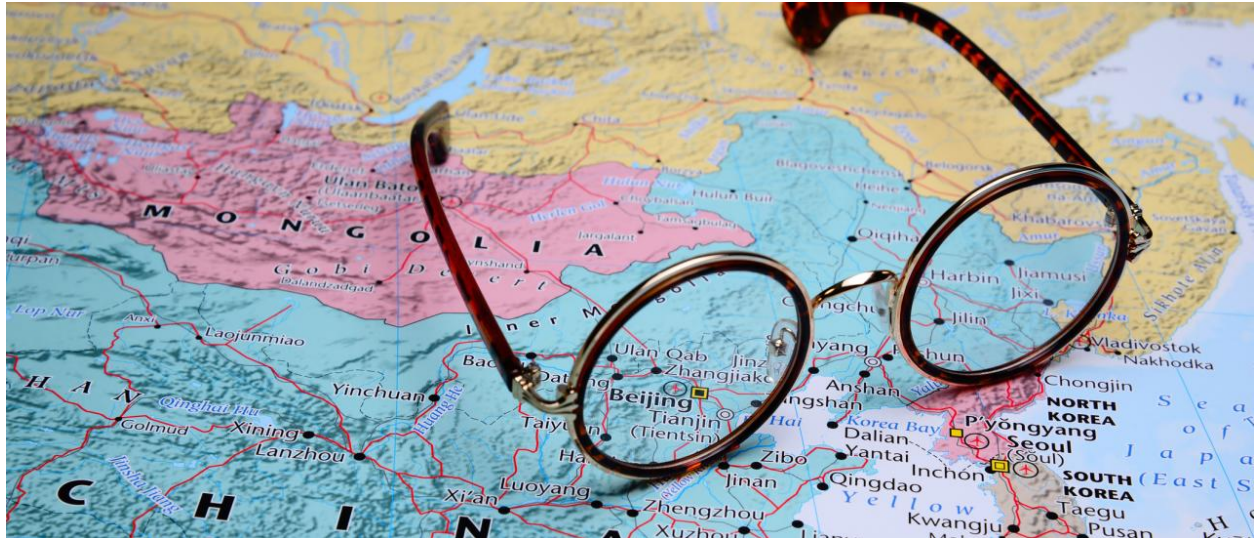


Converting Social Impact Into Competitive Advantage



By , Asia Editor & Digital Manager

Improve quality of life in an underserved region, and you create a blue ocean.

Some leaders are vague when discussing their corporate mission, but Hubert Sagnières (MBA '86), chairman and CEO of [Essilor International](#), puts it in terms as ambitious as they are specific: “To provide solutions for better vision for each of the seven billion people on this planet, including the 2.5 billion who currently suffer from uncorrected poor vision.”

On top of incalculable discomfort and difficulties for sufferers, the poor vision epidemic costs the world’s economies an estimated US\$272 billion each year . As global population growth continues, the impact seems likely to worsen. Sagnières says, “Someone has to do something to stop that. Essilor took it as our main mission to reverse the trend of this curve, which means providing 50 million eyeglasses to 50 million people every year.”

Speaking to INSEAD Knowledge just after his keynote dialogue at the recent [INSEAD Forum](#) in Singapore, Sagnières laid out the uncommonly farsighted business case behind this social mission. Headquartered in Charenton-le-Pont, France, Essilor is currently the world’s biggest ophthalmic lens

manufacturer, with an estimated one billion people using its vision care products worldwide. Sagnières is looking ahead to the next generation of the firm's consumers, which he hopes to cultivate within developing markets where optical care has previously not even been an option.

Eye Mitra

He admits that there are a number of challenges involved in bringing vision care to villagers in, for example, remote areas of India and China – including accessibility and awareness. In India, the company's Eye Mitra ("friends of the eyes" in Hindi) flagship programme trains locals to provide primary vision care, empowering them to set up basic optical shops in their hometowns. So far, Essilor's networks of vision care micro-entrepreneurs numbers 3,000 and counting.

"We don't make them an eye care doctor," clarifies Sagnières, "but we can make them someone who with the right accuracy can take measurements and find the right lens".

At the same time, Essilor tackled the issue of affordability by developing innovative techniques for large-scale manufacturing of low-cost, quality eyeglasses. The value chain is simple and sustainable, and even if margins are razor-thin right now, Sagnières is resolutely future-focused.

"Having good vision is an addiction", he says. "In the next few years, they will improve their life because they see well and they will make a better living. This will enable them one day to spend more on a new pair of eyeglasses, and why not even more on a pair of eyeglasses that protect your eyes against the sun also."

Changing mind-sets

But before that can happen, educational hurdles must be surmounted. People in some underserved regions often don't grasp the chronic nature of disorders such as myopia, which reportedly affects up to 90 percent of young adults in East Asia. Tending to view eyeglasses as a temporary fix, akin to a cast on a broken limb, they stop wearing their specs after their eyesight improves. When their vision problems return with a vengeance, the cultural tendency is to blame the eyeglasses themselves. "It is too common that people believe that good vision is granted for life," says Sagnières.

Mobile solutions

The company's initiatives within emerging markets are poised for a huge step-up in scale in the coming years, thanks to a raft of new mobile apps that will help to automate aspects of the vision-screening process. The apps are expected to slash the training period for Eye Mitra participants and other Essilor-aided primary vision care providers, consequently lowering the barrier of entry.

Further, Sagnières hints at big things to come, stemming from a recently-completed [open innovation contest](#) that challenged “the innovators and app developers of the world” to submit low-cost, scalable eye-refraction solutions.

Communicating the mission

With more than 65,000 employees spread across several dozen countries, how does Sagnières keep Essilor committed to the mission? “In order to have a big impact in the world, you need money, talent, and you need to send a signal both internally and outside.” In addition to setting the tone himself, the chairman gave social impact its own seat at the big table, by creating the position of Chief Mission Officer. Still, he says it takes constant communication and engagement to ensure the message comes across and is taken up. “Transforming a company like this, it’s the work of every minute. We travel and explain all of this to all of us, everywhere in the world. It’s a complicated task.”

What really gets employees on board is seeing for themselves how their work has improved lives. “The most fantastic part of my day – and this is true for the employees we have throughout the world – is when you provide eyeglasses for the first time to someone and you see the smile on his face”, Sagnières says. “When you say ‘What I am doing will have an impact on someone’, suddenly you get the energy.”

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