

Chihiro Sasaki – Division Manager, Healthcare, Fujifilm Middle East & Africa



The company is well-positioned for the future and artificial intelligence has been one of our strongest assets for decades

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As Fujifilm, the iconic Japanese photography and imaging company, continues to expand into healthcare, it is betting heavily on the Middle East and Africa (MEA). Chihiro Sasaki, healthcare division manager in the region, explains the company's footprint in MEA, its efforts to help the region combat chronic diseases through innovative medical devices and screening programs, and lays out its strategy to penetrate the market through educational efforts.

Could you begin by introducing Fujifilm as an important player in the medical device industry?

The annual turnover for Fujifilm, globally, is around 24 billion USD. The interesting part of that number is not the amount itself, but rather how the revenue is utilized. As a highly innovative company, we invest heavily in research and development (R&D); the average expenditure on R&D is around 8 million USD per day. That is why our solutions are synonymous with innovations and quality. Today, the company is transforming and expanding more and more into healthcare. Our presence in the Middle East and Africa region consists of the regional headquarters in Dubai, two large subsidiaries in Turkey and South Africa, and smaller affiliates in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Lebanon and Ethiopia.

Fujifilm is a pioneer in diagnostic imaging and information systems for healthcare facilities. Our medical products consist of computed and digital radiography, digital mammography, endoscopy, in-vitro diagnostics, portable ultrasound systems (Sonosite), and medical information technology. We have a diverse and comprehensive portfolio that puts us on par with any other company in the industry. One of our main areas of focus is on the educational side, not only selling products. Those efforts are one of the many ways in which we differentiate from other companies, it shows our commitment to collaborate with all the stakeholders in any given market.

Can you go into detail about your efforts in healthcare education?

The education component is particularly important in the Middle East and Africa. We have a training centre in Egypt, the UAE and Lebanon where we constantly invite potential customers so they can compare our products. Our objective is not only selling medical devices, but we want that all healthcare workers who may use our products can understand their features to maximize their performance. This is why we consider that the educational programs for healthcare workers are crucially important to us. This region is especially important because the rate of cancer and other chronic diseases is beginning to skyrocket and Fujifilm has a wide range of products for cancer screening: mammography for breast cancer, CT scanners for lung cancer, endoscopy products for stomach cancer, just to name a few. We have seen a great reception to our products in this region and the authorities are interested in implementing cancer screening programs. We have already completed a pilot program in Saudi Arabia and are looking to replicate it in other markets like the UAE.

Endoscopy is a good example; we have invited potential customers from other countries so doctors can explain to them how to use our solutions and their benefits. We also send doctors from this region to Japan or Europe so they can see firsthand the latest innovations. The more doctors are exposed to our products, the more they like them over our competitorsâ??.

What has been your personal experience with Fujifilm so far?

I started my career with Fujifilm back in 2009 and could not be prouder of the company. I joined the company to work in the endoscopy department in our Japanese offices and handled the Australian market. After two years, I was assigned to work on the Latin American market from Japan and, after two years, I moved to Miami because the Latin American market was growing very fast at the time and being closer was a necessity. I frequently visited countries like Brazil, which represented around 50 percent of the regionâ??s healthcare business. I still remember when I visited a hospital in La Paz, Bolivia, the highest capital city in the world with an elevation of roughly 3,650 meters above sea level. I immediately got mountain sickness once I landed at the airport. I had never even climbed Mount Fuji, which is the highest mountain in Japan with an altitude of 3,776 meters; it is still one of the toughest business trips in my life. In 2014, I went back to Japan and supported the Middle East and Africa market by establishing the endoscopy department. Three years later, in January 2017, I finally moved to Dubai to oversee the healthcare division for the Middle East and Africa.

I have been blessed to work with great teams along the journey and the key for me has been to adapt to different cultures and ways of doing things. For example, when I moved to Miami, the majority of the employees spoke Spanish so I studied the language so I could communicate efficiently with the team.

The healthcare division has continued to grow at a global level and it now represents around 20 percent of Fujifilm's total revenue. Is that the case in this region?

The healthcare division represents around 63 percent of the total revenue of Fujifilm Middle East FZE; healthcare is a huge business for the company in the Middle East and Africa. The office was established almost ten years ago, but at that time we sold mostly cameras. We began introducing our healthcare solutions in 2012. Since then, we have participated in major congresses and healthcare exhibitions such as Arab Health and Medlab. Thanks to this aggressive branding, Fujifilm has been well received by the industry because they appreciate the quality and our commitment to the market. It has been a story of success.

What are the main markets for the healthcare division in the region?

Our biggest market in the region is Saudi Arabia, which represents around 25 percent of the revenue, but the whole GCC area has been performing at a good level. In terms of products, the modality business is driving the growth, meaning x-rays and mammography solutions; almost 67 percent of the Medical division sales are coming from the modality business, and it is followed by the endoscopy products. We offer the full portfolio in the region: modality, endoscopy, ultrasound, laboratory and IT; all five divisions have been growing by double digits annually in the MEA region.

