



Career Series: Susan Natland

April 21st, 2022 - Muireann Bolger



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The chair of the USPTO’s Trademark Public Advisory Committee and Knobbe Martens partner explores the thrill of IP cases and how her enviable ‘super power’ has helped her career.

Tell us about the course of your career.

My career has followed a straight-forward path. Before I enrolled in law school, I was fortunate enough to identify IP law as the profession I wanted to pursue.

I was also thrilled to attend my “dream school” University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) for law school. For my first summer job as a law student, I was accepted as a summer clerk at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, providing me with hands-on, practical litigation experience.

After that, I made one of the best decisions of my life and accepted a summer associate position at Knobbe Martens for my second summer of law school. I chose Knobbe Martens because, as an IP boutique, the firm was likely to provide me with excellent training and mentorship. I was right...and I’ve never looked back!

<https://www.worldipreview.com/article/career-series-susan-natland>

As my career grew at Knobbe Martens, I developed an appreciation and deep affinity for trademarks and brand protection. Now, 23 years later at the firm, I chair the firm's Trademark and Brand Protection Group. I most enjoy the long-term relationships I build with clients. I am obsessed with ensuring my clients' brands are protected and maintain strength in the market.

Years after graduating from UCLA Law School, I had the privilege of teaching advanced trademark law for three years at my alma mater. At the graduation ceremony, I walked in the "procession" as a faculty member down the same path, to the same music as I did during my own law school graduation. That was a special moment.

Outline a typical day in your role.

I typically start my day with a rigorous workout of either a boxing class or a jog on the beach, followed by coffee (with lots of milk and sugar to disguise the taste!). I am then ready to take on the day which typically involves numerous phone calls and meetings focused on brand protection, enforcement and supporting my clients' business goals. By the time a matter gets to me, it usually requires complex decision making and strategy, and I tend to put out a lot of fires. I often power through the day and work late into the evening. I am highly focused and don't stop until the work is done (at least for that day). It's what I enjoy doing and what my clients have come to expect.

What are the best parts about your job?

The thrill of winning and getting great results for my clients is the best feeling in the world. I played a lot of competitive sports growing up, so the competitive attitude and desire to win is innate. I build long-term relationships with all my clients and have earned their trust to protect their IP assets and brand. I truly care about their brands, and I think that comes out in how I approach my job.

I particularly relish the opportunity to engage in international trademark work. For example, last night I had a conversation with a brand counsel in Saudi Arabia.

Two nights before, I spoke to a counsel in Kuwait. And a week before that, I was discussing pressing brand protection matters with another counsel in Hong Kong. I really enjoy collaborating with people from all over the world and learning about different cultures and their approach to IP, trademark law and brand protection.

Travelling around the world on behalf of my clients is one of the best parts of my job. I'm a big fan of in-person meetings: the face-to-face exchange of information and in-person communication is invaluable. I like to visit clients and meet with local counsel all around the world. My superpower is being able to sleep anywhere, even on a plane. I typically go to sleep at take-off, and don't wake up until we land!

I most enjoy the strategic aspects of my job. I love thinking about solutions in connection with specific matters. If the client hits a roadblock, I want to figure out how to get around that while still achieving the client's goal. Sometimes I even dream about solutions (back to my superpower)! I often wake up in the morning and think, "That's a good idea!"

What is the most difficult part of your job?

Dealing with potential conflicts and turning down work is always difficult because I want to help businesses and brands. When I have to say no, it's unfortunate but also part of our complex business. It's important to respect conflict policies and ethical issues. But it's still challenging.

Ensuring that client matters are handled in an exemplary fashion, on time and with unparalleled service creates demands on my time. At times it's hard to tune out completely. I'm always checking and responding to emails and messages, even when I'm on vacation. To force me to unplug, my husband takes my phone, locks it in a safe and refuses to tell me the combination! Such is the life of a Type A lawyer!

What is your biggest achievement?

Reaching the top level at my firm. I am the third woman promoted to this senior level since the firm opened its doors in 1962. More are on their way, but it is fulfilling to be part of the wave of "glass ceiling breakers." Of course, my biggest achievement is a successful marriage and raising three beautiful, thoughtful, hard-working, and intellectually curious kids (but I may be a bit biased on that).

This year will be my final year in a three-year term serving on the Trademark Public Advisory Committee (TPAC), where I assist the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) in creating policy, rules, regulations, and guidance to protect brands in the US. and abroad and help support the USPTO's critical mission of issuing predictable, reliable and high-quality IP rights.

This opportunity to create national trademark policy and goals has been one of the most fulfilling and rewarding experiences of my career. The TPAC's work helps increase the protection of US trademarks around the world, the public service counterpart to what I do for clients every day. I am honoured and delighted to finish the final year of my term as chair of a group of dedicated and extraordinary committee members.

What advice would you give to those looking to pursue a similar career path?

I have a biology background and am a registered patent attorney. That helped me get my foot in the door. Having a scientific background before becoming an IP attorney is helpful, even though it's not necessary for trademark law.

Start networking before you need the business. Don't be afraid to reach out to people. I love when students contact me for career advice. Get involved with trademark and other IP organisations as students. Volunteer at legal and arts organisations and other non-profits that help artists with copyrights and trademarks. Show a demonstrated interest in IP.

Just work hard. Hopefully, you'll find an area that you really love and enjoy. There are no shortcuts in life. If you want to be a lawyer, you must build a solid foundation. You need to learn all the work required of a first-year associate. You can't start by being a first-chair litigator. Maintain integrity. I always have my clients' best interests in mind, not my own. That will support a successful career.

Who or what inspires you?

My mother. She was a single mother with two children who worked three jobs. She started her own successful court reporting business, which is partly how I was able to connect with some lawyers before law school. She was independent and strong, and she taught me to be just like her and to always ask questions. Growing up, I felt very lucky that I had her for a role model. I try and replicate that for my children.

What was your most unusual job before becoming an attorney?

I'm not sure about my most unusual job, but my most fulfilling role was working at a temporary restraining order clinic in San Francisco to help domestic violence victims, often from under-served communities, successfully obtain restraining orders.

Women in law**What are the major issues facing women in law?**

It's a great time for women in law in the U.S. We still have a lot of work to do, but women are being recognised (rightfully so!) for the incredible value they bring to the table.

Is the legal profession doing enough to improve gender diversity?

There is always room for more growth. Until the number of women at the upper levels of law firms and legal departments mirrors society, there is room to grow. I would like to see more female managing partners of big firms.

How are you involved in promoting diversity?

I was the first chair of our firm's diversity committee and serve on other committees to promote women in law. But my most fulfilling role is mentoring young lawyers, both men and women, to become true business partners with their clients, and to provide practical business-focused advice that will separate them from many of their peers.