

Interview: David Anchell – cofounder and CEO of Camida, Ireland



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29.12.2016

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David Anchell, cofounder and CEO of Camida, a bespoke chemical supplier and distributor based in Ireland, details the exciting story of Camida’s founding, the specialist sourcing services they provide, their ‘can-do’ attitude of never saying no to clients, and his insights on the development of the Irish pharmaceutical landscape in the past few decades.

David, how did you come to found Camida in 1988?

I came to Ireland from the UK in 1977 at what was a very difficult time for the former; I was told by everyone not to come because there were no jobs available, but my response at the time was that I only needed one job, and there had to be one job somewhere for me! My background was in chemistry, so I eventually found a sales job with BASF, the world’s largest chemical company, despite having no prior sales experience. I was very fortunate, however, in that the 1970s was precisely the era of pharma foreign direct investment (FDI) into Ireland, so there was a growing market for BASF intermediates, which made my sales job very easy. I spent a decade at BASF achieving strong growth and building key relationships, before deciding I wanted to start my own company and work for myself.

At the beginning, however, all I had were the contacts I had accumulated in my time at BASF and no concrete idea of the business I actually wanted to build. Through speaking to my clients, however, I realized that they had a lot of unmet needs related to the sourcing of raw materials. The industry was saturated by companies trying to push their products or services instead of being interested in solving the problems that the pharma companies were facing.

As a result, in 1988, I founded Camida with a number of colleagues in order to address these unmet needs – essentially, meeting clients’ needs for sourcing products for pharmaceutical manufacture, which, to this day, remains our core business.

How does Camida operate today?

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Camida operates in three business segments. As I mentioned, the sourcing part is our core business and represents around 45 to 50 percent of our operations. We essentially remain open to any inquiry from potential customers regarding the supply of raw materials. For instance, companies developing a new process may want us to find them a reliable supplier. We pride ourselves on being able to cater to any request, regardless of how unique or niche. For instance, we had a company ask us to compile a library of around 1500 active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) for their records. This was a very unorthodox request but we told them we would find a way to fulfill it. We came up with a bespoke contract and then fulfilled the order in six months.

As a result, we get to know the pharma industry very well: the procurement, the purchasing, the R&D chemists, the technical people, the quality people – we speak to everyone along the value chain. The value that we provide is in listening carefully to the industry and doing our best to serve its needs – and we never charge for the information stream and expertise we provide around the supply of products.

We also distribute on behalf of overseas manufacturers of raw materials that would not justify setting up their own marketing arm in Ireland. This is around 25 to 30 percent of our business. The remaining 20 to 25 percent is vendor reduction programs, of what we call bespoke distribution, to highlight our dedication to customer needs. Customers may want to outsource the supply of many or most of their raw materials to us in order to focus on the mission-critical elements. We would have around five to six customers in this space, and while it is a healthy business, we ultimately do not want this service offering to compromise our core business offering of bespoke sourcing.

How important is the life sciences sector to Camida’s overall operations?

Life sciences is by far our most important sector, and we have five main client groups: traditional small molecule manufacturers; the newer large molecule manufacturers; diagnostics manufacturers; generics manufacturers; and manufacturers of generic formulations of drugs, albeit the last being a smaller sector in Ireland.

Drugs are such delicate mechanisms and drug development is so fraught with risk and uncertainty and the inherent complexity and the volatility of the pharma industry is constantly keeping us very busy. We are heavily involved in the drug development life cycle, often from the initial research stages, and so we need to be responsive and flexible to change as the drug progresses through the R&D cycle.

As the industry in Ireland and globally moves towards biopharma, a new problem relating to the supply of pharma manufacturing ingredients has arisen. Biologic drugs are often developed and fermented using rather common products, which would not traditionally have been manufactured to the stringent standards required by the highly regulated life sciences sector. This has caused somewhat of a supply issue within the industry and there is a critical need to bridge this gap.

Given the catholic focus of Camida’s service offerings, what is your strategy for maintaining a strong global network of suppliers to ensure that you can always meet client needs, no matter what they are?

