

The Power of AXA

An Interview with Mark Pearson,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, AXA

EDITORS' NOTE *Mark Pearson is also President and Chief Executive Officer of AXA Financial, Inc., the U.S. subsidiary of the global AXA Group, and a member of the AXA Group Management Committee. He joined AXA in 1995 with the acquisition of National Mutual, now AXA Asia Pacific Holdings, and was appointed Regional Chief Executive of AXA Asia Life in 2001. In 2008, Pearson was named President and Chief Executive Officer of AXA Japan. Before joining AXA, he spent 20 years in the insurance sector.*



Mark Pearson

COMPANY BRIEF *“AXA” (axa.com) is a brand name of AXA Equitable Financial Services, LLC and its family of companies. In business since 1859, AXA is a premier provider of financial advice, life insurance, and retirement planning services. AXA is part of the global AXA Group, a worldwide leader in financial protection and wealth management serving 102 million customers in 56 countries.*

How strong is the economy today and does this market still offer solid growth?

The U.S. is the number one life insurance market in the world. The diverse demographics here are exciting and the digital wave is transforming our business. We recently took 170 AXA leaders to Silicon Valley. What is happening there can't happen in any other economy due to the combination of education, skills, funding expertise, and the American Dream. What is exciting about operating a U.S. business is the ability to be mobile, to reinvent, and be flexible with a talented, diverse workforce.

With such a global platform, how close is your coordination from region to region?

AXA's global reach is an asset. With 102 million clients worldwide, we have size, scale and the opportunity to carry best practices across markets.

In some disciplines, like IT and finance, talent is attracted to big global companies. For IT platforms, we need scale to make them work. Our scale is a local competitive differentiator, especially for talent.

But the closer you get to the client, the more local you must be. For example, 401(k) is a unique U.S. offering and you have to be close to it in this market. In international markets, we can offer global investment platforms that benefit our customers.

Is the size and scale of AXA well understood in the U.S. market?

Interbrand has ranked AXA the number-one insurance brand in the world for five consecutive years. Globally, we have positive recognition. In the U.S., we still have work to do to leverage AXA's strong global brand.

This year, we've upped our brand game. First, we believe we needed a more modern, digitally friendly name, so we simplified our umbrella brand from AXA Equitable to AXA, and we put money and creative force behind

it. We're also promoting the AXA name via our revamped website, digital advertising, and search engine optimization. We want to be known for two things: first, for what we do – advice for life insurance and retirement; and second, for wanting our clients and prospects to know that we're here to help them take small, manageable steps toward getting their finances in order, so that they can focus on what else matters in their lives. Consistent with this promise, we offer a streamlined experience – on the phone, online, and in person – that reflects how we guide people toward taking small, manageable steps. AXA's digitally friendly, memorable, and modern identity reflects the simplicity and straightforwardness that we bring to our customers, who are navigating a complex financial environment.

The reaction to our new brand has been positive – our staff and advisors are thrilled that we're out more in the public eye. We're also getting a lot of website traffic, but I'm not declaring victory just yet.

How challenging is it to get the retirement message out?

The financial literacy issue needs to be addressed. We have to partner with governments to tackle this problem, so we're working with our representatives to encourage Americans to save for retirement. Fortunately, our advice model and what we do as an organization is to promote financial literacy. Across our business, and our AXA Achievement scholarship philanthropy, we focus on financial education. On all fronts, we help people understand the need for financial planning and that we're here to help them take small, manageable steps toward what is important for them, whether it's family protection, building a business, or saving for a dignified retirement.

Where is the innovation coming from in this business?

We've all read about big data and the digital wave. As insurers, understanding and managing data has always been at the core of our business. Now the combination of increased computing power and additional data sources is exciting. For example, in traditional underwriting, we would have to assess a person's health and risk in a pretty invasive way. Now we can use predictive analysis to underwrite – at the client's approval, through other data sources, like a prescription database, credit card spend, and driving record. We can work with our clients to do underwriting that is accurate and fast without being intrusive.

Today, we're also connecting with customers via social media to aid mutual understanding. When a customer shares with us the occurrence of a big life event, like a marriage or the birth of a child, this signals a changing financial need and a good time to sit down with a financial professional to address their circumstances. Social media provides an opportunity to approach clients when it's relevant for them. It also helps us promote financial literacy and education.

What is the focus of your philanthropic work?

AXA Achievement is our signature program, which offers college scholarships to youngsters who need help. The letters we get from the recipients are hugely energizing. It's a perfect fit with our business, which is focused on helping people build more secure futures. Increasing educational access helps start young people on the road to a more secure future.

We also do a lot of gift-matching in local communities because we have over 5,000 financial professionals around the country.

We recently donated a major work from our art collection to The Metropolitan Museum of Art – Thomas Hart Benton's iconic 10-panel *America Today* mural. Over 30 years ago we worked with Mayor Koch to save it from auction and keep it in New York City. The mural was on display in our New York City lobby for decades. It was important to us that the work remain in New York City and be studied and seen by millions of visitors from around the world, and protected for generations to come. The Met is constructing a special room for the mural as the centerpiece of a major Thomas Hart Benton exhibition opening this September, which AXA is sponsoring. It truly is a masterpiece that captures the boldness, diversity, and unstoppable creative American spirit that inspires me every day. ●