

Interview: Robert Bitner – General Manager, Galderma Poland



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Robert Bitner, country manager of Galderma Poland, give his first impressions of the Polish dermatology landscape and how his past experiences have prepared him for the challenges ahead. Additionally, he highlights the importance of establishing strong partnerships with Polish medical personnel for long-term success and the potential of the company's newest area, aesthetic dermatology.

After many years in the ophthalmology sector, you made a large shift towards dermatology, taking up the country manager role at Galderma Poland earlier this year. What was the reasoning behind this move and what similarities have you witnessed thus far within each distinct therapeutic area?

I was very keen to transition from the ophthalmology field as my days were becoming more routine and moving into dermatology gave me new opportunities and exciting challenges.

During my career the impact of treatment on a person's health has always been the most important. In eyecare, this involved in most of cases like vision correction or cataract people retaining their eyesight, while in skincare the conditions are generally more chronic and require constant treatment. In fact, I started to take note of skin conditions more as I aged and noticed people's skin becoming less elastic and healthy as they got older. This allowed me to understand the overriding mission of skin companies, as a person's skin health has a large impact on their daily life, especially in the case of our teenage patients who are mentally affected by conditions such as acne.

Looking at the similarities, both ophthalmology and dermatology are strongly rooted to the Rx segment. Also, aesthetic dermatology, is an area in which Galderma is increasing its footprint and is booming in Poland as Poles are becoming more concerned with their appearance and beauty clinics open up. It is a sector that is not directly linked to a medical condition, similar to the contact lenses field I have experienced during my time at Novartis. Aesthetics is more based on repeat business and interactions with clinicians â?? although â?? we are looking to incorporate aesthetic care as a part of complimentary therapy to other medical treatments.

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Overall, I see that both areas I have worked in during my career have many overlapping ideas, and my objective is to always learn and to apply the past positive learning or to avoid the same mistakes in dermatology that I made during my time in ophthalmology.

What is your initial diagnosis of the Polish dermatology landscape?

My first impression is it is growing extremely fast, and like many successes, it is about being at the right place at the right time, like the period of boom that occurred in eye care more than a decade ago. During that time majority of the companies achieved great results and were flourishing, though during these stages, it is important to understand one important factor; why? Many people did not know why they were commercially achieving results, what has happened because of them and after a few years their business failed.

This analysis is key for long-term, sustainable success and a theme I need to work out with my team at Galderma Poland. Therefore, we need to focus not only on our great products, but more establishing ourselves as the premier business partner of choice for dermatology clinics and we would love to help them to maximize positive consumers experience with their entire treatment service.

In your expert opinion, how well rewarded is innovation in Poland?

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The barrier for innovative companies in Poland is the limited public healthcare budget, the amount the National Health Fund (NFZ) is able and willing to spend on innovation in general. Recently we experienced a positive trend in Poland, and a good example is additional funds being directed towards cataract surgeries to reduce long patient queues in some regions that are up to three years. In fact, due to this factor, many companies see Poland as a second wave nation for product releases.

Nevertheless, all the products Galderma markets in Poland are paid out of pocket by the patient/consumer, so we are not constrained by the NFZ's spending. This is why the OTC industry is so strong in Poland, as the people are accustomed to paying for medicines themselves.

Galderma Poland is very strong in Rx and has been our core business for years, achieving still double-digit growth in 2017, a challenging task considering the saturation of the Polish dermatology market. Therefore, it is important to not only introduce new products, but grow overall awareness of the benefits of pharmaceuticals in dermatology as most of patients are unaware that medical treatment could cure their problem. This is especially prevalent in teenagers, who do not know drugs can help their acne, and are utilizing old wives' recipes instead.

Do you feel dermatology treatments should be reimbursed?

This answer is two-fold. On one hand, I know how important the treatments are for patients to grow self-esteem and self-confidence. Having reimbursement for basic products would be a great plus, especially for acne care in teenagers or rosacea for adults. Moreover, having reimbursement would help doctors convince patients to be compliant with their treatment.

On the other hand, I have witnessed throughout my career in Poland many greater issues in the reimbursement scheme in harsher therapeutic areas, such as MS or oncology. Furthermore, patients do not have the funds to pay for these treatments, unlike dermatology which is generally affordable for the average Pole. Asking for public funds knowing that life threatening diseases are not covered would be quite selfish.

Galderma in the past have conducted clinical trials in Poland. What potential do you see for the company to ramp up their activity in Poland?

Galderma over recent year has gone through an evolution. For many years the company grew through acquisitions and acted less globally, with the majority of activity being conducted in key markets, such as France. Now, since Nestle took full ownership in 2014, the company is thinking more global. This will increase the potential for Poland to take a greater part in R&D and help us interact further with universities and clinics.

What differentiates Galderma to the competition in the world of dermatology?

Within the dermatology sector in Poland many companies are represented by small distributors that have by its nature a short-term approach. Galderma being present directly, needs to have a different way of thinking by combining short-term objectives while to set up roots in for a long-term approach. We aspire to impact the market by being trendsetters and influencers, not followers.

The Rx field is already firmly established, so patient education and treating undiagnosed patients is a way of increasing the market and our market share. Though, really, I see our future growth coming from adding consumer interactions. This involves not just offering the direct treatment through the doctor, but the whole spectrum of care through additional products, such as nutritional advice, body wash & shampoos, body cream and specialty cosmetics. This will help build brand loyalty, a trait that is strong in Poland, shown through our leading brand, Cetaphil®.

What areas do you see growing for the company in the future?

Aesthetic dermatology definitely. It is a booming market in Poland, though I notice that in this field of medicine it is not overly sophisticated. As aforementioned, it is critical that Galderma and our partners understand the reasons behind this success and potential traps. It is easy to fall into the temptation of driving forward the image of beautiful people, though this is not thinking long-term as many people are put off by celebrities and horror stories of aesthetic treatment gone wrong.

We must attack the market strategically and ensure people understand the therapy is to help people achieve a natural look, which radiates health and beauty. Also, I believe, like many doctors, the market needs some regulation, in order to minimize risk for patients where underqualified people are administering the therapy, resulting in possible side effects, which might consume the public budget.

Overall, in aesthetic dermatology we must push the message of helping people live better lives, not just enhancing looks for commercial purposes.

Where do you want to take the affiliate over the upcoming years?

Galderma Poland has delivered year on year great numbers, and together with my team, I would like to continue the success of sales and profit growth. What I would like to add is my experience from

the field of optics and ophthalmology and how to transform the company from the supplier of premium quality products with clinically proven efficacy to the next level of becoming the medical partner for doctors and business partners to customers and shape. Together we can drive forward the dermatology market, with a special focus on aesthetics dermatology.

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