LOCAL TO GLOBAL:  
MAKING A DIFFERENCE AT PIERRE FABRE

A family-run company overlaid with the corporate culture of a pharmaceutical multinational may sound like a tricky balancing act. But it can offer the best of both worlds.

PIERRE FABRE, THE ONCOLOGY AND dermocosmetics specialist operating out of global headquarters in Castres, France, and from a UK base in Winchester, embodies the questing spirit of its eponymous founder and president, who died in July 2013.

It was an interest in holistic care that first brought Pierre Fabre, a pharmacist working in Castres, into the worlds of dermocosmetics, health and, subsequently, prescription medicines. Pierre Fabre also travelled extensively, discovering that in some Third World countries the vaccines administered were nothing more than placebos – an experience that instilled a sense of social responsibility in the company that still remains central to the Pierre Fabre ethos.

The Pierre Fabre group comprises a range of dermocosmetics with leading brands, as well as an extensive range in healthcare and prescription medicines that range across oncology, neuropsychiatry, dermatology and women’s health, as well as other therapeutic areas such as cardiology and diabetes.

The dominant oncology business in the UK, for example, includes vinca-alkaloid products, licensed in the UK for non-small cell lung cancer and metastatic breast cancer derived from the tropical periwinkle plant, grown in countries like Madagascar.

Giving something back
These plants need to be handpicked, notes Santoke Naal, recently appointed managing director of Pierre Fabre in the UK and Ireland. In the spirit of “giving something back”, Pierre Fabre makes sure a sizeable chunk of its oncology profit is invested in local infrastructure, healthcare and education in countries where the plants are harvested, Santoke explains.

The recognition that medicines entail broader responsibilities than R&D strategies or balance sheets permeates the Pierre Fabre business.

For Santoke this is one characteristic that distinguishes the group from some of the big names in pharmaceuticals and sustains Pierre Fabre’s unique blend of the global and the local within a framework of holistic care.

That singularity is also reflected in Pierre Fabre’s corporate structure. The group has shareholders but most of its assets reside in the Pierre Fabre Foundation, a public-interest organisation with a mission to improve access to quality medicines and care in the least developed and developing countries. This controlling interest not only ensures the continuity of founder Pierre Fabre’s vision but protects the group from takeover in a volatile pharmaceutical market.
While Pierre Fabre is the third largest pharmaceutical company in France, its UK operation is on a more modest scale. As Santoke stresses, though, behind that small UK presence is a “global giant” with around 11,000 employees worldwide and a presence in all the major markets.

A global family
So Pierre Fabre in the UK rests on a very solid corporate base, with a substantial investment in R&D – 50% of which goes into oncology. Yet it retains the feel of a family business.

That goes for location as well. The UK base is a listed building in Winchester, where a range of functions including medical, marketing and human resources are housed. This relatively intimate set-up means Pierre Fabre employees benefit from a broad immersion in the business, Santoke says.

“Everybody’s got a job role, but as a small team there is a lot of cross-functional work. This role flexibility ensures job satisfaction and is a great way to get experience across different fields,” Santoke comments. “Also, people have visibility of the whole organisation, which means it’s easier to implement ideas with real innovation.”

These advantages are supplemented by a good deal of in-house training in the UK, as well as external programmes run out of Pierre Fabre’s Paris office. The group also provides job placements on a rotational basis between France and affiliate countries to help with employee development. The opportunities for employees are endless, with possibilities for placements around the world within the Pierre Fabre group, Santoke comments.

The benefit of a small-scale UK operation is that our field-based staff know they have easy access to back-office support. “We don’t have the volume of red tape you get in big pharma, which means we can be better suited to a rapidly changing external environment,” Santoke observes.

Local business culture
The business culture at Pierre Fabre UK Oncology is one of sharing ideas and adapting quickly to the external environment and the firm has been a strong partner to its clinicians, nurses, patients and pharmacists, Santoke says. In the UK, market access and health technology assessments are familiar ground – and nowhere more so than in oncology, with its regular stream of new and frequently expensive products.

Market access issues go hand-in-hand with strong emotional identification. As Santoke points out, one in four people will know someone who has had cancer.

An oncology-focused business such as Pierre Fabre UK attracts not only high-calibre, experienced staff but often a strong sense of personal mission about making sure patients get optimal care. The future of the UK business is encouraging and continues to demonstrate double digit growth year-on-year as it expands its pool within oncology and beyond.

As Santoke emphasises, though, market access is always relative. “When you look at it on a global level you think, ‘what about countries that can’t afford even the more commonly available cancer drugs used in the UK?’” This is what makes oncology – and Pierre Fabre’s very particular approach to the field – such a powerful draw for pharma professionals who want to contribute beyond the bottom line.

Saving or extending lives overturned by cancer has an enormous impact locally and on multiple levels. Pierre Fabre also insists on the larger perspective: where the treatments originate, how that contribution is recognised, and how the battles we take for granted may not even get off the ground in the developing world.

These days, thinking globally and acting locally is a given. Creating a genuinely local business that acts globally, though, really is something else.