

ANNA GIBSON: MAKING THE MOST OF THE MEXICAN STAND-OFF

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When you have been held hostage by Central American gangsters – twice in the space of 24 hours – combating counterfeiting challenges in the luxury alcohol space must seem like child’s play.

Anna Gibson is the Global Director of Intellectual Property at Treasury Wine Estates, headquartered in Melbourne. Previously the wine division of Foster’s Group, Treasury is one of the world’s largest wine companies, with over 4000 trademarks in over 150 countries worldwide. And with some of those brands being famous names like Penfolds, Wolf Blass, Lindemans, 19 Crimes, Squealing Pig and Beringer, it’s no surprise that there is an exciting array of work to do in protecting and enforcing these brands on the global stage.

Growing up in Singapore, Hong Kong, Ireland, New Zealand and London, the well-travelled Anna came to Treasury, after beginning her career with Russell McVeagh in Auckland and then honing her skills in the intellectual property space at Matheson in Dublin and then through her four years at Herbert Smith Freehills in London and Melbourne. It was between these roles in NZ and Europe that she had that terrifying experience in Central America. She’d headed there for a gap year after six years of studying a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Science at the University of Auckland and it was when travelling via bus through central Mexico that the unthinkable happened. “It was very lively,” she says, in something of an understatement. “We were held for 24 hours because we were unknowingly driving across a drug gang line. I remember all I could think was my mother’s going to kill me, because she said, ‘Don’t go to Mexico,’ and I did.”

She found the experience surreal, one minute watching Mamma Mia on the bus’ monitor and the next facing a man with a gun, bandana and a sombrero “like something out of the cartoons”.

After 12 hours, they were released, only to be stopped again by the other side and held for another 12 hours, at gunpoint. “They were even worse because they got on the bus with no coverings on their faces. They didn’t care if you saw them and you really did wonder if you were going to get out of this alive.”

Escaping intact and after various other adventures and travels Anna joined the relatively peaceful world of Herbert Smith Freehills' Intellectual Property group in London and then Melbourne, working with Joel Smith and Celia Davies, which she loved. "I loved the dispute resolution aspect, the scientific analysis of trade mark portfolios and being commercially strategic in formulating client's global IP strategies."

This experience led naturally to Treasury Wine Estates, which she joined nearly three years ago and which has not only given her a great opportunity to further her skills in this area, but also ticked a number of other boxes for her too. "It was working in-house, which I'd always wanted to do, and I love Melbourne. I think it's the best city I've ever lived in."

"I also loved the idea of working with a broad array of internal clients and in dealing with people of different specialities and backgrounds - across marketing, finance, corporate governance, consumer insights and sales," she adds. "It's been a great decision, but a steep learning curve getting across the full history of over 100 brands as well as the business and how it operates. It's a very fun, fast paced and collaborative environment where trust and accountability are paramount."

One of Anna's most notable but satisfying challenges has been developing and implementing a proactive and comprehensive brand protection program in Asia, which focuses on combatting the counterfeit and copycat challenges so often seen across these markets. "The new program has been really successful in enforcing our rights and sending the right message to the market - that Treasury will do everything to protect and enforce the reputation of its brands."

In formulating this strategy, Treasury took advice from brands that have experienced their own challenges in this area. "We asked Pernod Ricard, Diageo, Hennessy, LMVH and Nike and others how to put the best brand protection program together and they really helped us to do that. It's a very collaborative space and this support has really helped us to achieve the results that we have."

"There are also a number of associations that fight for foreign brand owner rights in China, such as QPBC, which have been instrumental to our success and there are a lot of domestic brands there that have very similar issues and are likewise willing to share their learnings and support."

"The other reason we've done well is that the government and authorities in China have been very supportive of our brands in the fight against counterfeits and copycats and this has been a priority for them and we are extremely grateful for this support."

And working in this market, is it important to be a wine lover?

"No," says Anna, "But what tends to happen is, even if you aren't, you develop an appreciation for the wines... and it's very hard not to be taken by the romance of the winemaking industry and the history of the wineries you represent."