

Ornella Barra, Co-Chief Operating Officer, Walgreens Boots Alliance

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By MMR

June 22, 2020

DEERFIELD, Ill. — As Walgreens Boots Alliance’s co-chief operating officer, Ornella Barra has an exceptional perspective on developments around the world. In that capacity, she oversees all WBA’s divisions outside of the U.S., including Boots (U.K., Republic of Ireland and Opticians), Retail Pharmacy International, Global Brands and International Wholesale. She is also responsible at global level for human resources, CSR, communications and other business services.

Through active engagement with businesses on five continents and a deep understanding of the culture in the countries in which they operate, Barra is well equipped to shape the company’s response to situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Via its joint venture with GuoDa, which operates more than 5,000 pharmacies in China, Barra has been involved in fighting the coronavirus outbreak from the beginning.



Ornella Barra

“In those early days when COVID-19 was not even declared a pandemic, and even prior to the lockdown of the city of Wuhan, GuoDa took immediate action to switch the whole business into an emergency mode,” she recalls. “As the epidemic unfolded, GuoDa pharmacies faced huge pressure, keeping stores always open — without taking holidays for Chinese Lunar New Year — and striving to meet spikes in demand, especially for face masks and sanitizers.”

Under Barra’s direction, WBA harnessed its resources to supplement those efforts.

“Our global teams supported local pharmacies in many ways during this phase,” she says. “For example, WBA IT created in only seven days additional functionality within the GuoDa app to allow people to order on their mobile device and then go to a nearby community store to pay and collect items, minimizing the chance of potential virus transmission. This gained huge popularity and attracted 200,000 new customers within 16 days.”

Lessons learned at the retail level in China benefitted WBA’s operations around the world. In addition to her role in helping the company leverage that knowledge, Barra led the effort to maintain its supply chain.

“China is one of the biggest markets for WBA’s International Retail division, and we also have a global procurement and supply chain hub in the region, with teams based in Hong Kong and Shanghai,” she says. “Both offices were affected for nearly three months due to lockdown measures introduced by the government. Despite having to work from home, teams at both locations remained committed and did their best to keep business running and minimize disruptions caused by the pandemic. Within a tight time line, they quickly adapted the supply chain to provide personal protective equipment to areas heavily impacted by COVID-19.

“Leveraging the sourcing data and collaborating with manufacturers, the global team could make advance predictions and adapt supplies accordingly, ensuring the provision of most in-demand products in worst-hit countries as the COVID-19 epidemic spread out. This shows how rapid responding and adaptable our supply chain in Asia is, and it also reminds us of how everything is connected and interdependent in our globalized world.”