

How We Made Practice Group Chair: 'Look for Chances to Lead in Any Capacity,' Say Charlene Azema and Greg Phillips of Knobbe Martens

By ALM Staff

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Charlene Azema, 40, Greg Phillips, 57, Partners at Knobbe Martens, Irvine, California

Job title: Co-chairs of trademark and brand protection group

Practice area(s): **Azema:** Trademarks, brand protection, copyrights, media, advertising & marketing and domain names; **Phillips:** Trademark, brand protection and copyright

Law school and year of graduation: **Azema:** UCLA, 2012; **Phillips:** Loyola Law School, 2007
The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?

Azema: 13 years

Phillips: 25 years as a paralegal and lawyer

What made you pick your practice area?

Azema: My path to intellectual property was anything but linear. I initially planned to go to medical school but made a last-minute pivot to pursue a joint J.D./M.B.A. instead. That shift from the sciences to law led me to believe patent law would be a natural fit. Then, for one of my summer positions, I was offered an opportunity at a Hollywood studio in their



Courtesy photos

Charlene Azema, left, and Greg Phillips, right, with Knobbe Martens.

trademark and copyright department. From that experience, I fell into the 'soft' side of IP and didn't look back.

As I grew in my practice, I realized more and more how much it aligned with my interests. The client-side practice of intellectual property allows me to engage both the legal and business sides of my training. Day to day, I work directly with businesses, CEOs and marketing teams at critical moments when they're focused on IP growth, strategy and protection. My role is to help them build IP strategies that serve

their underlying business goals and clients consistently appreciate my business-tailored approach to solving their IP challenges.

Phillips: My first job after graduating from college was selling photocopiers and fax machines to small businesses. I enjoyed the aspects of marketing and advertising that were critical to sales, including selling the brand and creating marketing materials. That work piqued my interest in the legal issues involved with trademarks and copyrights, which eventually brought me to Knobbe Martens as a clerk/trademark paralegal in 1993, and then a summer associate in 2006.

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

Azema: Knowing early in my legal career that I wanted to focus on intellectual property, I deliberately chose Knobbe Martens. With the firm's focus on intellectual property, technology, and related practice areas, combined with its stellar reputation, I knew I would receive the best legal training and develop deep expertise in my chosen field. From day one of my legal career I joined Knobbe Martens' trademark and brand protection department, where I have been ever since. This provided me with immediate and sustained exposure to the full range of matters that now define my practice, including trademarks, copyrights, brand protection, IP strategy, IP enforcement, licensing, media, advertising and marketing, and domain names. Working closely with companies at every stage of growth, from emerging startups to Fortune 100 enterprises,

has allowed me to develop a comprehensive, strategic perspective on intellectual property and to build depth and expertise across the practice from multiple angles.

Phillips: As a trademark paralegal, I worked daily in connection with trademark filings and enforcement actions worldwide. I asked the lawyers I worked with numerous questions about strategy and participated in meetings with clients. I also attended several INTA (International Trademark Association) roundtables and Orange County (California) Paralegal Association events regarding trademark and copyright matters. In law school, I furthered my training with courses in intellectual property. After passing the bar, I continued to work with senior lawyers at Knobbe Martens as well as trademark lawyers from firms abroad, and attended numerous educational seminars.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

Azema: Over my years at Knobbe Martens, I've built strong ties with every attorney in my department—which is comprised of the most talented group of trademark and brand protection lawyers I've encountered. I felt I was the right person to co-lead the group because I could leverage the relationships I had built, both within and outside the firm, with ideas I've developed over the years to strengthen and grow our team.

I've also served on several firm committees including the executive, accounts receivable, diversity, budget, and mentorship committees, which has given me well-rounded experience

in each of these critical aspects of building a successful legal practice. When the opportunity arose, I was ready to draw on those skills to lead our practice group.

