

Urs VÃ¶geli â?? Managing Director, Janssen Switzerland



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Urs VÃ¶geli, managing director for Janssen Switzerland, outlines the importance of the Swiss operations to Janssen, his interesting career journey, Janssenâ??s commitment to bringing transformational medical innovations to Swiss patients, as well as his perspectives on talent development within the industry.


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Urs, you were appointed managing director of Janssen Switzerland in November 2019, having worked in a variety of roles with Janssen, BMS and Pfizer in your career. How has your past career experience equipped you to lead Janssenâ??s Swiss affiliate?

I actually started my pharma career with Pfizer as a junior product manager for an arthritis pain drug, just after the COX-2 inhibition controversy occurred, so I was basically thrown into the cold waters of

crisis management on my very first day in the industry! I tell you: the learning curve couldn't be steeper.

After three years with Pfizer, I joined Bristol-Myers Squibb in Switzerland. They hired me to lead an entire business unit and also to join their Swiss management board, despite my lack of people or strategic leadership experience. I suppose they saw my passion for leadership in the industry and serving patients and honestly, I had four amazing years with BMS Switzerland, during which we prepared the launch of our very first immuno-oncology drug, YERVOY®, which was a really exciting and completely new cancer therapy concept back then.

In 2013, Janssen Germany approached me with a position as marketing director for their entire portfolio. By then it was clear to me that as a market, Switzerland was a bit too narrow for career advancement and especially in terms of exposure to larger markets so I had already wanted to take a step out of Switzerland. At the beginning, it was an overwhelming position because I suddenly had to manage the full portfolio of such a large company in such a large market, but I learnt an incredible amount. Even more, I was deeply impressed and inspired by the way the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) CREDO is alive and serves as a compass for leadership every day. Subsequently, I became the director for our oncology and hematology franchises, overseeing exciting launches like ZYTIGA®, IMBRUVICA® or DARZALEX®. Within five years, we more than doubled our business in Germany and became one of the key oncology players.

That success helped prepare me for my next role, VP and regional commercial lead for hematology in Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA). Fortunately for me, as we did not have an EMEA HQ, I was able to choose to stay in Germany – my wife is actually German and our daughter was born in Germany – but a year later, as a family, we decided to move back to Switzerland. Many EMEA and global functions for Janssen are actually based out of our Zug campus in Switzerland.

Just two months after the move, I received the call offering me the Swiss managing director position, which I was very happy to accept. It is always great to start an MD position in your home country since you already understand the culture, the languages, and the healthcare system and can therefore start making a difference early on.

Having worked in a variety of roles, including transversal product and marketing roles both in-country and regionally, and now in a country manager position, from your perspective, what are the skill sets needed for these different types of roles?

First of all, I love the fact that with a company like J&J you are able to have a career where you can switch between these different types of roles – functionally and regionally – because I enjoy both international and local positions. The EMEA position I held was, of course, a very strategic role where I was in close collaboration with global teams and involved with decisions on our clinical programs and pipeline but ultimately I still had to shape the portfolio strategy to fit the EMEA markets – which is itself challenging because of the diversity within the region.

In that context, it is important to find a common denominator that would enable you to fit the strategy to your largest markets without leaving out the middle and smaller markets, and then operationally, it is important to work with your teams to create the right brand strategies. I definitely learnt a lot about how decisions in large companies like J&J are made, and how to influence people and form alliances to build strong cases for decision making.

At the same time, I do not think I could like my current job more than I currently do! It is amazing because I can be really close with our customers and external stakeholders and at the same time

lead and collaborate with an amazing team. At the moment, I spend at least one day a week out in the field, meeting with physicians and other stakeholders.

As you highlighted, for global companies like Janssen, it is important not to overlook smaller markets in strategic and operational decision. Switzerland is an interesting case because the market size is not so big but the country is extremely significant in terms of biopharmaceutical activity, so what is the importance that Janssen ascribes to the Swiss market?

It is patently clear that Switzerland holds a very special position for J&J. Our footprint here has historically been large, and it has been expanded further through key acquisitions like Actelion and Synthes. We have around 4,300 employees here, half from Janssen and half from the other J&J sectors. We are also one of the largest foreign employers here in Switzerland and a top three US employer in the country.

