

INTERVIEW

"Stay relevant by focusing on initiatives that move the needle"

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EXPERT INTERVIEW – HENRY COMOLET – HEAD OF SALES EXCELLENCE BASF AGRICULTURAL SOLUTIONS



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HENRY COMOLET
HEAD OF SALES EXCELLENCE – BASF AGRICULTURAL SOLUTIONS

THE CHALLENGE

BASF is the leading chemical company in the world. Its Agricultural Solutions business has been successful in the market for over 100 years, with a strong focus on sustainable partnerships with farmers all over the world. But of course there are also challenges in your market. Can you tell us what challenges BASF is facing in the agricultural space?

There are many challenges in front of us. You could put them into three categories: products, customer needs and market environment. Let me give you some examples. Until recently, BASF was largely a plant protection player, driven by innovation. Our first challenge is to develop innovations in the seeds market. With previous acquisition of a wide range of businesses and assets from Bayer, we now have very exciting new seeds and traits technologies in our portfolio – including hybrid wheat that we should start launching in the mid-2020s. For our customers, we need to continue moving from products to connected offers across crop protection, seeds and traits, and digital solutions. Lastly, we are facing increasing public pressure and more and more stringent regulatory requirements, which significantly raise the cost of our license to operate.

BASF CHALLENGES:

- Changes in offering
- Higher customer needs
- Public pressure and stringent regulatory requirements

OUR SOLUTION

Against this background, BASF's Agricultural Solutions division launched a European Sales Excellence initiative several years ago. Would you like to tell us more about the background and the associated goals?

The Sales Excellence initiative was based on a simple observation: the sales team in Europe represented about 50% of employees in Europe but had no representation at the European level. The Sales Excellence team was built to give a stronger sales voice in our decision process and improve the overall sales performance of the organization. The goals were built around three areas: margin management, market approaches and sales enablement.

GOALS



Margin management, market approaches & sales enablement.

Sales Excellence comprises many parameters. In your experience, what are the most important levers?

To have clear and relevant targets for the entire organization. The three areas I just mentioned have helped us do that. Equally important is having a European team that's as small as possible! Sales do not happen in the head office but in the field: there is no need for a large team at the headquarters functioning in a silo and creating work of dubious value. Last but not least: sales is about people and connections. By having a small European team, you have to work with other departments all the time and bring customer needs to functions and people that very often have little direct interaction with them.

DEMONSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF A NEW TEAM

Your initiative has also led to a considerable adaptation of market and customer processing and thus to considerable demands on your managers and sales staff. Why was it necessary, what were the biggest challenges and how did you tackle them?

Markets, technology and social norms are evolving on an almost daily basis. So, it's necessary to integrate their effect on our sales processes as to not be left behind. The biggest challenge was demonstrating our usefulness to an organization that was having good results and functioned without a Sales Excellence team. To demonstrate our relevance, we decided to focus on a limited number of initiatives (pricing, distributor management and sales training), sell them to the teams and then hit the ground running!

Managers always play a decisive role in such change processes. What expectations do you have of the executives in your Sales Excellence initiative?

The ideal profile includes business (sales) experience, project management skills, implementation drive, initiative and people skills. As the team is small, it is critical that everybody in the team has strong implementation drive and people skills.

MAKING IT LAST

For all companies, the sustainability of sales excellence initiatives is of very high importance. How do you deal with this topic and what role do you personally play?

Europe was the first of the four BASF regions to implement such an initiative. Four years later, the concept was expanded to the three other regions, and this year we are starting a global unit. Once you start the journey, the need for such a unit is overwhelmingly clear – if only because we need to look beyond strategy and invest more time and effort in execution of the strategy.

To ensure sustainability, you need to stay relevant by focusing on initiatives 'that move the needle' and by having a small enough team to show efficiency and guaranteeing focus! My role in this story is simple: I started the European unit and was instrumental in expanding the concept, both for other regions and the global level. I will be leaving my current position soon to support the establishment of the global unit.

LEARNINGS

What were your biggest learnings or is there something you would do differently afterwards?

“The main learning is that you never spend enough time following up and supporting implementation. If I could do something differently, I would spend more time on that.”

MERCURI INTERNATIONAL & BASF

You have opted for external support. What were the reasons for this and where do you see the added value of such support?

Even though BASF is a very large company with lots of internal resources, we simply cannot have all the expertise needed to implement our strategy. The added value of external support comes from their advanced expertise in specific subjects. To properly use external support, we need to have a clear view of what we want to achieve first.

RELATIONSHIPS

How many of your own customer contacts does your agenda still allow? How often do you "tour" yourself with sales staff?

Not enough! The issue is not so much with the number of customer contacts but the impact I can create at customer level. I have maximum impact at customer level by improving the performance of our approximately 750 sales teams members. So that's where I focus – and that's why I have many more meetings with our sales team than with direct customers. My customer visits are more to keep the feel of the market. I would certainly like to do more because a lot is happening. But unfortunately, there are only 24 hours in a day.

One last question Henry - do crop protection and seeds also play a role for you outside your profession?

Certainly. I actively engage with friends and acquaintances to explain that our industry is doing a lot of good and that we are not poisoning the planet. People in the West have lost touch with food production and that the quality of what we have in our plates has never been so high in human history.

About BASF's Agricultural Solutions division

With a rapidly growing population, the world is increasingly dependent on our ability to develop and maintain sustainable agriculture and healthy environments. Working with farmers, agricultural professionals, pest management experts and others, it is our role to help make this possible. That's why we invest in a strong R&D pipeline and broad portfolio, including seeds and traits, chemical and biological crop protection, soil management, plant health, pest control and digital farming. With expert teams in the lab, field, office and in production, we connect innovative thinking and down-to-earth action to create real world ideas that work – for farmers, society and the planet. In 2018, our division generated sales of €6.2 billion