

2021 ACC Top 10 30-Something: Meng Choo Cheah

Interviews and Profiles



The ACC Top 10 30-Somethings awards recognize in-house counsel between the ages of 30 and 39 for their innovation, global perspectives, proactive practice, advocacy efforts, and pro bono and community service work.



As a teenager, Meng Choo Cheah fawned over Oscar de la Renta's gowns and other dazzling runway couture. She dreamed of pursuing a career in fashion, and someday opening a wedding

dress boutique in her hometown of Kuala Lumpur. Her parents, however, wanted her to be a doctor. When she said no, they gave her two other options: law or business. She chose both — and added glamour later.

Apart from her love of fashion, working at Sephora was an easy sell. Meng Choo strongly believes in the products and the company's mission, which champions bold choices and fearlessness.

As the head of legal, SEA, ANZ & KR, Meng Choo has pioneered and built, from the ground up, the legal department in Southeast Asia, which is part of a team of 60 lawyers globally (a lean team in comparison to Sephora's global staff of 39,000).

Meng Choo realized early in her career at Sephora that digitizing the legal department would help employees find resources themselves, ultimately saving time and money. She fearlessly led her team to implement a Contract Lifestyle Management (CLM) and Automation Platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. The platform will be one of Meng Choo's many legacies at Sephora.

> "At Sephora, we believe beauty is for each person to define and ours to celebrate. Together, we support and encourage bold choices in beauty — and in life. Our purpose is to inspire fearlessness."
>
> Sephora Mission Statement

To further streamline communication between the global staff, she developed the Clause Bank Resource, a corporate database that provides a "single source of truth" available to the legal department and the entire company. This silo-breaking database compiles Sephora's essential corporate documents and commercial contracts. As a result, interdepartmental communication is more transparent and consistent while reducing emails. The real-time updates pinpoint the high-risk areas for in-house counsel to address — a critical feature in the chaotic year of 2020.

These digital tools were pivotal for ensuring business continuity as the legal team focused on dealing with novel legal issues during the upheaval created by Sephora's nearly overnight transformation from in-store to online sales when COVID-19 halted the retail world. Pre-pandemic, the majority of Sephora's revenue came from brick-and-mortar stores.

As Sephora shifted its focus towards its online business due to the closure of most of its stores, Meng Choo and her team had to continuously develop different legal strategies and keep abreast of legal and regulatory developments based on the lockdown measures for each APAC region.

Even when she wasn't the expert, Meng Choo led her department with aplomb during the ever-changing lockdown measures. Together, she and her team collaborated with business teams and external vendors to minimize business disruptions and ensure their customers' orders reached their doorsteps, whether it was concealer for Zoom meetings or facial serums to soothe pandemic stress.

Amongst other upheavals caused by COVID-19, moving sales online resulted in numerous other challenges. As Sephora's data protection officer, Meng Choo oversaw all privacy-related inquiries from consumers and regulators across Southeast Asia. Having already spearheaded the company's data privacy compliance program, Meng Choo continued to gear up for and prepare Sephora for the onslaught of data privacy concerns.

Her success begot a recent appointment as Southeast Asia's regional compliance officer. Her focus has been on supporting global ethics and compliance initiatives, including establishing a framework for anti-bribery, whistleblowing, and conflict of interest. The program educates employees on various ethical issues so that they can recognize and report concerns.

> Learning, Meng Choo tells her interns, is the most valuable asset to your career. "Ask a lot of questions," she advises.

Despite her busy professional life, Meng Choo has also made time to support the broader community. Meng Choo believes that legal departments can be collaborative environments with mentors who empower their colleagues. To foster this supportive network, Meng Choo led the development of Sephora's legal internship program, which attracts local and international law students. Learning, she tells her interns, is the most valuable asset to your career. "Ask a lot of questions," she advises.

Meng Choo has also lent her hand with volunteer work, which has been essential to building her confidence. When she started law, she began to doubt her decision to become a lawyer. Then an opportunity to be an advisor to the Asian Paralympic Committee appeared, and she took a leap of faith.

More than the professional experience, volunteering with these athletes who had an "appetite for life" made her realize what she wanted in life and helped her define her legal career. And with all her success, what a beautiful career she has to celebrate.

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