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Hussein El Hakim, managing director for Bayer Saudi Arabia and general manager for its pharmaceuticals division in the country, discusses the affiliate's rapid expansion after years of double-digit growth. El Hakim explains how the German Life Science company is approaching the transformation of the Saudi healthcare market, with changes in the procurement process, advances in digitalization, and improved market access for innovative products.

Before discussing Bayer Saudi and the country's pharma environment, can you begin by briefly introducing your career in the industry?

I have been managing director and general manager for the Pharmaceuticals Division at Bayer in Saudi Arabia for four years now. Before joining Bayer, I was lucky enough to work at two other big pharmaceuticals companies. Working with Bayer has been a pleasure, particularly because we as a team have managed to build a strategy which has led to a sustainable double-digit growth, ahead of the average market growth rate. Working in an industry that allows me the opportunity to positively impact the lives of patients is a blessing and what motivates me.

Over 11 years in Saudi Arabia, you have had a ringside seat for the dramatic changes that have taken place in the country's pharma industry. What has been most striking for you about the Kingdom's transformation?

The most impressive part has been the work done through the Kingdom's compelling Vision 2030. This Vision is compelling because it is leading the transformation from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. In doing so, the country put its healthcare system, patient access to medicine, and digital capabilities at the centre. I have also been struck by the empowerment of females which has improved vastly since I came to Saudi Arabia in 2010. It's great to see how women are being able to build their professional skills and are starting to be well represented in the workforce across all industries. On top of this, there are great opportunities in the Saudi pharma market, as the largest and fastest-growing in the Middle East & Africa (MEA) region.

How has Bayer's strategy had to be adapted to better dovetail with the ambitions of Vision 2030?

It is true that the organization's approach and strategy had to be altered to fit with Vision 2030. But let me first give my reflections on Vision 2030 for the whole country. The pandemic is a good testimony of the national strategy's success, with everyone rallying behind Vision 2030. At Bayer, we saw great opportunities in Saudi and aligned our strategy with these opportunities to grow as quickly as possible. To do so, we developed a growth strategy with four pillars and enablers. The first was portfolio management, looking at ways to accelerate the registration of our therapies and leverage the new regulations in the marketplace.

The second pillar was developing the required capabilities in the marketplace, meaning digital capabilities, customer-facing resources, and utilizing first-in-class platform applications to ensure we have good access to hospitals and healthcare practitioners.

The third pillar was partnering with key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, Saudi Federal Drug Authority, Ministry of Investment, NUPCO and other important key accounts.

The fourth was investing in culture and mindset because, as we all know, culture eats strategy for breakfast.

To achieve all of this, we needed enablers: carrying out all of our actions with the highest level of integrity and developing our talent pipeline. We managed to comply with the Saudization strategy and today almost 100 percent of our salesforce is made up of Saudi nationals.

How difficult was the process of adapting your human resource structure to accommodate the Saudization requirements?

I would not say it has been an easy process. However, I was amazed and inspired by the level of talent available in the marketplace. Our overall workforce, not just the sales team, is now composed of 50 percent Saudi nationals and our female employment stands at 30 percent, which is a great improvement. The female empowerment program launched by the authorities has been extremely beneficial for everyone and we are probably the only pharma company that has a 100 percent female team working on women's healthcare products. Additionally, we were proud to have the first female sales manager in Saudi and that we have been able to attract such talent to Bayer.

Moreover, we developed a digital-first reputation and employer brand campaign called "Move Forward with Bayer" with the objective of not only attracting the best talent but also communicating our aspirations as a company. This campaign aims to support the societal transformation process in the kingdom and to position Bayer at the forefront in being an employer of choice for young Saudi talents.

You mentioned portfolio management as one of the pillars of your strategy. What is the scope of this portfolio and how well-represented is Bayer's global portfolio in Saudi?