Over the past ten years, Janssen Switzerland has been managed as a cluster along with Austria. While we have seen good growth under this structure, looking at our market share, we realized that there was a lot of untapped potential within Janssen, and the structure made us a little too internally-focused. Therefore, we split the Swiss and Austrian affiliates to strengthen our external focus in both markets. In fact, I am the first-ever Swiss MD for Janssen Switzerland in our over 30 years of history. So we strongly believe that the local focus to the Swiss market will help us serving patients and our customers even better.

Switzerland as a country stands for stability, innovation and quality – all key success factors for the pharmaceutical industry. Therefore, while we do not have the market size of Germany, Switzerland really has a lot to offer. We have very innovative science, for instance, which we can leverage at the university and academic level but also with start-ups and other industry sectors that have a huge interest in life sciences. We also have amazing clinical study centres and internationally-respected KOLs, which, as we have seen, have been performing well in a situation like the global COVID-19 pandemic. In general, we try to use Switzerland as a place for early clinical development since our population size is a little small to scale up for large late-phase clinical trials.

It is also a country where pharma companies can still launch products fairly early, compared to global standards. Switzerland is very open to innovative products, and for a company like Janssen, which is focused on innovative, high-value products, we see good and strong uptake within the Swiss market, so this is also an important place to test new product concepts and to obtain early experience.

You mentioned strengthening your focus on the local market. What are the specificities of the Swiss market that it is important for Janssen to address?

The creation of dedicated organizations for Switzerland and Austria was about being closer to our customers and stakeholders. We wanted to better understand the local market access situation, to customize our strategy to the market, and to drive local debates and be active in shaping the Swiss market environment. That is the key priority for us at the moment.

With market access in particular, having returned to Switzerland after seven years, I was quite surprised to see how much tougher the Swiss market access and reimbursement situation had become. I think it has become one of the most challenging markets in Europe and we therefore

implemented a number of changes very quickly upon my arrival in order to strengthen our expertise. For instance, we enlarged our market access team and brought in talents that help us in better understanding and managing the current dynamics. We need to further invest in more competences in health economics, data analytics and modelling, as well as innovative reimbursement schemes.

A company like Janssen that is 100 percent focused on innovative products is really dependent on a solid market access environment that incentivizes innovation. This is why we are such strong advocates for a value-based healthcare pricing and reimbursement system. Our commitment here is to support the design of a sustainable healthcare system with high-quality patient care and fast access to innovation.

When we last covered the Swiss market four years ago, market access was not so much of a challenge. What do you think has happened in the intervening years?

From my perspective, there are a couple of aspects. Firstly, total healthcare costs have been rising in Switzerland, at a rate faster than GDP growth. Swiss people pay out-of-pocket for their healthcare insurance, and they also have to cover a certain amount for medical treatments. In an annual survey of the most pressing problems faced by Swiss people, healthcare costs always became one of the key topics over the last years surveys.

This makes it clear that all stakeholders have to consider the topic of healthcare cost sustainability. From an industry point of view, about eight years ago, triennial price reviews based on a basket of other European markets have been implemented, so Swiss drug prices are currently on par with European drug prices. Through this, the pharma industry as a whole has actually delivered savings of over a billion Swiss francs to the healthcare system in the past eight years. Drug expenditures as a percentage of healthcare spending has therefore also remained stable at 11-12 percent. Based on this, as an industry, we believe that we have already contributed significantly to the sustainability of the Swiss healthcare system.

As a country, as a company, we have to innovate continuously. We cannot just rely on the successes of the past. For instance, Switzerland is still at the top when it comes to number of patents per inhabitant, which is impressive. From an industry standpoint and a political perspective, we want to maintain our competitive edge in innovation. As an industry association, for instance, we have created our "Pharma Hub Switzerland 2030" strategy with ten pillars of very concrete measures and goals we are striving for.

For Janssen, during this COVID-19 period, we are starting to see that we need to drive innovation in more digital ways. There is a JLABS in Belgium, which is brick-and-mortar, but partly as a result of COVID-19, we have all had to promote more virtual collaboration like online seminars and workshops. We are building virtual networks of start-ups and investors here, and also deepening our local partnerships with leading academic institutions like ETH Zurich and EPFL in Lausanne and many start-ups and incubators.


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With Janssen's commitment to innovation, what new products are you excited to bring to Switzerland?

For Janssen it is all about bringing breakthrough innovations to patients and that is why I love working at Janssen because in all the years that I have been here, I have not launched a single product where I thought to myself, "well, this is a bit of a me-too product" or "there is already a product like this on the market". We work in transformational medical innovation. This is why the discussion of having a system that rewards true innovation that bring value to patients and society is so close to my heart and I am committed to advocating for it daily.

