

Sandra Marques – General Manager, Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal

Sandra Marques – General Manager, Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal

My management style is based on betting everything on the people we have. I believe that having an efficient, motivated, and engaged team that works cross-functionally is the key to success in any business

30.01.2024

Tags:

[Portugal](#), [Boehringer Ingelheim](#), [Europe](#), [Strategy](#), [Talent](#), [Leadership](#)

Boehringer Ingelheim has a 60-year history in Portugal and, despite challenges in terms of market access and reimbursement delays, remains fully committed to providing innovative healthcare solutions in the country. General Manager Sandra Marques outlines how the firm has established itself as a major player in Portugal's prescription retail market, its continued focus on life-changing treatments, and why a people-focused management strategy is a cornerstone of any future success.

Could you please provide us with a brief history of Boehringer Ingelheim in Portugal?

Boehringer Ingelheim has been operating in Portugal for over 60 years, primarily in the human pharma business. Overall, we have a rich history here and we are proud of the progress we have made in both human and animal health. This building where we are currently located used to be a Boehringer Ingelheim manufacturing plant, mainly for packaging purposes. In 2004, the company decided to remodel it for office purposes. In 2006, we moved in, and it has been our local headquarters ever since.

At the time, human pharma had three divisions: specialty care, primary care and consumer healthcare. In 2016, we swapped our consumer healthcare division for Sanofi's animal health division. Initially, our local animal health business was managed via a distributor in Spain, but this division grew in importance, and we were able to bring our animal health operations to Portugal in 2017.

While we have had to adapt to changes in the market over the years, we remain committed to providing innovative solutions to our customers. Our focus on customers' needs is what has allowed us to grow and expand our operations in Portugal.

How does Boehringer Ingelheim currently position itself in the Portuguese pharma market, and what therapy areas are your strong suit?

In the past, Boehringer Ingelheim was known for its consumer healthcare products and also as one of the key players in the respiratory area. In 2003, we launched a blockbuster in partnership with Pfizer, which was a game-changer for us and brought a new era of life-changing medicines for patients living with COPD. Since then, we have expanded into many other areas. We are currently positioned as the fourth player in the prescription retail market in Portugal. We are now very much focused on the cardio-renal-metabolic (CRM) arena, where we have a diversified portfolio. Therapeutics that are aimed for diabetes, heart failure and chronic kidney disease, which are highly prevalent conditions in Portugal, represent a significant growth driver for us. We are also invested in expanding our health solutions portfolio for interstitial lung diseases (ILDs).

What are the upcoming products in Boehringer Ingelheim's pipeline that can be expected in the market shortly?

Looking ahead, we have a prolific pipeline that will enable us to reach our goal of having 25 launches in the next five years, in areas such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, metabolic diseases, lung diseases, skin diseases, mental disorders and retinal diseases. This is a significant milestone for us since we'll be able to benefit an even larger and more diverse population of patients with our innovative solutions in healthcare. Just this year we have entered into five new R&D partnerships in the areas of oncology, cardio-renal-metabolic conditions and fibro-inflammatory diseases and the company is looking forward to working with our new partners and to starting new R&D partnerships to further enable and accelerate our commitment to transforming the lives of patients worldwide.

Given the challenges in accessing the market in Portugal, what makes the right strategy for Boehringer Ingelheim?

The big challenge for the industry here in Portugal is the time a medicine takes to come to market. Innovative product reimbursement delays are a significant hurdle, and the average time for an innovation to reach Portuguese patients is much longer than in other European countries. We also face significant bureaucratic hurdles regarding research & development that make Portugal a less attractive country for clinical trials. All these factors make it challenging to bring innovative solutions to the market as quickly and efficiently as our patients need.

Between launch and patent expiration, the window of opportunity to make the most out of our investment in a new molecule is too narrow. This is a significant challenge, as it takes billions of euros to bring a single molecule to light. Additionally, the government's willingness to reimburse innovation is limited, which can impact our ability to invest in new products.

Another challenge we face is the budgetary measures that were put in place during the economic crisis, such as the clawback protocol and changes in the international price referencing rules. This protocol, which aims to make the pharmaceutical industry support the state by keeping medicine expenditure stable, was supposed to be temporary but has become long-lasting and continues to impact our operations. We are currently expecting news on the international price referencing, which will determine the pricing rules and reference countries for 2024.

Along with the length of time to market access in Portugal, all these measures have made forecast planning very challenging. Despite all this, we've been relentlessly working to overcome these

hurdles and we remain committed to bringing innovative solutions to our customers.

Across the industry, we have seen scaling down becoming a trend for smaller markets. Why has Boehringer Ingelheim decided to remain a full operation in Portugal?

