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"Trademarks are the bread and butter of the IP world": WIPO director general calls on brand professionals to take message to the masses

- **WIPO director general opens *WTR Connect*, provides insight into future of the agency**
- **Plans expand focus on communicating the IP story, including to SMEs and the young**
- **Calls on the community to be proactive in engaging other groups and spreading message**

This week's [WTR Connect](#) series of virtual sessions kicked off yesterday with a fireside chat with Daren Tang, director general of WIPO. In a wide-ranging discussion, Tang provided insight into the agency's future focuses and issued a rallying call to the IP community.

Tang took the helm at WIPO on 1 October 2020, having previously served as chief executive of the IP Office of Singapore (IPOS). He likened the first five months in his new role to "drinking from a fire hydrant", the task being to get up to speed with WIPO staff, processes and structures in the midst of a pandemic. He was also keen to go about things in a slightly different way to his predecessors, explaining: "I have done away with chief of staffs. They are common in UN agencies because they act as an intermediary between the director general and the organisation, but I wanted to be close to the organisation and my colleagues."

In January his new team of assistant and deputy director generals [took office](#). Since then, a series of structural changes have already been implemented, including the establishment of a new division – the IP and Innovations Ecosystem Sector – which will consider intellectual property from the enterprise economic perspective. However, much of the current focus is on preparing for July, when programme and budget meetings will result in the strategic plan that sets up focus for the next five years. During our fireside chat, Tang expanded on some of the likely initiatives.

One relates to the commercial use of intellectual property. During his tenure at IPOS, the office launched a range of financing schemes and this remains an area of interest, albeit with WIPO playing a slightly different role. He explains: "More and more companies are centred on intangible assets. [But this is] an asset class which we don't know how to value properly – there is no consistent standard. And we often aren't quite clear on how to collateralise or monetise it. There is a big gap here and WIPO can play a role. But the role will be different to that of national IP offices. I don't see us as a UN agency getting involved in the trenches and running schemes that are targeting individual SMEs, because that is the job of national IP offices. They are on the ground and know the local circumstances best. What WIPO can do is draw from and leverage its strength as an international agency and help to bring people together to talk about these things, to share best practices and to look at common challenges. We can also connect with other agencies and international agencies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to say 'this is an issue we all need to look at'."

Creating connections is a recurring theme in our conversation and ensuring that SMEs are part of the discussion is set to be a priority for WIPO. This is particularly important, Tang notes, in light of covid-19: "Because of the pandemic, countries are looking at how they can help companies recover. SMEs are such a big part of employment and if they are not part of the recovery story, that recovery will not be even and will exacerbate divisions. That isn't good for anyone and WIPO must play a role in helping to make sure SMEs know how to use IP for business growth."

In this effort, Tang again sees WIPO adopting a partnership-based approach, complementing the work of national IP offices and other stakeholders. "We can't do this ourselves and don't intend to," he expands. "We need to find good partners – IP associations, SME associations and industry associations within different regions and countries. What we can also do is look at things from a systemic angle. To raise awareness at a political level and provide some toolkits to help, especially for those in developing countries that may not have the resources to develop resources."

More concrete proposals will be presented in the July programme and budget meetings, but SME support will clearly be high on the agenda. As for other WIPO priorities, Tang expands: "First, we want to continue doing our traditional areas of work well, including to support movement in the normative agenda. It is tough as all UN agencies are facing a geo-political environment in which consensus is harder to build. But we will continue doing that work."

That focus extends to administering services such as the international patent, trademark and design systems, as well as arbitration and mediation work, and the continued development of new platforms, such as WIPO Proof and WIPO Green.

Alongside SME outreach, there is also a desire to take the IP message to new audiences. For example, Tang contends: "We want to reach out to youth. That is absolutely crucial. When I look to them as the future innovators and creators, they won't understand the UN system and what WIPO does unless we reach out to them in a concrete fashion – to show them how IP is connected and something that is part of their lives, especially as they create and innovate. So there will be a big focus on youth."

This all plays into a larger communication piece – namely, to ensure that intellectual property is both understood and embraced across all sectors, regions and sections of the population. "We have to tell the story of IP a lot more effectively to people outside the IP community. We have to make people feel that IP is relevant to them and I worry that we don't do this enough. There is a view that IP is all about very advanced economies and only supports those who can exploit it. We need to tell these stories better – to get off the shelf and put the story out there. So

WIPO will work with institutions and agencies, and IP associations. And I'd like to make an appeal [to the wider IP community]. In whatever way you can, make sure people understand that what you are doing is relevant to their lives. That is what we need to do for IP to remain relevant to people five, 10 or 20 years from now."

This is a story that Tang himself has learnt over his career. As someone who did not start out in this particular industry, he recalls: "IP was never my first love. It was an arranged marriage. For most of my professional life I was practising international law and when I was asked to join the IP office nine years ago it was really a leap in the dark. After joining I saw IP all around me. It is about the brands we see around us. It is about the technology that we use day to day. It is about the content we create and consume every day."

Now, as an IP evangelist, he is keen for the wider community to take that enthusiasm to the masses – and trademark professionals are best positioned to do so. "The discussion on IP rights tends to be dominated by patents but I think that trademarks are the bread and butter of the IP world, and this community should be proud of the fact that what it is doing is so critical to entrepreneurs and enterprises. My colleagues in the patent and technology sectors may be upset to hear me say this, but not every enterprise needs a patent. Every enterprise does need a brand. A brand is needed to engage with consumers and convey its mission."

With brands more accessible than patents and clearly visible in everyday life, there is a real opportunity for the trademark community to promote intellectual property more generally. Tang concludes: "It is an exciting time to be an IP expert but please make sure that we connect our community to the other communities out there, so that the man and woman on the street understand what we do. If we don't, the perception that IP is only for big economies and companies will be perpetuated and that is to the sufferance of us all. Let's work together – and WIPO is here to support you in this endeavour."

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