Combining Law with Business: A Fashionable Career Move

In wide-ranging work at Perry Ellis International, Senior Vice President and General Counsel Cory Shade displays the ardor for business, law, and learning that inspired her to earn JD and MBA degrees (’89, ’91). Shade’s story so far is laced with useful motifs: marketability, diverse expertise, pragmatism, luck—and balance.
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omething of a Renaissance alumna, Cory Shade mapped a career path that constantly enhanced her high-value degree combination. During law school and her MBA program, she worked at Carp & Sexauer and then held seven professional positions between 1989 and her post at Perry Ellis. They spanned good economic times and bad and gave her formidable experience. “My excellent base preparation at Washington University was key to being able to take advantage of opportunities as they appeared,” she says.

Citibank recruited Shade on campus for an in-house position in its Puerto Rican operation. “Because I had the combination JD/MBA, I was in the management training program as well as in the legal department,” says Shade, who speaks Spanish fluently. “I learned the full range of business and business-legal aspects in every division.”

In 1996 she became a corporate attorney at Steel Hector & Davis LLP, now Squire Saunders & Dempsey LLP. “I needed the stronger, broader, in-depth base that a large law firm can provide. I wanted to be sure I had the best training possible.”

That accomplished, Shade returned to in-house law in 1998 as general counsel with First Com Corporation, a telecommunications firm with operations throughout South America. “I enjoyed working with business people to cut to the chase,” Shade says, “and being responsive and more responsible for my advice.” She traveled extensively, relishing being part of a startup technology company amid the telecommunications frenzy.

After AT&T Latin America bought First Com, Shade joined the large law firm Kilpatrick Stockton LLP to help form its Miami branch. “I had several offers on the table but wanted to be part of that growth”—something she had enjoyed as a girl working at her father’s business in Joplin, Missouri. As financial times turned, however, Kilpatrick Stockton closed; in 2002 Shade moved to a client organization, BG Investments. There, she could use her telecommunications experience as the investment company initiated grass-roots technologies and acquisitions primarily in the Balkans. By the time the Perry Ellis opportunity arose in 2006, Shade’s daughter, Sloan, now 6, had just been born, and Shade wanted to be stateside again.

At Perry Ellis International, Shade is in her element. The publicly traded firm has offices around the world, product lines of men’s apparel and accessories, acquisitions on the women’s side (mainly since Shade went on board), a licensed fragrance, a wholesale business, and a retail presence and licensing arm for brands such as Original Penguin by Munsingwear, Jantzen, Callaway, Nike, and others. Her “days, months, and years” are quite varied, and she spends only 10 percent of her time traveling. She is responsible for all SEC filings and requirements and any and all corporate matters, including licensing and intellectual property. Shade also is part of contract negotiations from beginning to closing, as well as store rollouts on a macro level. Additionally, she oversees all litigation and other legal issues that inevitably arise.

“Each situation is a puzzle, and I enjoy putting all the pieces together and balancing the time and the economics to get the best result for my business people,” she says. She also enjoys knowing the product: “I can’t just sit back and look at this business theoretically. I have to touch it, see it, know the fabrics, understand the commodity prices. I have to strategically position myself, and know how everything relates to sales, customer contracts, and much more.

“I love learning,” she says. “The processes, the manufacturing of everything that goes into the products.” At Steel Hector, for example, Shade went on site to understand the wind and solar renewable-energy projects. “It makes a difference how you translate something into the contract—and how you interact with the business people.”

Because of her intensive preparation, Shade can work effectively with designers if questions arise. When she talks with a business person, she can empathize and understand what they need to accomplish. “I know what gets moved through the warehouses, for example, and what goes on; that way, I can minimize risk and relate to the manager as a partner,” she says.

Based on what she knows firsthand about success today, Shade hopes the many students planning advanced degrees focus not only on academics but also on picking up as many practical skills as possible along the way to differentiate themselves as they move forward. “Have an open attitude and personality,” she says. “Learn to connect with people to see opportunities. Have patience with people: listen and learn from their experiences.”

Of herself, Shade says simply: “I always want to be the best. There are things I don’t know, and I want to learn them. I don’t sit back. The world is always changing, and I embrace that.”

But a career is not nearly enough, she says. One’s own life, companies, and society are far better served when “family and friends are balanced in the equation,” along with charitable efforts. “Washington University helped prepare me and opened the doors to where I am now. I try to give back to the university—and my community—as much as I can.”

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