

Emerging Market Interview >>

MATTHIEU SEGUIN, COUNTRY COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR NIGERIA – COCA-COLA HELLENIC



Africa's phenomenal growth

With around 600 million consumers, two thirds of the total population of the continent, Africa is widely considered to be the emerging consumer market with the most potential today; and that number is expected to almost double over the next two decades, as living standards continue to rise. >>



In this article, Andrew Openshaw caught up with Africa veteran, Frenchman Matthieu Seguin from the Nigerian Bottling Company (a

member of Coca-Cola Hellenic Group), who gives his insights into the opportunities and challenges for big brands like Coca-Cola seeking to capitalise on Africa's phenomenal growth. He also shares his views on why people should cast aside their perceptions of Africa, and consider the hugely rewarding career opportunities it has to offer executives from the developed world.

You've been with Coca-Cola Hellenic since 2009. What initially attracted you to the business? What have you achieved in the four years since you joined?

I was attracted to Coca-Cola for two reasons: the brand and the people. People are very accessible at Coca-Cola. Despite being a big international business, you have direct access, for example, to the CEO and the executive team; perhaps more so than you would in other similar sized organisations. There is a real sense of fraternity here, and the people are also very capable and add a lot of credibility to the organisation. It was also a company where I believed I could learn a lot and develop

professionally, which I think I have. In terms of achievements, in my previous role as Group International Customers Director, I set up the multi-functional group customer team and created greater value for our customers in Europe; namely the big retailers. In Nigeria, my role has been focused entirely on business turnaround. When I came here in 2011, we were not performing at the level we should have been, but now Nigeria is one of Hellenic's fastest growing territories. It's been hard work and a fantastic experience and I'm glad to say it's a completely different organisation now than it was back then. And the best is yet to come!

Around 9% of Coca-Cola Hellenic's global business exists in Nigeria. That's quite a large investment. What are the businesses hopes for growth in Nigeria?

Nigeria is a country with huge potential. It has a young and growing population, currently around 170 million people. Its GDP is growing



Matthieu Seguin



Taken at Coca-Cola sponsored Sailing Regatta in Lagos, 2013.

and a greater number of the population are earning more and climbing the social ladder as a result. There is an abundance of new businesses here today; new construction

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projects are taking place in the cities and significant improvements have been made to the country's infrastructure. Per capita consumption of our product portfolio in

Nigeria is also really low compared to Europe, for example, so it's a huge market for us to grow in. Life is still very challenging, however, for the tens of millions of people who live on one dollar a day. So for Coca-Cola, our challenge is trying to create a diverse product portfolio which meets the needs of the very diverse consumer base you have in the country.

Corruption is commonly cited as a hindrance to doing business in Nigeria. This alongside other factors such as

food inflation, the recent removal of fuel subsidies and the growing terrorist threat in northern Nigeria, must have had an impact on consumer demand. How is Coca-Cola Hellenic dealing with this?

Everybody talks about these issues, but all we can do is focus on trying to do things right, which isn't easy. We've been operating in this country for over 60 years and we've always been very clear about our values and also how we conduct our business. We are certain that by doing the right thing, we can ultimately sustain our business in Nigeria. I also believe that these are challenges common to most emerging economies and when the situation improves, we are certain to reap the benefits

for our good behaviour. If you want to be successful in Nigeria, you need to focus on a few key priorities and stick to them. Every day there is a good event and a bad event but if you spend all your time fire fighting, you will fail. It's not rocket science. As I've said, there are also lots of opportunities here, particularly in the North, which is the fastest growing region, so you need to be firm and clear about what your priorities are – agree to a plan and stick to it. We are very proud of our 62 year presence in Nigeria and for me it stills feels like the right place to be from a professional standpoint.

Terrorism must be a worry though? I know earlier this year Nestlé was forced to evacuate some of its staff due to the threat from Boko Haram. What precautions does Coca-Cola Hellenic have in place to protect its staff from terrorists?

Terrorism has become a global challenge and Nigeria is one of many countries in recent times that has been affected by it. As both local and international security institutions continue to effectively combat these 'faceless networks' businesses and communities, as well as individuals, must remain vigilant and always bring to the fore issues concerning security. As a business we operate in 70 locations across Nigeria and we are proud of our local presence. We continue to work hard at ensuring the safety of our people. On a personal note, I will admit, when I first came here I perhaps got too comfortable and as a result, I once got myself into an unsafe situation; nothing major. I learnt my lesson though, and I'm always careful now.

Do any of the prevailing issues I've discussed impact Coca-Cola's ability to attract talent to Nigeria?

Attracting talent to Nigeria isn't a problem. This is mainly due to the fact that there is an increasing number of Nigerians returning home after working overseas. These people, in the main, are looking to work for multinational companies like Coca-Cola and have the right kind of skills that we're looking for.

So, we've always got highly capable people knocking on our door looking for work, and we're increasingly able to offer these people a diverse range of opportunities within our business. I have a fantastic team here already but I'm also aware that we need to develop our capability. So, when it comes to talent acquisition, we're focused on creating a positive state of mind within the business, which makes people outside of the business want to come and work here. I have a huge amount of respect for Nigerians; everybody here wants to help you and there is a positive energy that runs throughout the country. At Coca-Cola we want to try and capitalise on that state of mind by bringing people into the organisation with the right kind of attitude who can help grow our business, but also help attract others here as well. Organising events

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such as the sailing regatta is helpful because, on the one hand, it's an opportunity for employees to get together and have some fun while at the same time people outside of the business get an indication of what it might be like to live in Nigeria and work at Coca-Cola.

So, are expats like you no longer a vital source of expertise for global brands like Coca-Cola in Africa?

I'm actually one of only three expats currently working in the business' commercial team and I would definitely say we're relying more and more on local talent. My focus is really on training and getting everyone in the organisation up to the same level in terms of

skills and capabilities. It's local people who will shape this business in the future and what we're trying to do now is actually send more Nigerians to Europe; we believe Nigeria is a good platform from which to develop people before sending them out across the group. This is certainly something we expect to see more of in the future.

This is your second stint in Africa - following almost three years spent in Johannesburg with P&G - and you've lived on the continent now for almost six years altogether. What is it about Africa that has led you to settle there?

Africa gets in your blood and it becomes your life. I won't lie though, doing business here is tough but it never gets boring, there is always something happening. The key to surviving in this environment as an expat, I think, is to be resilient as well as persistent. If you can get through your first year, through a lot of pain and difficulties, you'll eventually start to make a difference and enjoy the 'Africa experience'. Nigeria in particular is tough – expats often say Johannesburg is for beginners whereas

Nigeria is for 'old hands'. You have to be positive, and show determination and leadership. The best piece of advice I could probably give to anyone would be, make sure you go out and connect with, listen to and be close to African people; if you don't do that, then you have no chance.

What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

I really like sailing in the lagoons and lakes; it's a great way to ease the stress. When I was based in Athens, I developed an interest in marathon running and I continue to run here in Nigeria. Other than that, I enjoy spending as much time as possible with my family and friends.