

# Alexandra Britt Barkman

## Senior Legal Counsel, Zimmermann

**Ashleigh Fehrenbach**, co-editor of the CLB and Senior Associate at RPC in the IP and Tech team, sits down with **Alexandra Britt Barkman**, Senior Legal Counsel at Zimmermann, one of Australia's most loved fashion brands, to discuss her career and thoughts on International Women's Day in 2023.

Before joining Zimmermann in 2022, Alexandra held coveted in-house legal roles at both Samsung Australia and Coca-Cola South Pacific. Prior to making the leap to in-house counsel, Alexandra was a solicitor at Addisons Lawyers where she started on her path as an intellectual property and disputes lawyer.

**ASHLEIGH FEHRENBACH:** Alex, thank you so much for sharing your insights on International Women's Day in 2023. Before we get to all things IWD, could you please share with us your career path and how you came to be at one of the most enviable fashion brands in Australia, Zimmermann?

**ALEXANDRA BRITT BARKMAN:** I began working in private practice with Addisons as a law clerk, and then as a graduate and junior solicitor in the intellectual property team. While I was working at Addisons, an opportunity came up to work with Coca-Cola's legal team on a secondment. Initially I had every intention of returning to private practice, at least for another few years, but when I was offered a permanent Legal Counsel role at Coke I found I couldn't give up the excitement and enormous variation of work that in-house life involves.

I've always been drawn to creative work, from studying textiles and design in high school, to music and composition (I taught the violin for about 10 years and have far too many dressmaking patterns). I suppose that's why intellectual property law had such a natural appeal to me. I've always felt very strongly about protecting creative work and became particularly interested in anti-counterfeiting when I worked in luxury retail during university. My role at Zimmermann now feels like a wonderful culmination of all those interests and experiences.

**ASHLEIGH:** As in-house counsel for a well-known brand, what skills do you consider have been the most essential to you on your journey?

**ALEXANDRA:** Technical legal skills aside, I think the most valuable

skill for me has been relationship building. Although it's of course important to maintain independence as a legal advisor, in my experience the stronger the relationships I can build with my colleagues on the commercial side of the business, the more likely they are to bring legal into the loop early and mitigate legal risks before they materialise. I've found those relationships are an invaluable basis for supporting a solid compliance program and fostering a strong partnership between the legal function and the business.

**ASHLEIGH:** Can you tell me what a typical day at Zimmermann looks like for you and is there a Miranda Priestly equivalent figure in the office?

**ALEXANDRA:** I'm afraid there isn't – although arriving at the office can often feel like stepping into a Vogue spread!

It's difficult to describe a typical day, as it can be so varied. My day often starts with a quick huddle with our Brand Enforcement team, to track and plan our IP enforcement and anti-counterfeiting work. It's interesting tackling the changing nature of technologies and platforms used in the counterfeit industry, and constantly brings new challenges as counterfeit seller behaviours change. It's impossible not to take piracy personally when you see first-hand the immense work designers and artists put into each piece. Most days will also involve an eclectic assortment of other matters, from supporting retail and marketing teams with advice and contract work, to privacy, supply chain, WHS and sustainability.



**ASHLEIGH:** If there is one thing you would celebrate about International Women's Day in either the legal profession or the fashion industry (or both!), specifically, what would it be?

**ALEXANDRA:** For me, it's an opportunity to reflect on the amazing female role models I've had in my career. As a lawyer it's encouraging to see the change occurring in the legal industry in recent years, as women's representation in senior leadership roles continues to increase. I feel privileged to have worked with several female Partners and General Counsels across my roles, and now for a company helmed by two exceptionally talented women who have really brought Australian fashion to the world stage.

**ASHLEIGH:** You found an early in your career passion for intellectual property law. What developments do you see on the horizon as being important to intellectual property law for Australian brands? Are there any gaps you've noticed throughout your career that you feel should be closed or given more attention to, in order to provide brands with greater protection?

**ALEXANDRA:** I think trying to keep pace with the lightning speed of technology will always be front and centre in intellectual property

- I suspect the same is true of most practice areas. This change can mean anything from new methods used by counterfeit sellers, and new methods to tackle them, to entirely new challenges like the application of traditional trade mark law to NFTs (as Hermès, for example, has recently experienced). The pace at which that changes means there will always be gaps to adapt to – which can often make the job seem both much easier, and much harder at the same time!

**ASHLEIGH: What do you like best about your work?**

**ALEXANDRA:** I've been very fortunate to work under managers who have supported my particular passion for IP, whilst also encouraging me to gain as much experience as I can in other practice areas. My intellectual property and brand protection work is probably my favourite part of my job, although my work is never just that - from liaising with external counsel on counterfeit raids, to new stores in Spain, there aren't a lot of dull moments. I think one of the great benefits of working in-house, and particularly gaining experience in larger businesses and legal teams, is that you are constantly exposed to a huge variety of different legal matters.

Working directly with clients from within the business is a very different experience from private practice. I enjoy learning about the nuts and bolts of the business like the design process, supply chains, and evolving sustainability considerations for the industry. It's also exciting being surrounded by such beautiful clothes and creative people!

**ASHLEIGH: Who are some women in the profession whom you really admire, and why?**

**ALEXANDRA:** At Coca-Cola I was very fortunate to work with Sarah Susak, the General Counsel at the time. She is incredibly sharp and a remarkable lawyer, and also the kindest and most compassionate colleague. She works hard to make sure her team has a supportive working environment, and really invested in my development as a young lawyer to help me find new strengths. During my time at Coke, Sarah's support was a constant reminder to me of the importance of uplifting the people around you (inside and outside the office).

I also couldn't answer that question without including my Mum, Carolyn Britt. It was so special to have her move my admission as a solicitor and she has been a constant source of motivation as my career has developed and throughout my studies. Mum is the person who first sparked my interest in the law, bringing me along to the Law Library when I was a little kid as she was studying for her Masters and patiently explaining what happened in the cases I "helped" her to find. It made for a strange sense of déjà-vu when *Lumley v Gye* turned up again in my own Contracts Law textbook.

**ASHLEIGH: What is the best professional advice you have ever received?**

**ALEXANDRA:** It's hard to pinpoint specific advice, but I've certainly had some incredible role models in my career who have taught me a lot by

example and encouraged me to find a way to channel my non-legal interests in my work and career. I feel that being genuine and harnessing those interests in my professional capacity is what has allowed me to derive the most out of my work.

Sarah Susak (mentioned above) has been involved in a huge amount of charity work and is a fierce social justice advocate. She showed me the importance of using your skills to do some good outside of your day job. I have been volunteering with Kingsford Legal Centre at their free community advice nights for the last couple of years. It's not only incredibly rewarding, but it has also helped me to grow as a lawyer through exposure to a range of matters I wouldn't ordinarily deal with day to day.

**ASHLEIGH: Alex, thank you so much for your insights. On behalf of all our readers, I'd like to wish you a very happy International Women's Day!**

## Contributions & Comments

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