

Volume - 5 - Issue 1, 2006 - My Opinion

Interview with Paul Veithen

Interviewee

Paul Veithen

Can You Tell Us a Little About Yourself and Your Experience in the Field of Imaging

I have been with Agfa for about 35 years and have spent ten years as CEO of Agfa Canada. It was then that I learned how a strong team can build a powerful market position, with thoughtful acquisitions and an innovative spirit - even when resources are scarce. In healthcare, we were offering a Radiology Information System (RIS) to the Canadian market as long as 15 years ago, and our approach of the Picture Archiving and Communications Systems (PACS) market has been equally innovative and fast. This approach has put us in the pole position in Europe in the field of RIS/PACS solutions today.

As General Manager Agfa HealthCare Europe, I am responsible for some 900 employees and over 500 million euro in sales. We have set up a European organization that will streamline and improve the effectiveness of our local sales organizations. I believe an adequate local approach to the market will increasingly become a key success factor, particularly in Europe.

What do You Believe to be the Most Important Development in Shaping Europe's Imaging Industry Over the Last Decade?

The shift from analog to digital radiology was the dominant factor over the past years. Agfa HealthCare has been leading the field with its unrivalled integrative expertise. We are currently the number one in the European RIS/PACS market, with approximately 27% market share according to market analyst Frost & Sullivan.

In addition, these past years the industry has been shaped by the consolidation of the supply side in the healthcare market. The RIS market is a classic example of a fragmented market, with many local vendors, each with their own solutions and installed base. Acquiring local expertise has been a proven strategy in the European healthcare market.

What can You See in Your Crystal Ball for the Imaging Industry Taking Over the Next Ten Years?

With some European RIS/PACS markets saturated, the question is: what is next? Obviously, the Electronic Patient Record (EPR) is what we are all focusing on. There are some similarities between the current RIS market and the growing EPR market. With recent acquisitions in France and Germany adding to our existing expertise in EPR, Agfa has now managed to take the lead in this market. We have some 2,700 EPR installations in Europe, putting us solidly on the map as the first EPR vendor in Europe. Our uniqueness is built on decades of healthcare experience and goes beyond the current business process automation solutions. The market does not expect mere IT solutions, but solutions offering added value to clinicians as well as hospital management, with maximum flexibility.

Connectivity through integration will be key to success.

Agfa will be a leading supplier and offer best of breed solutions that we connect to the hospital's IT highway, together with existing tools. Our approach has resulted in an installed RIS/PACS base in Europe of over 450, with more than 150 standalone RIS solutions. I am convinced that the integrative edge of Agfa will prove to be a key success factor in the future healthcare IT market.

How do You View the Current Convergence of the Imaging and IT Sectors? Is it all Good News or do You Anticipate Problems?

The convergence stands beyond discussion. The need for hospitals to create an IT highway, to which all clinical functions can connect, will become predominant in the coming years.

There are obvious clinical workflow benefits that come with this trend. Communication facilities speed up the patient throughput, reduce patient waiting times and allow fast support from anywhere within a multi-site hospital, as well as from the care network surrounding the hospital. It is

now possible to physically separate the examination from the reporting, an important step towards optimized resource management in an environment hampered by a shortage of manpower.

We have been guiding many hospital radiology departments in their move from analog to digital. We know that an organization needs to continuously adapt and seek other competencies. Those that do so successfully, become a professional learning organization. They decide on arguments instead of intuition, and they hire consultants to assist them.

As the IT dimension in healthcare increases, we are facing a decision-making process that extends beyond the clinical departments, to the general management and the IT department.

Are There Lessons Europe can Learn from America?

I have always considered the US market to be faster in accepting innovative technologies, particularly when they have been developed locally. The European market is more conservative, but once it goes ahead, it usually does so with improved technology, better than the technology that was accepted in the US. The mobile telephony market is a clearcut example of this.

I like to think that the European healthcare market is more balanced and more careful at keeping the patients' interest in mind. Although I certainly would say that there is no such absolute notion as 'the European market'. Countries like the UK, Scandinavia or the Netherlands are much faster to integrate new ideas, from the US or elsewhere, than others. In my opinion, the fundamental uniqueness of European healthcare is that access to healthcare is universal. It is characteristic that many envy us and we need to cherish that.

What Person do You Most Admire in this Industry?

Prof. Albert L. Baert of the University of Leuven in Belgium has been instrumental in putting Europe on the radiology map. I think he has been in the past decennium and currently still is one of Europe's most inspiring academicians and radiologists.

Prof. Baert received many national and international scientific awards. He has been an honorary member, secretary general, president and chairman of numerous scientific societies; among them the Radiological Society of North America and the International Society of Radiology.

In 1993 and in 1995 he organized and presided the European Congress of Radiology (ECR) in Vienna, and was the key driver behind the efforts to take the academic and professional content of this most important European radiology event to the highest level. Prof. Baert also contributed substantially to the promotion of organized radiology in Europe and the world. He is currently Honorary Lecturer of the European Association of Radiology.

In an Alternative Reality, What Other Career Path Might You have Chosen?

I always wanted to be a diplomat. And an entrepreneurial spirit has always triggered me. But Agfa gave me all the opportunities I could handle. I have been with Agfa for 35 years and, in retrospect, I don't regret the reciprocal loyalty.

What was the Last Book You Read and the Last Film You Saw?

I recently found some time to read the bestseller The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown. It is a lightning-paced, intelligent and unpredictable thriller. It builds on 2,000 years of Western culture and history and is written in an exceptionally intriguing way.

The last movie I saw was The Lord of the Rings, which impressed me above all with the mastery of the scenery.

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