Phillips: I wanted the opportunity to develop and grow Knobbe Martens' trademark and brand protection practice. I believe our department works best, including providing strategic counsel to clients, when we maximize teamwork. As co-lead, I can contribute directly to further developing the group's teamwork approach by discussing with each member how we can utilize their skills. Also, I could see from my own career how my practice grew in part thanks to the advice, mentorship and support of the other lawyers in the group. As co-lead for the department, I now have the opportunity to apply this experience to mentor and assist others.

What skill sets do you need to be an effective practice group leader (i.e., knowing more about the practice, hiring, business development, financial management, etc.)?

Azema: An effective practice group leader needs a blend of technical expertise and leadership skills. First and foremost, you need to deeply understand the practice and be a trusted resource for both your team and clients. Equally important are strong people skills, which are critical for hiring, mentoring, and retaining talent as well as for fostering trust and collaboration of your team. Every team member should feel valued and supported, as that will ensure the collaboration of everyone on the team in the joint mission of achieving excellence.

Finally, having a vision for the group as a whole beyond one's individual practice is critical. A leader should have a vision for the evolution of the department, looking beyond personal growth towards developing strategies that support the success and growth of every member of the team.

Phillips: It is important to understand the roles and responsibilities of each member of the group, from lawyers to paralegals to assistants and other staff support, as well as the challenges they each face and what excites them about their role with the firm. With that information, we can maximize the group's efficiency, grow the department, and continue to enjoy our time at the firm.

It is also critical to create and understand the group's business goals and communicate those goals to the entire group. The team works best when every member understands the direction we are heading and how they can help us reach those goals.

How do you balance client work with management work?

Phillips: Being organized and purposeful is critical. In the morning, I prioritize the various client and department management projects to maximize efficiency and meet deadlines. To meet those goals, it is very helpful to delegate tasks to associates and staff, which also gives them opportunities to gain experience working on challenging projects. I also block off time during the week to focus on business development efforts, as well as meeting with associates and staff to review projects and provide mentoring.

Azema: While there's no perfect formula, I set clear blocks of time each day for client work, ensuring client needs remain the primary focus of my schedule. Around those commitments, I carve out dedicated time throughout the week for leadership responsibilities such as mentoring, team building, and strategic planning. I also meet regularly with my group to gain alignment on the most critical priorities, and the team does a phenomenal job collaborating to achieve the goals we set. Even between Greg and I, we work together on a vision for the group, but then take ownership of tasks to avoid duplication of work.

How does having a practice leadership role give you a sense of the broader strategic vision of the firm?

Phillips: Knobbe Martens has a unique, homegrown talent ethos that has served us very well. Many of the partners at the firm started here as associates or even earlier, as I did, and that contributes to our unique culture. In that sense, our strategy guiding the trademark and brand protection group is the same as for the firm as a whole: organic growth through the recruitment of talented associates who see our firm as a place where they can grow and establish a fulfilling, rewarding career. It is important as the group's co-leader to understand this dynamic and how it affects our particular group.

Azema: This move has given me valuable insights into the benefits of the firm's talent development model, and what it values from a leadership perspective. Stepping into a practice leadership role reflects the trust the

group and firm leadership have in me and their confidence in my vision. Before taking on this position, I had many ideas but didn't always voice or implement them. Being elected co-chair signaled to me that the team, and the firm value those ideas and want me to put them into action.

What other roles or experiences help you in this current role?

Azema: The day-to-day practice of law provides countless opportunities to build leadership skills. Early on, managing teams of associates, paralegals, and staff taught me how to lead in ways that drive engagement. Serving on numerous firm committees gave me insight into firm operations and balancing competing business interests. Also, observing seasoned leaders reinforced the power of collaboration—showing that you achieve far more with the collaboration of your team members than alone.

Phillips: As a former clerk and trademark paralegal for Knobbe Martens, I understand how those roles play an important part of the group's success, as well as the challenges those team members face. Based on that experience, I have a solid understanding of the group's daily practice, which helps in identifying ways to improve how we are approaching our work, and in developing new procedures for the group.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

Phillips: Consistent with our model for growth, we want to add lawyers and staff and of course, grow our client work. It's an exciting time to be a trademark and brand protection lawyer, with so many new

developments playing out in everything from shifting policies at the USPTO to the immense impact AI is having on our clients' brands. We're exceptionally well-positioned to recruit and retain the kind of talent that can thrive in this environment, and that will lead to increasing client development opportunities. Also, identifying ways to thoughtfully and strategically implement AI tools in our practice is critical to maximizing efficiency and meeting client budget goals, but in a way that allows us to continue delivering the highest caliber work product.

