

# CHALLENGER MINDSET DRIVING ASAHI'S EUROPEAN EXPANSION



Japanese food and beverage manufacturer Asahi is Europe's third largest brewer, with revenues close to €2 billion, 1,900 employees and customers in 80 markets.

After making in-roads into the European beer market in April 2016, buying the Peroni and Grolsch brands from Anheuser-Busch InBev, Asahi acquired SABMiller's Eastern European beer brands, including Pilsner Urquell, taking its total spending on former SABMiller assets to \$11 billion. In addition to its own flagship brand, Asahi Super Dry, the business now owns an enviable portfolio of beers in the growing premium segment.

continue offsetting stifled domestic growth linked to Japan's ageing population, making further overseas acquisitions over the next few years.

As well as a strong brand portfolio, Asahi Europe also inherited infrastructure through acquisition and now boasts world-class production facilities in the Netherlands, Italy and the UK. In addition, the company has strong distribution agreements in France and Canada, as well as across

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Like Japanese whiskey maker Suntory, which bolstered its European operations after merging with global spirits manufacturer Beam, Asahi can leverage heritage and a consolidated domestic position. Founded in 1889, it is the leading Japanese brewer with a 40% share of Japan's beer market and turnover of \$17.5 billion. While the domestic division remains Asahi's largest business unit, it is international expansion which remains a priority for the company. Asahi has already extended its footprint in Oceania, South East Asia and North America during the last decade and will

the broader European region, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Talent too moved from SABMiller to Asahi in 2016 including Procurement Head, Ian Brenton. He tells Nigel Wright how the business is adopting a challenger mindset in the European market, embracing an agile, entrepreneurial way of working:

"Our aim is to become a Global Premium Beer Powerhouse, surpassing customer expectations in our products and services through the Japanese concept of 'Kando' (deliciousness, happiness and innovation). Our





aspirational brands, engaging marketing activities, premium execution and acquisition strategy, complemented by organic growth and investment in product development, means that we are well placed to continue our growth. To achieve this, we encourage employees to carve out roles for themselves, as opposed to 'slotting-in' to a pre-defined operating model – what we refer to as our challenger mindset.”

Ian is based in Switzerland along with 20% of his team. The country, he says, remains attractive to international businesses because of its economic stability, geographical location and infrastructure. As many global firms operate from a Swiss base, a large talent pool exists there. Furthermore, the evolution of its economy from pharmaceuticals and supply chain to NGOs, and more recently, technology and cryptocurrency means it remains relevant and appealing to traditional and modern businesses. “Coupled with an excellent healthcare system and low crime levels this makes Switzerland a fantastic, safe, enjoyable country to live and work in,” he said.

To strike the right balance between stakeholder needs and supplier engagement, most of Ian’s team are based in the UK, Italy and the Netherlands. Ian highlighted the ongoing importance for his entire team in developing strong and sustainable relationships for both professional development and business success. In his view, world class professionals will master a topic or skill well, strengthening their self-confidence, before moving into larger and increasingly

complex roles. Relationships and behavioural changes are the key to a sustainable shift in their thinking and approach. He added:

“Relationship building is an area I regularly find myself revisiting. There’s a temptation to stay close to your comfort zone, but to become a change agent it’s the challenging interactions and strong relationships that are important. When working well, a strong team can deliver consistent world class performance, creating space to develop relationships and influence, beyond traditional procurement. Often there is something obvious you can offer when building a relationship with a stakeholder, but equally, you can be surprised by their demands and feedback – such insights are invaluable in building credibility and influence, securing your career ambitions within an organisation.”

Since January 2018, Asahi Super Dry has been available in Europe and with further expansion planned, career opportunities are abundant with Ian highlighting Asahi’s “dynamic, challenging, supportive and fun” culture as a reason to consider working at the business.

Having previously led global procurement for secondary and tertiary packaging at SABMiller, Ian has intimate knowledge of brands such as Peroni, Grolsch and Pilsner Urquell and experience building award winning procurement teams to support their growth. With responsibility for half a billion dollars of direct and indirect annual spend, procurement is a critical function at Asahi Europe and one where getting hiring right is vital, though Ian shared some insights into the challenges he often faces:

“Early in their careers, prospective candidates tend to be too competitive during interviews and to narrow in their ambitions. My advice is don’t treat the interview as a competition. Let curiosity guide you and avoid ending up in a role which doesn’t satisfy you or benefit the employer. I respect people who dedicate themselves to a profession, but those that don’t should keep an open mind during the early years – building on their experiences and embracing flexibility. It will lead to a more satisfying career down the line.”

People who succeed at Asahi, according to Ian, demonstrate “an infectious passion for our products” and he praised recruiters that identify individuals who make a positive impact at the organisation. According to Ian, recruitment partners need to combine skills and market knowledge with a tenacity to get close to the business and understanding its culture and people, to act quickly and attract the best talent. And while keen to maintain relationships with trusted suppliers, he added how he’s always open to direct approaches from individuals who think they’ve got what it takes – “feel free to drop me a line and enjoy a ‘karakuchi’ moment!”