

Interview: Michel Ginestet – Global Innovative Pharma (GIP) Business Unit Head and President, Pfizer France



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The President of Pfizer France reveals how the biggest challenge the French pharma industry faces is to gain credit for its contribution to improve people's quality of life; why France is and will always be important for any large pharma company, despite some particular challenges; and how France's unique strength is the academic ability of its people, which translates directly into research ability.

Since becoming President of Pfizer France in 2013, what have been the main highlights for the affiliate?

One of the main highlights has been the launch of a couple of really strong brands these last few years. In oncology, our product Xalkori® is a model in personalized medicine for the anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) mutation. Oncology is probably the one area where the pharmaceutical industry has contributed the most in recent years. The next frontier in the medical industry will be immuno-oncology. In this regards, Pfizer has recently signed a deal with Merck Serono and in 2014 reached an agreement with French biotech company Cellectis to develop immunotherapy drugs in cancer.

At the global level, a major strategic decision that Pfizer undertook three years ago was to move to a Business Unit construct, bringing together our top leaders to focus on major financial, strategic and operational decisions for the company. My role was to implement this move in France, explaining to the outside world the reasoning behind such a move. In France we are now harvesting the results of these changes, and for the first time in our history we have five business units that are all performing above budget.

In 2013, Pfizer sold its only manufacturing facility in France. The relevance and attractiveness of manufacturing in France is a central question for both government and industry. What did this move say about Pfizer's approach?

It may be counterintuitive, but the very fact of divesting our plant in favor of a CMO that we have a longstanding relationship with, Fareva, will lead to increased investment in France. If you really want to get out of a market, you close a plant, you do not sell it. When we sell a plant, we do so with binding long-term agreements. Pfizer still sees France as an attractive market to manufacture products. The problem we were facing in 2013 is that these sorts of plants, manufacturing primarily small molecules and pills, were areas where internally Pfizer's volumes were decreasing. Viagra®, which used to be an important part of our business, was going off patent, inevitably leading to a decrease in volumes. A company such as Fareva can attract external volume and offset the loss of Viagra®, in a way which we would not be capable of doing. Pfizer was not moving out of France by divesting a plant; on the contrary, it demonstrated our commitment to remaining an active player in the country. Even if we are not present with a Pfizer logo, through all the contracts we have in France, Pfizer is today employing over 1,400 people in manufacturing. We need to better communicate our role in supporting French manufacturing jobs, and we have plans to do so. 10 percent of the volume of Pfizer products produced globally are manufactured in France. Our responsibility is to raise awareness of our commitment to France. In terms of our industrial footprint, we employ a considerable number of people. This is a model that we will look to adopt in a number of countries. Rather than having our own plant, we will increasingly look to deal with local manufacturers.

In the past many complained about a certain distance between French academic and public research and the corporate world. Yet Pfizer has established a lot of common R&D projects linking these worlds. Tell us about your strategy when it comes to R&D?

We apply the same logic when it comes to research as we do for manufacturing. Rather than focusing on internal resources, our model is based on partnerships, of which we have many. We collaborate both with private research, Collectis being one example, but also with public research, where France is extremely strong. Pfizer has an ongoing partnership with INCa (The French National Cancer Institute), working on oncology in France. The perception of internal stakeholders in Pfizer's global research is that France is a model. If you want to work in oncology research you have a one-stop shop in INCa, which centralizes all the knowledge within the oncology world and which greatly facilitates the process.

As regards to product development, you have to factor in regional specificities, regional healthcare systems and their different approaches. You cannot conduct development in one single country that will then be generalized to all affiliates; you have to conduct development in numerous countries. France, by its size and good level of infrastructure, is a good place to do product development. France's unique strength is the academic ability of its people, which translates directly into research capability.

What are some of the other unique strengths of the French healthcare system?

Public and private partnerships (PPPs) are essential to fostering innovation and research. Around six years ago France came up with the concept of R&D speed-dating, something which is now a best practice. Conceived as a laboratory for ideas and innovations, R&D speed-dating promotes encounters between academic researchers and top-level R&D decision-makers from health companies, focused on a specific field of research. It was through this system that Pfizer first started talking to Cellectis, and laid the groundwork for our future collaboration at a global level. Another unique feature of the French system is the ATU system (early access to drugs not yet on the market). This is the best example of France's commitment to innovation. Before a product has even been approved, we make it available to patients to tackle a clear unmet political need. This model is now being replicated in other countries, providing patients access to a brand up to three years before it would normally be available. Within Pfizer, France is the fifth biggest contributor in terms of total turnover. It is a large market with comprehensive access to healthcare. Compared to other markets where you have problems around access, France has universal and unlimited access to healthcare.

What is the biggest challenge that the pharmaceutical industry faces in France?

The biggest challenge we have as an industry is to improve our image. All studies demonstrate that the pharmaceutical industry is the biggest contributor to improving life expectancy and the quality of life. Not only is the industry not recognized for its contribution, we are even frequently criticized.

How does a big pharma company such as Pfizer perceive France?

France is and will always be a strong contributor to any large pharmaceutical company. Although we are often perceived as a difficult country, and for good reasons, it should be remembered that France is a strong country, with excellent people, supporting innovation. It should be these factors that drive the image of France.

After 24 years of working for Pfizer France, in 2012 you become country President, heading one of Pfizer's largest affiliates in the world. How did life change for you on the day you were appointed?

You feel the pressure! You are now the person in people's eyes, both internally and externally, who is responsible for the overall affiliate. In terms of business, the role did not radically change from my previous job of being in charge of a business unit. The main difference is that for both the inside and outside worlds, you are seen as the leader, and people expect answers to a lot of questions. I take seriously my responsibility to ensure that Pfizer remains a company where people feel proud to work and are happy in their jobs, contributing to make available the patients treatments that improve their lives.

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