

Interview: Frank Tischler, Managing Director, Bene Farmac utica, Portugal



24.02.2014

Tags:

[chronic pain](#), [reimbursement](#), [ambulatory](#), [manufacturing](#), [Bene](#)

Bene Farmac utica was established in 2009 to expand the supply and presence of Bene-Arzneimittel in Portugal, having already sold products in the country for several decades. The affiliate  s managing director, Frank Tischler, outlines Bene Farmac utica  s entrance into Portugal and discusses the importance of adding value to brands in an environment plagued by tough market access and reimbursement.

What personally interested you in starting and running this affiliate?

Bene Farmac utica is the organization  s first affiliate developed outside of Germany. Portugal was chosen by the family company due to the country  s specific environment and its opportunity to grow. I was invited to lead the project, as I had already been working within the Portuguese pharmaceutical industry for several years. This was indeed a challenge; when we operationally launched the company in 2010, Portugal  s pharmaceutical industry was experiencing its worst year ever, followed by two more years of even worse performance. In spite of these issues and some public  s skepticism towards our optimistic attitude, Bene has enjoyed continual success in Portugal because of the company  s product reliability. Ben-u-ron, our main brand, has been the brand of confidence for several years in a row because of our commitment to the people through confidence, trust and quality. In times of crisis, this provides an opportunity to enhance the trust that people have in our brand by guaranteeing delivery and involving all stakeholders in the approach through the building of partnerships. Bene Farmac utica has a strong and growing team of 43 employees that mixes older and more experienced individuals with younger people. In the last couple of years we have enlarged our portfolio and launched new brands.

Bene  s products have been present in Portugal for over 50 years, and have therefore accumulated a strong brand image. Ben-u-ron is recognized as the pharma brand in Portugal. As such, it has developed an emotional value. We sell more than 10 million boxes of our entire Ben-u-ron range per year, which is equivalent to one box per inhabitant in Portugal. This product is commonly found in Portuguese homes, which is very important to people  s comfort. Few such products exist with Ben-u-ron  s comfort, safety and trust. Bene has worked tirelessly for the last

50 years to create and develop that trust and confidence.

Thirty percent of Portugal's population suffers from chronic pain, which is an extraordinarily high rate. What are the historical factors that have led to this figure?

This is largely due to individuals not recognizing the treatability of pain. The experience of debilitating pain causes absence at work, and can even lead to domestic issues, all the while with the belief that the pain will pass. Such suffering should not occur, and is easily treatable. While there is no clinical reason to explain why the Portuguese population has such a high rate of chronic pain, we have discovered that pain diagnosis is in need of improvement. With this improvement, correct treatment can be administered more quickly. By defining ourselves as a pain management company, we have focused on enlarging our historic portfolio to create the necessary improvements. Bene has also supplied scientific advice and help to stakeholders in the pharmaceutical market, namely physicians, nurses and pain centers, for earlier diagnosis. The company also built a website (www.conhecedor.pt) for the public and professionals to access regarding pain education.

What is the cultural attitude surrounding pain in Portugal as it relates to convincing health authorities about reimbursement?

We have a National Program for pain management, implemented by the government since 2001, with a revision in 2008. Some of our hospitals have pain units specialized in pain treatment, with a multidisciplinary team that struggle daily to provide the best support and treatment to the patient with pain. A very important player has been APED, the Portuguese association for the study of pain, with whom we have been cooperating. APED has been very active near fellow doctors, doctors from different specialties, nurses, psychologists, and other health professionals involved in pain management, emphasizing the importance of pain treatment and implementing educational programs.

During Portugal's crisis, has Bene benefitted from its strong focus on the ambulatory market, which traditionally is less complex and barrier-ridden than the hospital market?

Actually, the ambulatory market is still strongly regulated, particularly with prescription-based products. On the hospital side, the payback protocol with the industry last year indented the market. In the ambulatory market, price cuts were so severe that the government aims on cuts in spending were reached without any additional measures.

