

MEDITECH

Markets

Artikeltext

A case of David versus Goliath

Implant Direct, a non-quoted company, is challenging the **Swiss market leaders**. An assessment. BY VOLKER STROHM

A dental practice somewhere in Europe – a flourishing business with around 5,000 dental implants placed each year. Domenico Scala, CEO of Nobel Biocare, left with his tail between his legs, so the story goes, having been beaten to the finishing line by Implant Direct. Although Scala reportedly sought to compete with the American supplier of low-price dental implants, and offered huge price concessions, the dentist, who was a Nobel Biocare customer, stood firm: “I’ll accept your offer on condition that you make the discount retroactive for the past years”, he is reported to have said at the end of the meeting. Whatever the exact details of this story, Scala could have saved himself the trouble, because an offer prospectus bearing the name “Implant Direct” had long since landed on his desk. Company founder Gerald Niznick makes no secret of the fact that he would sell his firm at any time for a price of at least 200 million dollars. As *Stocks* knows, Straumann have also received an offer to buy the business.

The American is no stranger to such transactions, and his name has been known to provoke very fierce reactions in the industry. In 2001 he sold his then company Paragon Implant to Sulzer Medica, before going on to found Implant Direct in 2004 and buying back the production plants in California from Zimmer, which had taken over Sulzer Medica in the meantime. On the company website, Niznick, without any undue modesty, cites the American financial journal *Barron’s Magazine*, in which an article refers to him as the “Godfather of American Implant Dentistry”. “Whether our corporate culture would fit with Straumann or Nobel Biocare, is another matter”, says Thomas Vogt, a member of the management trio at Implant Direct and responsible for its European arm

(see the interview). “The product portfolio would certainly bring about some major cannibalization.” That’s no surprise: Implant Direct copies the products of Nobel Biocare, Straumann and Zimmer Dental. The only difference is that if you order on the Internet you can save up to 70 percent. This method of doing business is resented by the established names in the market. Their main criticism is that there are no studies to validate the products. “What will such products look like in 15 or 20 years time”, asks one dental expert; “what happens if the company ceases to exist sooner or later?” He supplies the answer himself: it may not be possible to identify what sort of implant was placed – and it would have to be removed. “The vast majority of dental professionals expect quality guarantees”, emphasizes Nicolas Weidmann, company spokesman at Nobel Biocare. The Swiss company, based at Kloten, near Zürich, is no stranger to disputes with Niznick: at the turn of the millennium, Ernst Thomke joined the beleaguered world market leader – still based in Sweden at that time – via his investment company BB Medtech (together with Heliane Canepa). As *Stocks* learned from an acquaintance of Thomke, the go-getting American, Niznick, told Thomke: “I’m going to make life difficult for you.” The areas in which Implant Direct takes the market leaders to task are innovation and profit margins. “At quoted companies, innovation is largely investor-driven”, says Vogt. “They *have to* bring new products to market in order to avoid price erosion. Consequently, new solutions are constantly being offered that are very controversial in regard to the surgical process.”

Stock exchange flotation is not an option as far as Niznick is concerned:

“The advantages would be primarily financial”, says Vogt, “but we are able to finance our growth ourselves.” Last year the company achieved revenues of \$ 25 million, and the target for 2009 is between 40 and 45 million.

“Contrary to media reports, the actual influence of these suppliers is negligible because they only account for very small market shares”, comments Mark Hill. And the Straumann spokesman also fired his own salvo: “The assertion that premium suppliers have an excessive profit margin on their products is risky, and could backfire on the low-cost suppliers. If you take into account the costs of high-quality materials, scientific studies, customer service, and training, the question is then whether it is not in fact the low-price suppliers who are charging

the higher mark-ups because they do not have any of these costs, and in the case of staff training, they even outsource to the established manufacturers.”

Grafik „Nobel Biocare“

SPI adjusted

Revival: the freefall has been arrested, although Nobel Biocare still face the task of winning back aggrieved customers. Share prices always reflect a certain degree of takeover fantasy. **www.nobelbiocare.com**

Stock rating

Grafik „Straumann“

SPI adjusted

Catch-up race: Straumann shares are also priced at a highly ambitious level. The Basel-based company has optimized its cost structure, making it an interesting medium- to long-term investment. Market share has grown recently. **www.straumann.com**

Stock rating

Grafik „Konzert der Grossen“

Big is beautiful

Market share for dental implants

Others

Low-price suppliers such as Implant Direct only play a marginal role. Their market share is put at around two percent.

Source: Adamant, ZKB

Kasten „Kurzinterview“

BRIEF INTERVIEW

“Now and then we receive a letter from our competitors' lawyers”

A very basic question, to start off: why does the Implant Direct concept actually work?

Thomas Vogt: I can give you an equally simple answer: we offer the customer the same quality and the same prospects of a successful outcome as other manufacturers – but at a 70 percent lower price. That is, of course, a strong argument, particularly in economically challenging times.

So you see yourself as a beneficiary of the economic crisis?

I don't like the word "beneficiary". Our growth is being boosted by the crisis – but we will continue to grow once the crisis has passed.

The price discount argument is fair enough – but your competitors maintain that the implant itself is not a major cost factor in the dental treatment; that is to say, it only accounts for a relatively small proportion of the overall cost.

The fact is, patients can pay 20 to 25 percent less when our products are used. In my view, that is not a marginal amount.

Nevertheless, you are faced with skepticism on the part of dentists – they often talk about "brand loyalty".

Dentists do not change the range of products they use overnight – that's true. They must first be convinced that they will get the same quality at a lower price. It takes a week or two before a dentist decides to make the change.

In spite of the price advantage, not all dentists are changing over to Implant Direct. Why is that?

Some dentists are still too comfortable; there is not much pressure of competition. And too few people question the claims made by the major suppliers. We need to change this mindset.

One point of criticism is the lack of long-term studies to validate your products ...

... which is not true. Company president Gerald Niznick has been in the market for 15 years, and is regarded as one of the dental implantology pioneers.

Secondly, our products are, for example, approved by the US health authority, the FDA, and they are covered by the product liability law in the USA. Last but not least, many products from our competitor Zimmer are attributable to Niznick – there are enough studies dealing with these.

But, just between us, isn't it a bit unusual to sell dental products through the Internet?

That's a cultural question. Swiss and German dentists don't rush after every new innovation that comes along, so they respond less quickly to our business model. In other countries and regions, the concept is more readily accepted: in Spain, Italy, Scandinavia, and the USA, too. But we also see differences at a quite different level: Nobel Biocare customers are generally more open to innovations than Straumann customers.

Let's stay with the word "unusual": whereas other medical technology companies often make a big secret of their product prices, Implant Direct advertises them quiet openly on the Internet and in printed price lists.

What feedback do you get about this?

(laughs) Now and then we receive a letter from our competitors' lawyers. The message we get from customers is: at last somebody is putting right certain things in the industry. There is a great sense of frustration amongst dentists.

How do see the market developing?

The first thing to say is that we are very satisfied with our current rate of growth and the market share we are winning. In the long term, the implant market will see a change in pricing. The premium suppliers will find it difficult to hold on to their 80 percent market share. *(vst)*

Bildunterschrift

"Some dentists are still too comfortable"

Thomas Vogt, Chief Operating Officer at Implant Direct