

Profile: Sophie Ciufu

Counsel Business and Legal Affairs at Viacom International Media Networks, a division of Viacom International Inc.

CAMLA Young Lawyers Committee Member, Marie Karykis, caught up with Sophie Ciufu, Counsel at Viacom International Media Networks in New York to discuss her experience living and working overseas as an Australian lawyer.



MARIE KARYKIS: Can you tell me a little about your role at Viacom? What does a typical day look like for you?

SOPHIE CIUFO: I work with Viacom International Media Networks ('VIMN'), a division of Viacom International Inc., as Counsel, Business and Legal Affairs. VIMN operates Viacom's multimedia brands and platforms outside of the U.S., including MTV, Nickelodeon, Nick Jr, BET, and Comedy Central.

In my role, I provide practical and commercially-focused legal advice and support to VIMN's business teams across most of our brands and platforms, including: marketing and communications; content production; acquisition and distribution; game and app development and distribution; multiplatform and technology operations; and more! I also project manage legal aspects of global initiatives, liaising with our legal teams in local markets to ensure compliance with local laws and regulations, including: Europe; the Middle East; North Africa; and Asia Pacific. I work together with my direct manager, VIMN's Senior Counsel, and VIMN's General Counsel on a day-to-day basis and I also do some ad hoc work with our Viacom U.S.-focused colleagues.

As such, a typical day is a day that is never typical! Whilst most days will start with an assessment of my day ahead, including my meeting schedule and planned to-do list for that day, I'll often have to reprioritise based on requests/developments that have come through overnight or simply from a colleague in the elevator. I spend a large part of my day drafting, negotiating, and advising on a range of commercial deals and initiatives related to all of the aforementioned business areas. I'll often work with the business to determine how to tackle legal aspects of novel or intricate deals and how to best draft the narrative of a deal into an agreement. Sometimes my day will involve deal negotiations with third parties, legal or regulatory research, and just plain old detective work to get to the bottom of a matter.

KARYKIS: Where have you worked previously, and what led you to making the big move overseas?

CIUFO: Prior to moving to VIMN in New York, I worked for VIMN's Australian & New Zealand business ('VIMN ANZ') for over 5 years: part-time as their Legal Intern and then Legal Assistant during my final semester of University and College of Law; full-time as their Junior Legal Counsel, when I was admitted to practice, and then as Legal Counsel. While I worked part-time at VIMN ANZ, I also worked part-time at Chris Chow Creative Lawyers as a Paralegal and Assistant.

Some fortunate timing and a few* (*many*) conversations about my goal to live and work in New York led to my move.

I had been to New York on vacation a few times to visit my sister, who also lives here, and I always took the opportunity to visit the VIMN office and say hello to the team I now work in. It was a great way to put faces to email signatures and to opportunistically vocalise my desire to move (well, let's face it, I would tell anyone that would listen!). When the Counsel position in the VIMN team became vacant, I had made the connections I needed to be noticed when I threw my hat in the ring and ultimately be offered an internal transfer, an offer I couldn't turn down. To have the opportunity as a young in-house counsel to work at the heart of a corporation like Viacom, to learn how it operates at its HQ-level, was going to be (and has been) invaluable experience to not only develop my legal skills but also to develop my business acumen. So, I took the role and moved!

KARYKIS: What has been the highlight of your time in New York?

CIUFO: Personally, it would definitely have to be seeing Bruce Springsteen's show on Broadway! He really is The Boss!

Professionally, working out of VIMN's Times Square headquarters has been pretty amazing. Whilst battling the tourist crowds every evening to get to the subway isn't necessarily fun, stepping out of the office into the middle of all the lights of Times Square is definitely a surreal feeling that I still haven't gotten used to one year in.

Also, as part of my role at VIMN, I was placed in a leadership program run by an organisation called the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity. The program focused on providing young lawyers with tools for developing and leveraging leadership skills and career development strategies. Aside from the professional benefits, the program introduced me to young lawyers from all over the U.S. who work across an all of areas of law and for all kinds of firms and companies. That insight into the U.S. legal profession gave me the chance to recognise the pros, cons, differences, and similarities against the Australian legal profession, and gaining that insight was definitely a highlight of my time here.

KARYKIS: What advice do you have for other young lawyers looking to move overseas?

CIUFO: Ask questions! You'll never know what opportunities are out there if you don't ask and seek them out. The best career advice I've ever received is simple: the person that cares the most about your career is you. So, these opportunities aren't going to land on your desk without pro-activeness on your part.

