

Business Life

The warm heart beneath the ice



Monday interview

Ornella Barra

Joint managing director, Alliance Boots

The chief executive of the pharmaceutical wholesale division lets her guard down for **Andrea Felsted**

Ornella Barra has a reputation for being icy, distant and private. Yet, bumping into her before our meeting, she is off-guard, checking her make-up in the mirror in the tiny ladies' cloakroom in the corporate offices of Alliance Boots in London.

Her appearance is immaculate. All long blonde hair – her fringe flicked to the side to frame her face – expertly made-up eyes and glossy coppery red lips widening into a smile. Tall, even in flat shoes,

her slim frame is swathed in a tailored black-and-white pinstriped suit and finished off with an emerald green silk scarf.

This relaxed stance continues in a more formal boardroom, where Ms Barra, in a one-to-one setting, smiles freely and laughs easily and often.

The 57-year-old trained pharmacist is chief executive of Alliance Boots's pharmaceutical wholesale division, which supplies drugs to pharmacists in 21 countries and had a turnover of almost £14bn in the year to March. She is also in charge of Alliance Boots's retail operations outside the UK and the Republic of Ireland, and leads its corporate social responsibility activities. She is in effect one of two joint managing directors of the £20bn turnover group.

She has also been the part-

Chemistry: Ornella Barra first linked up with Stefano Pessina (below), chairman of Alliance Boots, when she was looking for a fellow entrepreneur to develop her wholesale business **Shaun Curry**

'It is relatively easy to stay together, to live together and to work together'

Ornella Barra

ner of Stefano Pessina, Alliance Boots's 70-year-old executive chairman and part-owner of the private group, for the past 25 years, although the couple have never married.

"It's more than one marriage," she says in her thick

Italian accent, of their professional and private partnership.

Ms Barra was born in Chiavari, near Genoa in Italy, where her father, an entrepreneur, was in construction. Her mother played an integral part in the business, looking after the paperwork, company finances and staff. "My mother 50 years ago was a very strong lady, and followed my father in all activities, and maybe the DNA [was passed on to me]," she says.

Ms Barra was keen to pursue a medical career. But she opted instead to study pharmacy at the University of Genoa because she thought that, as a woman, 35 years ago, it would be easier to reach a top position in pharmacy than in medicine.

After graduation, she started work in a local pharmacy, but soon opened her



own outlet close to Chiavari. Then she spotted a gap in the market – the wholesale supply of drugs to pharmacies.

Two years after setting up the wholesale business, she sought a corporate partner to help develop the company.

“I asked my friend to suggest a strong entrepreneur to move in the same direction and to develop the wholesaling activity in Italy together, and my friend suggested Stefano,” she says. “The rest is history.”

She dodges the question of whether it was love at first sight, or the romance took time to kindle, choosing instead to focus on the corporate courtship.

“During the meeting, I presented my programme and my vision to develop the business. Stefano had a company in the south of Italy, and myself in the north of Italy. I presented to Stefano my strategy . . . and Stefano was enthusiastic,” she says.

Although the first few years were tough, they persevered, forging into all regions of Italy before creating the international company Alliance Santé, after a series of deals in France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Morocco.

“In reality, Stefano represented the architect, the strategy of the company, and myself, the engine,” she says.

In 1997, Alliance Santé merged with UniChem to create Alliance UniChem. Nine years later, Alliance UniChem sealed a deal with Boots, one of Britain’s best known high-street chains. In 2007, Mr Pessina and private equity group Kohlberg Kravis

Roberts took Alliance Boots private in a £12.4bn deal. The acquisition, at the height of the financial boom, was at the time Europe’s biggest buy-out.

Ms Barra admits that their professional and personal partnership is an unusual one. “But it’s not unusual for us,” she says. “Because if you have the same values, if you have the same approach in life . . . it is relatively easy to stay together, to live together and to work together and, thereafter, the results . . . speak for themselves.”

But isn’t it a bit strange reporting to your partner?

“It is important to respect the role, and also to separate the role. In the company, Stefano is executive chairman and I report to him,” she says. “For us now it is normal.”

Despite being regularly named on lists of the world’s most successful businesswomen, Ms Barra has until

now largely stayed out of the limelight, leaving Mr Pessina to take the glory. “My style is low profile,” she says.

Part of her reluctance to take a more public profile may be explained by her English, which can sometimes be difficult to follow. She occasionally has to confer with a colleague in Italian or French on an English word or phrase. “It is true,” she acknowledges. “In reality, English is my fourth language” – after Italian, French and Spanish. She also understands Portuguese and German.

People who know Ms Barra say she is extremely driven and focused.

“She’s a tough cookie,” says one person who has worked with her. “She is ruthless, determined and extremely experienced.”

Another says she is “a very determined lady”. But he adds: “She’s got maybe a cold exterior, but a warm heart un-

derneath.”

Ms Barra acknowledges that she drives herself and her staff hard. “I am very demanding, especially with myself, and sometimes I am demanding with my colleagues, but at the same time, I want to protect my people,” she says.

Part of the drive comes from her fierce work ethic. “In reality, for me, work is part of my pleasure,” she says. “It’s my hobby.”

Such dedication will be necessary. Alliance Boots is widely expected to seek a return to the stock market in the next few years – although Ms Barra insists there are currently no such plans. Meanwhile, the economic crisis in Europe is the worst that she has seen in her 30-year career. With governments keen to cut their borrowing burdens – potentially affecting how much they spend on healthcare – her management mantra of always being one step ahead will be more necessary than ever.

However, the crisis could open doors, in the form of acquisitions if the target is right, in markets such as China and Latin America, but also in Europe. “The economic crisis also means good opportunities if a company is solid, if a company has a good financial performance,” she says.

Ms Barra may be prepared to reveal her softer edges. But anyone who thinks she has abandoned her steely side would be sorely mistaken.

The CV

- **Born:** December 20 1953, Chiavari, Italy
- **Education:** Pharmacy, University of Genoa
- **Career:** 1979 Pharmacist, managing and then setting up her own pharmacy
- **1984** Founded Di Pharma, a pharmaceutical wholesaler
- **1986** Merges with Stefano Pessina’s Alleanza Salute Italia. Becomes managing director of the enlarged group
- **1990** Joins the board of Alliance Santé, the international pharmaceutical

wholesaler formed following a series of international acquisitions

- **1997** Executive director of Alliance UniChem, following the merger between Alliance Santé and UniChem
- **2006** Wholesale and commercial affairs director of Alliance Boots, following the merger of Alliance UniChem and Boots.
- **2009** Chief executive, pharmaceutical wholesale division, Alliance Boots.
- **Interests:** Gardening, art, history, architecture.