Azema: Knobbe Martens is a nationwide IP firm, and our trademark and brand protection group is distributed in offices throughout the country. With this in mind, one of our key priorities in the near term will be defining new ways to support the growth and development of our team across offices. We have a renewed focus on improving training and connection with new associates and enhancing collaboration among partners in different offices.

Do you have a broader influence in this role over improving diversity at your firm? If yes, how so?

Azema: I've been a member of the firm's diversity committee for over a decade, championing initiatives that promote diversity and advance women's leadership. As a diverse woman, being elected co-chair is both an honor and a reflection of the firm's commitment to recruiting, retaining, and recognizing the achievements of diverse attorneys. It represents the amazing work the firm continues to do in fostering an inclusive and welcoming culture.

Phillips: In my role, I work closely with Terra Davis, the firm's chief diversity and talent development officer, and others throughout the firm to ensure we are building an inclusive, equitable environment. Our clients represent a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and it's important that our team does as well.

Is succession planning a part of your role as a practice group leader, and if yes, how so?

Phillips: Like all firms, we do have a few senior partners that will retire in the next few years. I anticipate, as co-leaders, that Charlene and I will play key roles in transitioning those partners' client matters and practice management activities to others in the group. This will provide an opportunity for me to get a deep understanding of the strengths and skillsets of fellow lawyers in the group, and how they can further contribute to the group as it grows and transitions.

Azema: Absolutely. As Greg mentions, we know that the group will evolve over the years as senior partners retire and younger lawyers seek new leadership roles. This only underscores our commitment to providing opportunities for professional development and mentorship to the next generation of standout trademark and brand protection attorneys.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

Azema: One thing that surprised me was how much of the role is about listening and building consensus. I expected to focus primarily on strategy and management, but I quickly realized that being co-chair means serving as a connector that brings together

different perspectives, making sure everyone feels heard and creating alignment on goals. Another surprise was the amount of time spent thinking beyond my own practice to the growth and success of the entire group. It's a shift from an individual mindset to a collective one, and while challenging, it's incredibly rewarding.

Phillips: Not really a surprise but more of a realization of all of the day-to-day tasks that are involved in managing the group. I am glad that I share the leadership role with Charlene, not only to divide the tasks but also to have someone to discuss the various issues and determine the direction that the group is taking.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

Azema: Having a bird's eye view into the work of the entire trademark and brand protection group has really empowered me to speak to the breadth and depth of our client work as a team. We have dozens of lawyers across the country working with emerging companies, established industry leaders, and individuals to strengthen and protect their brands. While the needs of the clients differ depending on their unique goals, our commitment to providing them with the best brand protection strategy possible remains consistent across industries.

Phillips: With a better insight into the strengths and roles of each group member, I can convey

to our clients the strength of our group and how we can best help clients achieve their goals. I can also better determine how to meet the clients' goals by delegating tasks to various group members who are looking for new challenges.

Is there any other advice you'd share for those looking to become a practice leader?

Phillips: I would encourage them to take on management or practice development roles in their groups to see firsthand how the current leaders develop the practice and work with each group member.

Azema: Don't wait until you have the title to start acting like a leader. Begin sharing your ideas with the group early on. Your perspective matters and contributing proactively shows you're invested in the team's success. Also, being a strong team player before stepping into a leadership role is critical. Trust, team building, and having a vision for the success of others are foundational skills of effective leadership and a me-focused mentality won't build those skills.

Finally, look for chances to lead in any capacity, whether it's taking ownership of a project, organizing an event, or volunteering for a new initiative. These experiences not only help you build confidence but also give you practical opportunities to develop the skills you'll need as a practice leader.