If you're looking to transfer internally, my advice is to find out what offices and teams your company has globally. Then, make connections with colleagues in these offices, drop-in and visit them if you're on vacation, and volunteer for cross-territory projects. Also, becoming a respected and valuable asset to your company is ultimately what will be your resume, cover letter, interview, skills assessment and, most importantly, your character reference if you're transferring internally. So, always keep this in mind in your day-to-day work and relationships. You're an investment to your employer and your knowledge of their company is the asset they're investing in, it is invaluable to them no matter what location you are working in and it is in their interests to retain you.

If you're looking to move overseas without an internal transfer, I would go on vacation and do a reconnaissance. Scope out the city, the industry, the firms/companies operating there and then when you eventually make the move, plot out a plan of action. I would ask colleagues and friends for introductions, reach out to people on LinkedIn, and tap into the resource of Australians overseas, because let's face it, we're everywhere! You'd be surprised how willing people are to have a coffee, offer advice, and even just talk you through their own experience to give you some idea of what to expect with a move of your own.

KARYKIS: What steps did you have to take in order to practise in New York? Were your Australian legal qualifications transferable?

CIUFO: Yes, my Australian qualifications were transferable to practise as in-house counsel in New York. People admitted in a jurisdiction outside of the U.S. are permitted to register and practise as in-house counsel in New York State (for those readers playing at home, it is Part 522 (b) (2) of the Rules for the Registration of In-House Counsel as directed by the New York State Court of Appeals). Certain obligations apply, including that I must maintain my New South Wales practising certificate.

KARYKIS: What do you wish you knew before moving?

CIUFO: How cold and long the winters are here! Whilst the snow is definitely novel and beautiful, come April, winter has definitely overstayed its welcome.

KARYKIS: What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the media industry?

CIUFO: The media and content industry is a very interesting and challenging space to work in right now, there are many factors disrupting the ordinary course of business and for a lawyer working in this space there is a requirement of adept and innovative thinking, malleability, and risk-tolerance (and calculation!).

There are the obvious 'disruptors', such as technology and the entry of new players into the market. But I believe the real disrupter is choice. Consumers are armed with the power of choice more than ever before and businesses need to innovate and develop ways to ensure they are chosen. With consumer choice comes a variety of challenges and things companies in the media industry have to think about that they may not have had to in the past: smaller

subscription fees and alternate subscription structures; the impact of piracy; multiple viewing devices and associated technology; ad-blocking technology; and a demand for more instantaneous consumption (for example, the expectation of series-stacking which reduces the longevity of a property).

As a lawyer in this environment, it is more important than ever to keep abreast of not only legal and regulatory changes, but industry and audience trends, technological developments, and moves your company or client's competitors are making so you're as informed as possible to deliver the most competitive legal and commercial services to either your company or your client.

I truly believe that disruption and challenges can be positive. I believe that with each challenge, comes an opportunity to disrupt the ordinary, the average, and discover new business opportunities, new ways of thinking and doing, and, as a lawyer, an opportunity to be creative and innovative in a profession that hasn't traditionally asked those things of you.

KARYKIS: What was your favourite part about being on the CAMLA YL Committee?

CIUFO: Oh, I loved everything about being on the CAMLA Young Lawyers Committee! The network of people the Committee introduced me to was definitely a highlight. Being in-house counsel from basically the start of my career meant that I didn't have an immediate network of legal colleagues, so joining organisations like CAMLA and the NSW Young Lawyers committees was a great way to meet other lawyers working in a similar space to me, including peers with a similar level of experience as well as more experienced professionals. Another highlight was the rewarding opportunity of organising and hosting networking and professional events for other young lawyers and law students, such as the Committee's inaugural CPD session on Defamation Law in 2017 and, of course, the star event that is the Committee's Speed Mentoring evening.

KARYKIS: I grew up watching Nickelodeon shows as a kid. What is your favourite Viacom show?

CIUFO: Viacom has such strong, diverse, and entertaining slate of content (past, present, and upcoming), which makes that a difficult question to answer! Growing up, I was obsessed with Rugrats, Hey Arnold!, and Daria. More recently, I thoroughly enjoy the Comedy Central Roasts and I watch Broad City religiously, I'm really excited to see what Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer do next now they've wrapped filming on the final season.



Marie Karykis is Legal Counsel at Foxtel and member of the CAMLA Young Lawyers Committee.