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This is perhaps the greatest challenge for us: our business model drives us to numerous infinite vendors in the world. The very simple fact is that using new vendors is risky because they are not necessarily accustomed to the needs of our company, our clients or even the industry.

In addition, frequently our customers's need for speed exacerbate rather than help us solve this problem. To illustrate, a pharma company could invent a drug using a catalogue of available materials, which successfully moves to pilot plant production, perhaps for phase I trials. They would then want to find a commercial producer within a very short time span to meet the deadline for starting phase I trials. For us as a supplier, this means we have to sacrifice the ideal vendor assessment processes for speed to meet the deadline. In the worst-case scenario, what could happen is that the materials, while acceptable for early production, do not meet the stringent requirements applicable to full-scale production for a drug that will be commercially launched. This is a very tricky issue and I think the pharma industry needs to do more to acknowledge this from the demand perspective.

That said, we do have decades of experience in the industry and we also avail ourselves of the various databases of information that exist. We have also become very well-known internationally, if not directly through the Camida brand then through our strategic partners, which we use in markets like China, India and South Korea, who then select and approve the relevant vendors for us. This global supply network (an association called INDIS of which Camida was a founder in 1992) is an integral part of the value and expertise that Camida offers our clients.

What is Camida's international footprint then?

We are an Irish company but we very much involve ourselves internationally. For fiscal representation, we incorporate ourselves in the US and we have a PT in Singapore, which also enables us to serve the global pharma industry.

In terms of business, around 50 percent would be in Ireland, 30 percent in the UK and the remaining 20 percent internationally. We have found ourselves to be most successful in our home market, and this may partially be a result of the relative youth of the Irish pharma market compared to the UK or continental Europe. The UK has a tradition of manufacture that dates from the Industrial Revolution and out of that have come the historic UK pharma companies like Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). In contrast, Ireland was something of a clean slate in the 1970s, which drove the need for the services and technical expertise that Camida provides. In a way, we have grown along with the Irish pharma industry in the past few decades.

The international business we do have has mostly be a result of the relationships we have built with the respective companies's Irish operations. For instance, our supply activities to the USA, Singapore, China, Puerto Rico, etc. would still be mostly driven from our work in Ireland and the UK.

We have heard that the pharma manufacture sector in Ireland is facing intense competition for talent because demand far outstrips supply. Is Camida, as a service provider, affected by the same dynamics?

The pharma manufacture sector is facing the severe challenge of fulfilling their workforce requirements. There is a disproportionately large number of companies in Ireland that require the same techniques and skillsets. There is also the added dimension of the fact that Ireland is such a small country and people have strong ties to their home county or city. If a company opens a new facility in Galway, for instance, that would draw people originally from Galway away from say, Dublin or Cork, back to Galway. This is an extra employment consideration that companies have to account

for in Ireland.

For Camida, we do not face this problem. The work that we do is rather unique and extremely interesting. For instance, for our sourcing business, we have a team of six technically educated people dedicated exclusively to handling customer enquiries. This is quite an unusual role to offer someone with a third-level degree qualification, who may not necessarily want to work in a laboratory.

Furthermore, what I have noticed is that Irish people are very keen to be involved in this kind of high-level, high-value manufacturing. I have found Irish workers to be very enthusiastic and committed to the company ethos.

Looking forward 3-5 years, what would you like to accomplish for Camida?

I would inevitably be older and grayer then! The biopharma industry in Ireland would have matured and I believe their needs would be better met in a few years.

For Camida, I would like to solve the technical challenges I mentioned surrounding the sourcing of quality raw materials for the biopharma industry.

Ultimately, I hope Camida will continue to be successful in a number of ways. I always want to maintain our reputation in the eyes of our suppliers, customers and partners. The company obviously needs to make a profit, but beyond that, I want our staff to remain motivated and the work to be not only interesting but fun and enjoyable. In that sense, the ambition for Camida is not any sort of radical transformation â?? as I do not see a need for it â?? but rather, to keep on keeping on!

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