



Women in the global war on counterfeiting

CRJ presents an interview with two women on the frontline in the global war on counterfeiting, finding out how they work and the dangers of fake goods, as well as the far reaching effects of such criminal activities

In her first few weeks on the job at UL, Natalie Wong found herself standing inside a building in Manchester, UK, surrounded by counterfeit lithium-ion batteries. These are powerful batteries that can overheat and explode if not properly manufactured and handled. Also on the premises were counterfeit electrical items, such as AC adapters, hair straighteners, and electrical components for phones and laptops, each of which can produce harmful shocks and cause fires if they are developed without meeting lifesaving electrical standards for consumer safety.

An angry crowd gathered on the street outside the building where the counterfeit goods were stored, upset that the authorities were seizing items of great value.

The more than 17,000 counterfeit products seized that day had all been confiscated as part of a global enforcement action in which UL was taking part. The seized items bore counterfeit UL Marks – the symbol that buyers typically rely on to indicate that the products they are purchasing have passed rigorous, scientific testing and are safe for use. Bypassing testing and placing a counterfeit Mark on products is an especially manipulative crime, as it aims to lure shoppers and take advantage of their trust with a wholly untested product that could potentially cause serious physical harm or property damage.

Risky business

Brand protection can be a risky business when investigating items that translate to huge profits on the open market, but Wong does not work alone. An enforcement action can only be accomplished with a broad group of concerned and active stakeholders. In this case, the collaborative force seizing the counterfeit items included the Modern Slavery Co-ordination Unit of the Greater Manchester Police, Immigration, Customs, Trading Standards and 15 to 20 other brand representatives.

No day is typical for Wong, who serves as the senior regional investigations manager for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, as her normal work involves managing several investigations across several different countries with many different partners. The stakes are high, but the rewards are even greater.

“An exceptional day would be when, after a long investigation working the supply chain, doing surveillance and spending a lot of time on a case, we get the result we’re after,” Wong said. “It’s a game of patience.”

For her, it’s also a matter of critical importance: “At UL, our company mission is working for a safer world, and we genuinely work hard for that.”

“Our co-operation with law enforcement results in the seizure of millions of products every year that are potentially unsafe and hazardous and could really put somebody’s life at risk. In one case, we may discover 20 lithium-ion batteries, and in another it may be 50,000. But it only takes one unsafe battery to wreak havoc in somebody’s home and potentially have a big impact on somebody’s life, so we take what we do very seriously. It is something that we put a lot of heart and soul into.”

No day is typical for Natalie Wong, who is senior regional investigations manager for Europe, the Middle East and Africa with UL

UL

Making matters worse, law enforcement budgets to fight IP crime are shrinking

Counterfeiting is a highly profitable crime, with minimal penalties for offenders. As online shopping grows in popularity around the globe, so does the counterfeiting crisis. In 2021, more than 2.14 billion people worldwide are expected to buy goods and services online, up from 1.66 billion global digital buyers in 2016, according to information published in 2019 by Statista. Before the advent of internet shopping, criminals had to reveal themselves in order to reach consumers by setting up a shop or market stall, their goods open to the public to be examined. That made investigating

and seizing products, and holding the counterfeiters responsible, a lot easier.

Today, the digital marketplace offers many more places to host a storefront, and buyers can’t examine products before

purchasing them, or figure out where and how they might have originated. Products can be purchased and shipped from any location around the world. Counterfeiters are doing business over mobile apps and online trading platforms, or simply hosting their own websites.

“It makes it so much more challenging for us because essentially anyone can make a product and start a business,” Wong said. “And, when you’re dealing with civil and criminal cases with regards to intellectual property (IP) crime, the penalties are very low. So for a criminal, it’s low risk. If they get caught, the likelihood is that they’re not going to prison. What it does mean is that they’re creating huge revenue flow from the sale of counterfeit goods, which gets pushed through to fund more serious organised crime.”

Making matters worse, law enforcement budgets to fight IP crime are shrinking. With limited resources, law enforcement agencies around the world struggle to provide officers with the training necessary to detect and investigate such crimes. Monica Mena works to educate law enforcement and the public as UL’s senior manager of outreach and capacity building. She partners with Interpol to develop free online training for global law enforcement through the International IP Crime Investigators College (IIPCIC).

“UL is a safety science company and we have the privilege of working with many global organisations to tackle critical safety challenges. It is our responsibility to communicate what we learn with the public,” Mena said. “I focus on sharing that information with our stakeholders through partnerships like the one with Interpol.”