In this environment, having the best-known brand in Portugal, the company's products are in a way a safe haven for people, especially during crisis. Ben-u-ron is accessible, efficient and always solves the problem. Consequently, the Portuguese have continued to purchase and trust in our brand. We have also focused on innovating existing molecules by improving their capability and convenience.

How have Ben-u-ron sales increased as a result of your presence here, and what other added value does this affiliate provide?

Ben-u-ron sales have increased by about five percent per year. This is due not only to the product's reputation, but through Bene's persistence in creating partnerships with patients and professionals as well. The company hosts scientific sessions throughout the year for pharmacists and physicians focused on recognizing and treating special pains. Bene proactively communicates its added value through such services, and this has been paramount in achieving success. Moreover, our pain website is frequently used by professionals, physicians, pain centers and hospitals as a reference site. We also receive feedback from professionals to improve our services further, particularly with pharmacists, whom consumers trust in order to gain confidence when

purchasing non-prescription or OTC products.

How has the launch of new products fared in this tough environment?

Bene Farmacêutica has recently launched two new brands, but regulatory processes are very slow and time to market is quite long, especially for brands. In the last few years, for every brand approved in Portugal there are 20 or more approved generic drugs. The launch of Bene brands and expansion of portfolio in Portugal has been difficult, but the international partnerships that we have built here over the years have been extremely helpful in this regard. In 2014 and 2015, we will launch more new products for market entrance.

Would you ever consider opening manufacturing for Bene here in Portugal?

Bene's manufacturing facilities are located in our German headquarters. While we have no current plans to create new production facilities, we do not exclude any changes in the future if such need were to arise. I also would add that manufacturing for smaller series of production is one of the country's competitive advantages, compared internationally, since facilities in countries like France and Germany do not have the flexibility required for such projects.

What do you perceive as the role of mid-sized companies in Portugal, like Bene, in terms of their evolution in the global marketplace?

For a company like Bene, Angola and Mozambique are important targets outside of Portugal at the moment. Many companies are establishing operations in Angola and Mozambique, and there is an active exchange of migration between these two countries and Portugal for pharmaceutical-related work. The good understanding of the needs and structures of those markets and the language is obviously an advantage, although the language is less relevant as English becomes more mainstream globally. Additionally, Mozambique adapted Portugal's regulatory system some years ago, and Angola will create similar legislation. This is useful for Portuguese companies because now they can sell products registered in Portugal in these countries with significantly fewer barriers. Exports are also very important in both countries, although Angola clearly has a much bigger market.

Crises need to bring out the best in people to survive, and this always requires a solid strategy. Furthermore, many young people are going abroad at this time, which some consider dangerous. I do not think Portugal is losing people; these individuals go abroad, which is important for gaining experience and learning new approaches. Many of these people will return when the opportunity is right. There is a very strong tie to the country here, as it is in many southern European countries.

Is being part of a family-owned company an advantage during a crisis in terms of flexibility and adaptability?

Family companies are always a bit more concerned about their workers and their protection than multinationals, who focus more on stock market value and consequently making cuts where necessary. In that sense, the family of Bene has always been very supportive. Opening an affiliate during a crisis demonstrates strength. It needs a solid vision and strategy in order to succeed. Normally, your decision making process is also much shorter and quicker, which obviously helps in a situation of crises to adapt quicker to new challenges.

Conversely, family companies must be careful with professional management. If a company is not professionally managed, then decisions may take even longer than a multinational company, and the focus on that company's strategy can be easily forgotten.

What are your ambitions for Bene Farmacêutica in the future?

I hope to maintain the confidence and faith of the Portuguese people with the most trusted brand in Portugal, as well as the ability to offer more therapeutic solutions. Our principal aim is to provide those new solutions and to enhance scientific knowledge on pain. But it is difficult to predict anything at the moment. Companies have learned to adapt very quickly to changes here. Nevertheless, the export market will continue to be important in the PALOPs, as these are the markets for which Bene Farmacêutica is responsible. Despite the current market environment, the affiliate will continue to grow through new therapeutic solutions, new products we can bring to the market, and the enhancement of existing products.

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