Boehringer Ingelheim has decided to maintain the entirety of its operations in Portugal because the company believes these decisions should be based on our commitment to continuously improve healthcare and not on the market size. Our mission is to transform lives for generations, and we believe we have been doing this ever since we began our journey in Portugal. Although it can be challenging to operate in Portugal due to its unique environment, we believe we have the responsibility to improve the healthcare system by making life-changing treatments accessible to patients, and by partnering with policymakers, patient organizations, medical societies and other stakeholders that also want to healthcare in Portugal to higher standards.

Could you describe your management style in leading this successful affiliate?

My management style is based on betting everything on the people we have. I believe that having an efficient, motivated, and engaged team that works cross-functionally is the key to success in any business. Culture is everything and it makes all the difference. At Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal, we have an environment where people feel proud of belonging to the company and of their daily work, knowing that they are making a difference for patients and ultimately transforming lives.

Besides a great team, having a strong portfolio and pipeline is essential. However, even with the best products, if we do not have the right people to conduct our business, we cannot succeed. This is why I am proud to lead a team that is not only talented but also diverse and truly engaged.

Speaking about engagement and sense of belonging, COVID-19 presented a significant challenge to the affiliate. We were used to working in a very social environment and people enjoyed speaking in the corridors and solving problems together. However, we quickly adapted to the new reality and worked hard to keep people engaged and motivated while they were working from home. We invested a lot in internal communication and initiatives to help people feel they were still part of a living and connected organization and part of the Boehringer Ingelheim family. Now that we are returning to the office, I am thrilled to see that the team is eager to come back and be part of the Boehringer Ingelheim spirit.

How have you leveraged the local Portuguese talent to bring value to Boehringer Ingelheim on a larger scale?

I am proud of my talented colleagues here in Portugal and the contributions they make to our business and the broader organization. In 2014, Boehringer Ingelheim established a new regional structure that included Portugal in a region with eight mid-sized countries. This allowed us to operate as part of a larger team and leverage synergies across the region. Challenges in one market can be compensated by the success of another one â?? making us a more robust organization. I feel proud to be part of a bigger mission, to know that every country counts and each one is working to help the others.

Many talented people started their careers at Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal and then moved to other regions, countries, and our headquarters. It's exciting when we can develop these talents and project their work to a larger scale at Corporate, our regional headquarters in Amsterdam or in larger countries worldwide. Our local talent is adaptable, flexible, and agile when responding to challenges, which makes a significant difference in their success. People who have worked with our Portuguese team have proven their effectiveness and adaptability, and we are proud of the positive reputation they have built for themselves and for Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal.

Was becoming the General Manager of Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal always a part of your career plan? What were the pivotal moments in your journey that led to where you are today?

I certainly never expected to be a General Manager when I joined Boehringer Ingelheim. At that time, my first task was to launch one of our important brands in the hypertension area. After that, I had the opportunity to launch our blockbuster COPD brand in partnership with Pfizer, which was a great experience that helped me grow in my professional journey and was the best years of my life. I loved marketing and connecting with people to showcase the amazing things we had to offer.

After the successful COPD launch, I decided to pursue other opportunities and took on the role of Head of Marketing. In this position, I took a challenging 1.5-year assignment that allowed me to manage the customer-facing teams in Spain, France and Italy and support them on becoming more efficient and productive.

By the end of 2013, I returned to my position as Head of Marketing and my manager, who was German and the first female General Manager in Portugal offered me the opportunity to succeed her. I decided to take the chance and became the first Portuguese GM at Boehringer Ingelheim Portugal. I have been in this role for almost 10 years.

Although this was not always part of my career plan, I am very proud of having taken the leap. I hope my own success and what we have collectively achieved as a team have shown that local talents can be successful leaders. Overall, I am grateful for all the opportunities Boehringer Ingelheim offered me, and I look forward to continuing my contributions to the organization.

Boehringer Ingelheim unveiled a new corporate branding in October. As a long-term employee, how do you feel about this change and what does it mean for the company?

I am definitely excited about the evolved brand. I believe that the new elements are fresh, and they reflect our values and how we want to be perceived by our stakeholders and partners. The evolved brand includes our internal positioning of transforming lives for generations, as well as the sustainability element and the idea that every patient counts. The new brand claim of "Life Forward" is also very impactful and inspiring. I also like the new color scheme, changing from blue to green.

I believe the timing of this change was perfect. Most companies go through this kind of change in difficult times, but we are currently doing well, and it shows that we have a bright future ahead of us. It is important to reinforce our corporate identity and accommodate every element of the new pipeline coming to life. The evolved brand has been well-received, and I am proud to be part of a company that is always looking ahead and striving to make a positive impact in the world and the lives of our patients. Life forward!

[See more interviews](#)

