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*Jingle Garcia Diola, Executive Director at Firmlink Pharma, details the company's value-added services and how they are positioning themselves as the business development partner of choice for large local and multinational companies looking to penetrate new markets. She also discusses her extensive career in the pharmaceutical industry as well as Firmlink's vision for continued growth in the future.*

## **Could you please provide a brief overview of your extensive experience working in the pharmaceutical industry prior to joining Firmlink?**

I am an international pharmaceutical marketing executive with almost 2 decades of experience as a Registered Pharmacist with an MBA in Marketing to further complement my professional endeavors. I started my career on the plant floors of General Drug & Chemical Company (a Division of United Laboratories Inc.), and then moved onto setting up the businesses of several overseas companies working through an agency here in Manila. During this time, we pioneered the 1st GMP foreign audits by the Bureau of Food and Drugs, which is now the Philippine FDA, something considered to be a major milestone then. I was then head hunted to lead the Philippine operations of Zydus Cadila where I became the youngest Filipina to hold a Country Managerial position. Through this position I worked to forge alliances, unlike other large generic players operating here. We worked on partnerships, differentiating ourselves in the sense that we worked more on exclusive brand owning arrangements with the top local generic companies giving them security at the same time protecting vendor's IPR. The partnerships we forged at Zydus Cadila have given us a head start by registering 22 products that were coming off patent, products which were launched as soon as their patent expired at very profitable prices.

I then moved to an expanded role to be Regional Head, Asia Pacific for Jubilant Life Sciences, India where I was handling the markets of Japan, Australia, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Taiwan. For Jubilant, the major milestone was that we were able to make it as first Indian company to have formulation exports to the highly regulated Japanese market. This stint helped to develop several path breaking partnerships for them in Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia.

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## **What is Firmlink's footprint currently, and what is the portfolio of services that you are offering to your partners?**

While working at Jubilant in late 2009, I was recruited by Firmlink Pharma, a very lean and young organization. We have 3 locations globally, hopefully with a 4<sup>th</sup> in Brazil in the next three years. Manila is our center for regulatory and business development work in the Asia Pacific region where we have been in operation for almost 5 years working as an extended arm for international players. Our business model is basically to let our international partners focus on their core competencies dossier development, or front-end sales and marketing. Therefore, we do the entire chain of their business development in markets that they are not familiar with, as well as regulatory work and product sourcing allowing them to focus more on their in-built strengths.

The most sizeable market for us at the moment is Taiwan, as we are the biggest importers in the country. We follow similar business model there as well, partnering with large importers. In each market, we try to minimize the number of partnerships we have, as we want to have a very close-knit relationship with our partners. We focus on large generic companies, and not just local but multinational companies as well.

## **Assisting with market entry is also one of the services that Firmlink offers its partners. What are some of the challenges and benefits of entering the pharmaceutical market in the Philippines?**

The biggest challenges we found companies facing in the Philippines are mostly related to cultural and profit margin understanding. For example, before we planned the Zydus Cadila entry to the Philippines, about a handful of top 10 Indian companies were already present, but not with any significant presence. When these companies entered the market, there was not much understanding in terms of how the local companies work, but they also helped to increase the acceptance of Indian products. 20 years ago, if you said that something was an Indian product, no one would want it, they were viewed as substandard. We therefore naturally adopted a partnership business model to have large local companies as the face for Indian products. With Zydus Cadila, we launched the company first, as opposed to just doing a product launch. We invited key opinion leaders, regulatory professionals and industry executives to visit the manufacturing sites and the R&D Center, which is one of the topnotch R&D Centers in the region. This was the first time that the Philippines FDA actually did a site audit of an Indian company, and it was an eye-opener for them. The challenge for MNCs coming into the Philippines is more of understanding how local companies work in the country. Compared to other ASEAN markets, Philippines still has a very easy market entry process, and the Philippines represents a huge opportunity in that sense, and additionally, generic prices in the country are quite high compared to neighboring countries, representing another opportunity.

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## **How would you describe the regulatory environment in the Philippines, and what improvements do you think could be made?**

The regulatory system here is still one of the most trustworthy in the region with its sound and relatively established structure. Over the past few years, we have seen a heap of streamlining efforts by the Philippines FDA most especially the full harmonization process to align its standards with the rest of ASEAN. While the regulatory environment is fast changing, from an industry perspective, there is a focused need to build on the progress already made and not necessarily reinvent the wheel. A push for the membership with the Pharmaceutical Inspection Co-operation Scheme (PICs) will also bring Philippines at par with the rest of its neighboring countries in terms of globally accepted practices and standards.

