This motivation and passion also radiates outside of the company; we recently won an award as the second most important brand in Switzerland for 2020, showing consumers’ trust in us and passion for nature.

What differentiates A. Vogel from its competition in the Swiss phytopharmaceutical space and positions the firm for future success?

Our focus is on both tradition â?? leveraging our history with nature and plants â?? and science â?? bringing high-quality products to market. To my knowledge, this combination is unique in the European phytopharmaceutical field. As the largest Swiss phyto company, we also have the aim of being an important voice in the field across Europe, raising the profile of the interesting and beneficial work we are conducting.

Is there still room to grow for A. Vogel and how will this growth be driven?

Within Switzerland, our main growth driver will be in the prescription field. Across Europe, there is still a huge potential for growth through better positioning and getting more key opinion leaders to talk for us. The company has great market standing in a number of countries, including the UK, where we are one of the best-known herbal medicinal brands, but the potential to grow there is still enormous.

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