What is the main message to regional stakeholders about the company's offering around innovation?

Beginning in 1934 as Japan's pioneering photographic film maker, Fujifilm has leveraged its imaging and information technology to become a global player known for innovation in healthcare. We apply our strong imaging technology and experience into the medical device field such as mammography, endoscopy, ultrasound, among others. The company is well-positioned for the future and artificial intelligence has been one of our strongest assets for decades. Fujifilm was a pioneer in healthcare AI and obtained its first patent in 1991; our big investments in R&D have allowed us to lead the industry in many aspects. REiLI is Fujifilm's new AI solution. Reili, which in Japanese means "intelligent and resourceful", represents a new frontier in diagnostics and will improve medical care. There is huge potential for AI in the healthcare industry, for example, by using our AI (REiLI), doctors will be able to get more accurate and timely diagnostic images.

During Arab Health, you stated that "when healthcare intersects with IT, it transforms the quality of the patient experience". What do your products improve the quality of Middle Eastern patients specifically?

I will put the example of Africa, where the number of doctors and radiologists is normally limited. Fujifilm's IT solutions have allowed hospitals and clinics from remote areas to communicate patient data, making the system more efficient and improving their geographical reach. In order to reduce healthcare workers' burden, streamline processes, improve the accuracy of diagnosis, and offer personalized care with more efficiency, we need to rely on healthcare technology.

With cancer incidence on the rise in the Middle East region, there has been talk about a national screening program in Saudi Arabia, which already attempted to do it years ago. What role can Fujifilm play in those type of programs?

Participation in screening programs is a crucial part of our strategy. Statistics clearly indicate that the prevalence of lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension are extremely high in the UAE and the region. Because of this, over the last 10 years, Colorectal cancer and Liver cancer has dramatically increased in this region. We believe that a national screening program and control are the key to reduce the burden of cancer in the country and to bring down cancer fatalities. The Middle East has around 400 million people, of which, nearly 65 percent are under the age of 30; as the age of these population increases, so will the burden on the healthcare systems. In Saudi Arabia, for example, we launched a pilot program to detect colon cancer in patients that lasted almost one year with the support of the Ministry of Health. The program demonstrated the big difference that screening programs can have, and the Saudi government has asked us to increase the magnitude of the program and we are looking to replicate it in other countries. We are already discussing potential programs with the authorities in the UAE and Kuwait. Fujifilm will try to support and help each country's ministry of health to create and implement a cancer screening program.

After having experience overseeing the Fujifilm's healthcare division for Australia and Latin America in the past, what makes you confident that the company will continue to succeed in the Middle East and Africa?

As I mentioned, as the age of the Middle East population increases, so will the burden on the healthcare systems. Our solutions are the embodiment of Japanese quality and are a great fit for the high standards being established in the region. We provide durable and reliable medical devices as well as cancer screening solutions that are gaining the trust of the different stakeholders present in these markets. We always share each region's success stories with other regions.

What makes Fujifilm stand out when you have to compete against other big medical device players?

Something that I cannot overstate is how comprehensive our portfolio is. We offer a complete solution of products that touch upon almost all areas important for the healthcare system and hospitals. We offer a broad range of diagnostic equipment built on our proprietary technologies, including X-ray diagnostic equipment, endoscopes, ultrasound equipment, and in-vitro diagnostic (IVD) systems. Perhaps, the most important thing is that all these devices are connected to the hospitals' systems by our medical information technology. For example, Fujifilm provides diagnostic support to physicians by providing medical-use picture archiving and communications systems (PACS).

One more important thing is the way we organize our medical division and the team's diversity. There are more than 25 different nationalities within the medical business employee base. This diversity contributes to creating new ideas, and, although we have five medical divisions, we always communicate with each other and if someone comes up with a good idea, he or she immediately talks about it with the team or management. Our team diversity, flat organization structure and decision-making speed help Fujifilm differentiate from other big players.

After 11 years in Fujifilm, what motivates you to continue working for the company?

When I thought about this question, three points came up in my head. First of all, something that I appreciate from Fujifilm is the way they challenge me. The company has allowed me to advance and learn in every position I have had. This region, for example, is very challenging yet very rewarding. I am enthusiastic about the future of the company in this region, which is why we are working hard to promote our brand and solutions.

Secondly, I have always learned something new from my talented and professional Fujifilm peers. It was the case in Australia, the United States, Latin America and now in the Middle East. This is the reason why I stay in Fujifilm; I enjoy working in something that I feel passionate about.

Thirdly, Fujifilm had to endure a large-scale industry transformation after the rapid digitalization in the 2000s. At that time, our core business was the colour film business and that business revenue sharply went down after 2000. But the company managed to thrive by diversifying its business portfolio. Because of this tough experience, we are never satisfied with the status quo and try to improve more and more, we always think of ourselves as a challenger. I like this culture, and this is our strong DNA.

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