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## **Throughout the Philippines we have seen an increase in acceptance towards generic medicines. How has this impacted the market as well as Firmlink's operations?**

The rising acceptance of generics has been very positive for Firmlink. We have been working in the generic space for a long time, and the generics market is now nearly 50 percent of the market. At Firmlink, we are quite bullish about the future of generics in the Philippines, as the generic market is currently growing at a double-digit pace and projected to continue in the future.

## **What makes Firmlink the partner of choice in the Philippines?**

To succeed in the generic business, do not be generic, and we live in the credo of operational excellence. We provide differentiated service and product offerings based on clear cut, transparent and highly ethical approach. Our expertise lies in all aspects of regulatory processes and requirements, pricing in key therapeutic areas and market specific models suited to a specific geography. We perform rigorous due diligence procedures to ensure customers get the benefits of reliability of commitments with cost effectiveness so vital for our customers in the generic space. We ensure that we go beyond the expectations of clients by drilling down on all planned activities. Our worldwide network of vendors is carefully selected to offer a wide range of formulations specially focusing on the niche, un-crowded segments or difficult to develop products across select high growth therapeutic categories.

## **Looking more broadly at Firmlink's regional activities, how important of a role does the Philippines play?**

Moving forward, and looking at the global outlook, Firmlink has identified 13 key pharmaceutical markets that it plans to focus on to provide our services. The Philippines is one of these key markets and in fact is the center for our regulatory and business development initiatives in Asia Pacific. Also the proximity of handling other major pharmerging markets from here like Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and Korea will help us build Philippines into an even bigger regional hub as Firmlink grows to set up offices in Brazil and CIS in the near future. There is immense talent pool in the Philippines which makes it one of the most sought after source of technical pharmaceutical know how.

In terms of the market potential, Philippines not being a reimbursed market and most spending on drugs being out-of-pocket for the patient, the potential to have more support and growth in the market is immense. The National Insurance Act, for example, while instituted a few years back is still far from taking the effect it should have by increasing the coverage of drug use aided by the government. However, having said that it is a good first step since it ensures coverage of the people on the fringes the elderly, the disabled & the underprivileged. This has surely increased the Hospital use by certain sections of the society which we estimate would be to the extent of 15-20 percent. Needless to say majority of this business is going to generics.

On the rise of generics and mapping the way the market has progressed over the last decade and a half is simply something very few of us in the industry envisioned. Even though the Generics Act was promulgated in 1988 but it really came into effect in the new millennium. Clearly the generic drug use has increased across several variables; Generic Drug Prescription increase, Generic drug substitution, Price Menu Cards and in fact actual use and acceptance of generic drugs. From a level of 15-20 percent generics in the market we are now close to 50 percent of the market being generic driven. And that is simply because Philippines still has generic prices higher than most of its neighbors and most developing countries and that is the opportunity that suppliers see here. That tagged with low entry barriers thus far make this prima facie an interesting market in the long term.

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**Over the course of your nearly 7-year tenure at Firmlink, what are a few of the achievements that you are proudest of?**

In Taiwan we are the biggest importers at the moment, as we have registered and tied-up 123 products in the country. In the Philippines, we are front-runners in terms of getting sites audited by the Philippine FDA and successfully sourced and launched differentiated products in the market with exclusive strong alliances with large local companies as well as MNCs. In Indonesia, we are the first company to get BPOM approvals for our Bangladeshi and Indian partners. In Bangladesh we work with the leading 10 companies, and we have registered most of their specialty molecules in most markets. Basically, we work in all niche product categories as well as medical devices. As the gestation period for product registration is quite long, we are just starting to get the results of those product registrations this year. We have had many product launches and registrations this year, and it will only increase in the coming years. We are also in ongoing discussions with several Japanese companies, so we are hoping to soon tap that market as well and get them in our markets.

**Where do you hope to see Firmlink in the next 3-5 years?**

Hopefully we are offering the same services, but working more closely in select geographies in a more focused way. We also hope to dedicate resources on more niche products as well, and continue to provide value-added services to our clients. The challenge for us now is that big companies have a structure already in place. They have their own sourcing team and their own business development team. We have to position ourselves as a efficient & cost effective support system or an extended arm for our international partners across India, Bangladesh, South Africa, Taiwan, Spain, Indonesia, Belgium, Korea, Japan, Brazil and the Middle East.

**Do you have any final message for our readers in the Philippines and around the world?**

Welcome to the Philippines! There is tremendous potential in the market, especially in the generic space. Universal healthcare is one opportunity that a lot of people will begin to tap, it has been there since 1998, but the full implementation and effect just came recently, and there are still a lot of gaps to be filled, and that is where the opportunity lies. Firmlink is well positioned to use its differentiated model in the generic space to assist our partners to get higher value. These are thrilling times to be in the market and we are confident of interpreting the changes and creating incremental value for our partners here. Firmlink is a natural partner of choice for those who want to tap into this potential.

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