Over the last few years, Janssen has brought enormous innovations in areas like dermatology, gastroenterology, psychiatry, multiple myeloma, prostate cancer and so on but there remain huge unmet needs in some areas. One is treatment-resistant depression, which is why I was very excited to launch SPRAVATO® a few months ago in Switzerland, which is a nasal spray for adults with treatment-resistant major depressive disorder. Neuroscience products are very challenging and higher-risk in clinical development than most other areas so we are very proud of bringing this new hope to patients in need and to their families. We are now in the process of negotiating reimbursement. I think we have done a good job in terms of showing its value in clinical trials but we need to do an even better job to show its value to patients and society at large because this is such an amazing and new innovation for a serious disease which affects so many.

Another area I am excited about is CAR-T therapy, of course. We have various exciting candidates, for example Ciltacabtagene Autoleucel (JNJ-4528), which has recently been granted priority medicines (PRIME) designation by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) for use in multiple myeloma patients that have exhausted all treatment options. We presented new data at the American Society for Clinical Oncology (ASCO) conference and the early clinical results in these heavily pre-treated patients look very promising.

What is surprising is that the first CAR-T therapy was only approved in Switzerland last year. What is Janssen doing to lay the groundwork for the approval, launch and uptake of these innovative therapies in the country?

Especially in oncology, there is a challenge at the moment. By law, a product has to receive reimbursement in Switzerland a maximum of 60 days after Swissmedic approval. According to current data, for oncology products, reimbursement decisions only come over a year later, on average. This means we see a huge backlog of innovation in the country, and we are worried about this for new innovations like CAR-T therapies.

For CAR-T, we are therefore beginning the prelaunch preparations earlier than we have ever done. This means engaging with multiple stakeholders, not just the Ministry of Health and Swissmedic but also with payers, politicians and hospital representatives, so that we can understand how to expedite the related processes in order to ensure a smooth launch of CAR-T therapies.

From an industry standpoint, as these are challenges shared by many pharma companies, we are also working together to look at how to improve the overall access, pricing and reimbursement situation, as well as the supply chain management and logistics challenges associated with CAR-T therapies.

Coming to COVID-19, you highlighted the importance of digitalization. What has been implemented?

Most importantly, I am very proud of our Janssen team. They have reacted with a lot of flexibility and resilience. Internally, it was all about being “digitally fit” and we have had the resources and competences to adapt quickly. We worked on being better in terms of data analytics and new technology adoption but it went quite smoothly in general because we have always been open to flexible ways of working and home office.

What was more challenging was interacting with our customers. We had to invest in upskilling both our field force’s and the physicians skills, and we recognized that we could not do everything ourselves on that front. We worked with external partners to help us learn how to better interact digitally with our customers.

I think we should not only look at it from a technical point of view but also focus on the partnership and collaboration that have occurred across the industry. The crisis has brought up completely new ways of working together with industry partners and academic institutions. We have been reaching out to other companies and other companies have been reaching out to us to see if we can join forces on various topics and projects like never before.

In terms of the COVID-19 vaccine candidate from Janssen, what role will country managers be playing in the commercialization process?

Janssen committed very early on to developing a COVID-19 vaccine on a not-for-profit basis. We have been able to leverage our knowledge and platform expertise from our Ebola, RSV and HIV vaccine efforts. In September we announced that our vaccine candidate will be entering Phase 3 clinical trials as a single-dose vaccine, which would be very helpful in a global pandemic situation.

For Switzerland, as we are not part of the European Union, we will have to negotiate a bilateral agreement with the Federal Office of Public Health

On a final note, as you are in your first year here in Janssen Switzerland, what is the mandate you have set for yourself for the rest of your term?

I am extremely proud of the engagement and spirit I can feel within my team here. We truly want to make a difference for patients “every day”. This is the purpose we have: to bring transformation innovations to the market so that patients can enjoy the beauty of life.

As an operating organization, I want to bring the very exciting Janssen pipeline to the Swiss in a quick and broadly accessible manner, despite the challenges that exist.

At the same time, I also want to foster a work environment that is inclusive and diverse. We already have an even gender split at our management board, and 40 percent of our workforce are millennials. We want to create a work environment where people can be their best selves every day, achieve their personal goals and purpose, and bring all their skills and excitement to the company.

I also feel the responsibility to promote young talent very quickly. I myself have benefited from the trust of leaders throughout my career so I think as leaders ourselves, we need to take bold decisions and support the young talents passionately.

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