I am happy that most of the global portfolio is well represented in Saudi, both with regards to our prescription-based and consumer health products. Today, we are well-represented in the fields of cardiovascular health, oncology neurology, ophthalmology, women's health, etc. Since the launch of Saudi Arabia's strategic 2030 Vision, the Kingdom has been working to further advancing its healthcare system, in particular from a regulatory perspective. Especially during the pandemic, the kingdom distinguished itself from other nations and realized successfully the fast-tracked registration of urgently needed medicines. For example, that allowed Bayer to bring one of its breakthrough oncology products to Saudi during wave one, meaning that it was one of the first countries to receive it. There is an accelerated path that is benefiting both patients and the industry.

The government has talked about enhancing clinical trials in the Kingdom. Is that something that Bayer would like to promote as well?

I think the authorities are taking very good steps in developing a system that can attract innovation and investments. At the clinical trial level, we can see many research centres being developed and the Saudi FDA has created accelerated processes to enhance clinical trials. Bayer has taken some initiatives in clinical trials and currently has 13 phase IV trials in place, with eight already completed and five ongoing. We have enrolled more than 1,200 patients and 120 investigators working in 60 centres, mostly focusing on oncology, haematology, ophthalmology, and cardiovascular.

You have mentioned fast track approval but what are some of the other market dynamics shaping the Saudi market?

In alignment with Vision 2030, there has been a trend towards favourable market dynamics in Saudi Arabia. Having a product approved in a few months is new to this part of the world; it usually takes a couple of years. Having Saudi be part of the first wave of countries to achieve access to innovative drugs is a great opportunity.

Because of the pandemic, we have seen a move towards digitalization, telemedicine or wearables for patients among others. Digitalization is an extremely important element that we must embrace and is no longer a luxury. The pandemic revealed why patients, the authorities, and the industry have to develop digital tools. Bayer, as part of its DNA, has taken the approach to reinvent itself and go digital.

The authorities have also taken important steps towards greater IP protection which will encourage more investment.

What is your take on NUPCO as the new centralized procurement agency and its impact on how Saudi healthcare operates?

I think the centralization of the procurement process via NUPCO is a smart approach. It took time to make NUPCO the national unified purchasing company, but it has now taken on more responsibility and goes way beyond tenders, working on supply chain integrity. The Saudi authorities needed to ensure that patients continue to have access to the latest innovative products and NUPCO represented a cost-effective way to manage procurement while embracing and incorporating world-class technology standards to accelerate patients' access to medicine.

How is Bayer working to position itself in the private market at a time when the government is employing a hands-off approach in order to develop the private insurance system?

The Saudi market is growing faster than most markets, even in the private sector. Bayer is taking a "one-fits-one" approach for the public and private sectors by following a unified growth strategy. To succeed, we need to redefine customer engagement because it must be a hybrid model of face-to-face and digital interactions.

Our perspective is that the organization must also redefine the company strategy to accelerate the entry of new products in the marketplace, benefiting from the Saudi FDA's regulations. Patient-centricity will be the key to succeed and fill the gaps. In this context, it's important to approach this in a holistic strategic approach.

What has been your approach to company culture in a country that is experiencing a dramatic social transformation?

I am happy with the culture we are building and the Saudi nationals we have incorporated into our team. Our vision "Health for all, Hunger for none" with its focus on innovation and sustainability as a leading life science company is based on values and behaviours that enable our employees to fulfil our purpose of "Science for a Better Life". Our four LIFE values "leadership, integrity, flexibility and efficiency" are each represented by concrete attributes that define what is expected of everyone at Bayer. We encourage an internal culture in which everyone has the ability to speak up. We are embracing inclusion and diversity, recognizing our unconscious biases and working against it. We must acknowledge our successes, but also our failures.

The culture and environment we are building also helps us attract the best talent during a time when many companies are in a silent race to bring the best people on board. For example, we are working with flexible working arrangements.

Moreover, we foster a culture of Inclusion and Diversity to drive innovative solutions. We embrace and encourage our employees' unique identities and believe that our human capital is one of our most valuable assets. The collective sum of individual differences, life experiences, knowledge, innovation, self-expression, unique capabilities and talent that our employees invest in their work represents a significant part of not only our culture and reputation, but Bayer's success as well.

Personally, I strongly believe that the global pandemic was a call-out to the whole world to reconnect and collaborate in order to work together.

I am proud that we at Bayer in Saudi Arabia are creating role models, who lead people with head, heart, and guts.

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