Interview: John Sampalis â?? President & CEO, JSS, Canada

â??At JSS, we are not just a pure academic CRO, although we nurture academic development, but we also serve industry at the same time.â?•

19.12.2017

Tags:

Canada, JSS, CRO, R&D, Service Provider

Dr. John Sampalis, CEO of JSS talks about the impact that changes in the global R&D landscape have had on JSS, the role technology is playing in running an efficient clinical trial program and the companyâ??s next exciting move into the US.

John, what have been the main milestones of the companyâ??s development since we last met you in 2013?

There have been some major developments over the last four years. In 2014 we completed the acquisition of our Indian affiliate. The integration process has started and is progressing quite well. We are very pleased with the fact that we can tap into resources in India to help our Canadian and US clients. In turn, we are able to provide significant value to our clients in the region. Our anticipation is that we will help India as a country and as a healthcare system to implement post marketing surveillance systems and elevate them to the same level that we have in Canada, the US and Europe, which would allow them to better assess the benefits and risks of marketed medication as well as the costs associated with said medication. We also made a small acquisition in Poland, which we are excited about as it gives us an opportunity to test the waters in Europe, especially Eastern Europe.

Overall, we have expanded our Business Development team to five people, each one dedicated to oversee one region, focusing of course on the Canadian business but also to bring in business from around the world.

In terms of organic growth, we have had a significant increase in our international business. Where in the past the majority of our business was Canada grown, our international business has almost doubled. This is a great indicator that once people know about the quality of your work, they want come and work with you. The problem we faced in the past was that most people did not know we were here, which means we had to do a better job of promoting ourselves and the excellent resources our potential clients could tap into.

Looking globally, we have seen industryâ??s R&D model change over the past decade, with Big Pharma increasingly outsourcing their R&D to external partners like CROs. How have these trends impacted the CRO landscape, and in particular JSS?

[Featured_in]

My concern sometimes with the transition of operations from big pharma to smaller CROs is that we tend to lose focus on our core task. To explain, we are designed to execute scientific work but what comes along with the transition of responsibilities is the administrative work, a.k.a. as the fiscal financial responsibility, which has increased dramatically over the last years. Overall the shift has been beneficial for us in terms of business growth but we now need to add another layer of service that did not exist prior. On the positive, we have seen a lot more consolidation in the CRO landscape, which is great because it means that we can serve bigger contracts.

How do you strike the balance of being able to service both big pharma while at the same time being a niche-oriented CRO?

Looking at the services we predominantly offer to big pharma, we consider ourselves to be more on the creative side of things. We will not compete directly with the large-scale CROs like IQVia for big Phase III trials, as those companies have significantly more resources to execute these types of studies.

[related_story]

What we offer big pharma companies is our work in post-marketing studies and epidemiological work. This work is not cookie-cutter, there is no stereotypical protocol management approach; it is very scientific and that is our competitive edge. Our big pharma clients appreciate exactly that.

When we work with smaller biotech companies, we also manage to bring in some of that creativity. For example, when they are developing a molecule or device, we always ask them for the final intent, whether they want to commercialize it themselves, license it or sell it off. We try to move the horizon and address the kind of questions governments, investors or buyers would pose.

What are the specific services most in demand by your clients?

At JSS, we are not just a pure academic CRO, although we nurture academic development, but we also serve industry at the same time. Our business is currently split 50-50 between pre- and post-marketing services.

The most frequently demanded services from big pharma exceed the execution of post-marketing studies to help answer questions in terms of treatment gaps in certain therapeutic areas or questions around the concerns that healthcare practitioners or patients might have once big pharma introduces their medication to the market.

Our biotech clients usually seek the full scope of services, as they need guidance along the entire value chain. Overall, project and study management is probably highest in demand, which goes

beyond the isolated services, such as data analysis and medical writing that we were approached for in the past.

What role does technology play in this regard?

For me, technology has to be a tool that helps you to sell a product. For example, we are working with a company to employ artificial intelligence (AI) that helps us to identify clinical trial candidates around the world. In addition, we are working with another partner, employing AI to scout what people say on social media, creating buckets of potential patients because they are asking particular questions. This is of great value to us but one of my main issues is to get everyone to adapt and embrace these technologies. Naturally, there are various degrees of scepticism. Pharmaceutical executives get very impressed but they do not necessarily understand how things work. Thus, their expectations can sometimes be misaligned with reality. However, if we keep our expectations reasonable technology platforms can be very useful.

Where I see a big push towards technology platforms is in two areas. First, technology helps us to become more efficient in managing our clinical programs and to identify the proper resources.

Secondly, technology is incredibly fascinating when it comes to data mining. We are very privileged to have access to insurmountable amount of data and technology can greatly help us to make sense of such. Nonetheless, we have to be cautious not to allow machine technology and random statistical analysis to take over human conclusions.

What makes JSS the partner of choice?

Depends which client you ask. The common denominator will be accessibility. We have never allowed bureaucracy and processes to stand in the way of serving our clients. Although profitability is necessary to keep our business alive, we are much more interested in providing value. Secondly, scientific value is our strong game. Essentially, we solve problems: before, during and after your clinical program to find out where your bottlenecks are and how we can overcome them.

Above all, we have an excellent operational team. Albeit challenging, we are keeping up with technology and are as good as large CROs in terms of reliability and processes, which is extremely important.

In essence, our clients come to us because we offer solutions to their problems and they stay with us because we can execute. We always deliver on our promise to complete their studies, publish their results and present evidence in the best way possible.

Over the last few years, you have been very successful in expanding internationally. What will be the next steps of your internationalization strategy?

When I first embarked on establishing an international footprint, everyone would always come to me and ask me about if I considered going to the US, which at the time seemed an insurmountable obstacle. The US was an important market of course but I was rather sceptical about penetrating it. In the meantime however, all these indicators have changed and there is high demand for our services in the US. Thus, our next big move will be to establish a JSS US office by the end of 2017. We already have made some movement towards this end and established some relationships.

We have pointers from our clients that they would love us to go and do work there, both big pharma and smaller biotech companies. The US is a great market and the timing is right for us to be there!

In addition, we are pushing more on the expansion in Latin America. We have hired a regional director that is based in Montreal but understands the Latin American very well. Finally, Poland is an interesting experiment, perhaps a springboard for Europe over the next few years.

What will be your other key priorities over the next few years?

We are currently looking for investors that would be interested in participating in the growth of JSS. The reason being that we would like to do a few more acquisitions to bring in supplementary services in terms of geographies and scope of services, especially in the regulatory areaâ??given that our plans are to provide regulatory services in the US.

Once we have attracted this kind of investment, I am going to focus a lot on organic growth, trying to stabilize things and grow that way. What is exciting about JSS is the kind of clients and the kind of projects we are attracting. Our average contract value has grown at a magnitude of five to seven, which is an important change to me. JSS is getting ready to invest more in our global infrastructure. It is encouraging and rewarding that people recognise the value we bring to them.

See more interviews