With more than 17,000 users from 150 countries, the IIPCIC translates its online learning to ensure a global reach, establish a common understanding of IP crime and encourage transnational co-operation. It is the leading educational platform for law enforcement and rights-holders worldwide, with a mission to educate global law enforcement and relevant stakeholder groups to combat transnational IP crime effectively. The curriculum introduces law enforcement and other stakeholders to the crime of counterfeiting, its global nature and its effects on economies.

Yet, as the Internet helps cloak the identities of the criminals behind counterfeiting and makes locating the brick-and-mortar counterpart of an online store

selling fake goods more difficult, is there any real way to protect against a global counterfeiting crisis?

While Wong focuses directly on hunting down the products bearing counterfeit UL Marks and the criminals producing them, Mena's fight occurs more behind-the-scenes, but it may ultimately provide the answer to reducing this growing crime. According to Mena, educating consumers on how to identify and protect themselves from purchasing counterfeit products is what can potentially have a significant impact in stopping counterfeiting.

Mena believes that knowledgeable consumers need to act as the first line of defence if there is any hope to combat counterfeiting in a major way.

"Consumers are the largest line of defence and the biggest group of ambassadors we could have to help curb this type of crime," Mena noted. "If they can help decrease the demand for counterfeit goods, then the criminals will be deterred."

Some of her work at UL includes teaching the next generation of shoppers about the potential dangers of purchasing goods that are not 'real.' An exhibit she developed for the Crime Museum in Nashville, Tennessee, featured an interactive game that tests for counterfeit Chilean sea bass. She also helped create a video introducing children between four and eight to the crime of counterfeiting, and the importance of honesty.

Mena's work requires global collaboration. Communicating with consumers, law enforcement and stakeholders in ways that they can clearly understand involves being able to translate and share knowledge into multiple languages. The IIPCIC curriculum currently offers courses in six languages.

Technology is, of course, essential to her efforts as she manages global content and online course creation. Mena works with Interpol and many other external partners and organisations that support UL's safety and education mission. "I'm in constant communication with organisations like these that have a common vision and share our mission to get the communication out, and get everybody rallied around fighting counterfeiting on a global scale," said Mena.

Wong and Mena support each other's work, combining their individual team's efforts on large-scale, collaborative initiatives like the recent Project Centurion – a six-week, in-depth investigation that joined UL and law enforcement officials from the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific – to seize nearly \$10 million in counterfeit products.

Wong said that during those six weeks it was: "All hands on deck, looping in all law enforcement, engaging all of the contacts that we have, and doing our best to enable them to remove as many unsafe and hazardous products as possible in the lead-up to the holiday period. That is the busiest shopping time of year and when people may take shortcuts."

Mena added: "My role is to get information about Project Centurion out to UL customers and to internal UL employees, and then share it at any events we have. Natalie and I are really lucky that we work for an organisation that truly believes in supporting brand protection efforts, not only for UL but for the world."

Collaboration between all interested parties is at the heart of any successful operation, and developing

and maintaining relationships to share information is absolutely critical for both Wong and Mena in the work they perform. UL sponsors the largest anti-counterfeiting conference annually, the International IP Crime Conference. It is at events like these where Wong and Mena take the time to meet with other stakeholders to review best practices and industry perspectives, and come up with effective combative strategies.

With the global trade in fake goods worth some half a trillion US dollars a year, IP crime touches all industry sectors, affecting the global economy and endangering public health. If there is one thing Mena would like the public to understand about counterfeiting, it's the many other crimes that it supports, including money laundering and organised crime.

Horrific global crimes

"Counterfeiting funds so many other very serious crimes, like human trafficking and terrorism," she emphasised. "That little 'designer' purse from a street vendor could be supporting horrific global crimes that have significant effects on people and economies." Wong added: "I think some people may go on holiday, pick up a fake handbag and fake sunglasses, and not think anything of it. If they genuinely understood where that money is going and how those products have been made, they would probably think twice."

Counterfeiting also affects businesses, taking revenue away from legitimate vendors. "It leads to unfair competition for legitimate vendors and can lead to fewer legitimate jobs being available to the local community," Mena said. Wong continued: "There really isn't anything that hasn't been counterfeited, so regardless of who you are, what you do or which country you live in, you've probably been exposed to purchasing something counterfeit at some point, whether it's a phone charger, wine or toothpaste. It's quite scary when you think about it."



Monica Mena: "Our subject matter experts come from all of our global partners and organisations, like US Customs and Border Protection, global law enforcement organisations, the International Trademark Association (INTA) and the International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition (IACC), World Customs Organisation (WCO), Hong Kong Customs and the FBI."

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