

## Kristie Prinz, Chair of the Section Program Committee



In this Profiles column, I interview Ms. Kristie Prinz, co-chair of the Voice Over Internet Protocol Committee and chair of the Program Committee for the Section of Science & Technology Law. Ms. Prinz has been a solo practitioner since 2004 in the San Francisco Bay Area and has her own consulting business to assist those just starting out on their own. If you would like to contact Kristie about her experiences as a solo practitioner, feel free to check out her consulting business website at [www.prinzlawconsulting.com](http://www.prinzlawconsulting.com) or contact her at [kprinz@prinzlawoffice.com](mailto:kprinz@prinzlawoffice.com). As always, these are not quotes but paraphrases of my conversation with Ms. Prinz.

**Q: Kristie, please tell us a little bit about your history and how you ended up where you are today.**

**A:** I got my undergraduate degree in Political Science at Furman University and then went to Vanderbilt Law School. I graduated there in 1998. I also spent a semester abroad in Spain, which is when I became interested in international issues. That's why I originally went to law school, to explore international law. The first job I landed out of law school, however, was actually for a small insurance defense firm in Atlanta. After a couple of months, they realized they did not have enough work for another associate, which sent me to another firm doing commercial litigation. While I was at that firm, I was able to slowly incorporate some corporate transactional work into my practice, because they had lost some associates from their corporate department, and their commercial litigation practice was a little slow. I left the firm shortly before it closed its Atlanta office and then moved to the Bay Area and was able to focus on transactional work and ultimately transition into the eCommerce and

intellectual property transactional practice I have today. The interesting part is that I have also over time been able to build my practice into an international practice, which is exactly what I hoped to do when I decided to attend law school in the first place.

**Q: Why did you decide to go out on your own? It sounds like you've had a lot of different firm experiences. What about solo practice really drew you?**

**A:** Going solo was a choice of necessity at first. I would like to think that I would have made the personal decision to go solo on my own, but in 2003, the firm that I was working for in Palo Alto, California, closed that office. I continued to work with one client of the former firm while I was looking for another job. After an extensive job search, I did receive an offer from another firm. But when I had that offer in hand, and I thought about what it was I was doing and really examined the pros and cons of accepting the offer versus building my own practice, I finally made the personal decision to build my own firm.

**Q: Wow, it sounds like you really were thrown out there into the mean streets all by yourself! What were some of the big challenges that you had at the beginning and even still now? Also, what was one of the first things you thought about doing when you decided to go solo?**

**A:** It really was not an easy transition. I came from a large-firm environment, and all of a sudden I did not have any of the support, the networking, and the know-how that a large firm is able to provide to its associates. I was on my own with one client. I needed insurance, I needed someplace to work from—it was really just being thrown out there on your own. The most difficult part I would say at the very beginning was getting insurance. If you go out on your own, you need to have insurance. But if you only have one client, insurance companies are not that eager to insure you. Once you have that first insurance, though, you can start negotiating for better insurance down the road. The other challenge was really those amenities that I was talking about. When you move out of a large firm, you just do not know *what* you do not

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*Cottrell is an intellectual property and business law attorney with Smith Moore Leatherwood in Greensboro, North Carolina. She focuses her practice on patent and trademark prosecution, intellectual property-related business transactions, and business litigation. She clerked for the Honorable Ben F. Tennille of the North Carolina Business Court prior to entering private practice. She can be reached at [clara.cottrell@smithmoorelaw.com](mailto:clara.cottrell@smithmoorelaw.com). Follow her on Twitter @ClaraCottrell.*



know! You are not sure where to turn next; you are not sure what things you even need to have, such as IT support and a server.

You asked what the first thing was that I thought about when I decided to go solo. I have one word for you: website! This was back in 2004, and I knew that I needed to have an online presence in order to draw more clients to the firm I was going to start. The first thing that I concentrated on was getting my marketing material together, which included a website. Of course, it takes time to build up your web presence and then more time to address your presence and make it stronger.

**Q: What are the challenges you are facing in today's economy?**

**A:** Right now, the challenge is the economy. As everyone has been hearing in the news, it is becoming harder and harder for small businesses to find lines of credit. This compounds the problem that many in our profession are dealing with in this bad economy: clients who are paying you slower and slower. The difficult part is seeing your business gaining ground and being set back by elements outside of your control. It is times like this that having money in the bank really makes a difference!

**Q: How long do you think it takes to develop a client base when you're out there on your own?**

**A:** I would say it takes several years, somewhere around three to four years, before you begin to see the fruits of your labor, and you start to feel that your reputation is strong enough that you are attracting clients. I was able to start with one client, which made it a little bit easier to get off the ground. Even with that support it took several years before I felt like I was in a good place with

a list of clients that I could continuously count on for work and for income. During the time, when you are building your client base, it is very important to market yourself and to build your reputation through the organizations that you're involved in and through your web presence.

**Q: What organizations have you been involved with, and how do you think that they have helped you build your reputation and your practice?**

**A:** I have been actively involved with a number of organizations, including Licensing Executives Society, National Association of Women Business Owners, International Technology Law Association, Intellectual Property Owners Association, the ABA, and the State Bar of California. What joining these organizations is able to provide you with are credentials and a low-pressure environment to hone your networking, speaking, and writing skills. By being involved in these organizations, you really are able to raise your profile with your peers and other professionals. You hope that these connections then turn into a referral source, but you cannot count on these organizations for your work. Instead, these are investments into your career. It takes a lot of money to attend all of the meetings and to become involved. It takes money and time. That is why it is important that you prioritize where you spend your resources. In this economy, even though it may be difficult to find the resources, I recommend still becoming involved and staying involved in different organizations to the extent possible. As I said, it is an investment. You should be able to use your involvement in organizations to build your professional development and your reputation. Becoming involved in these organizations also gives

you the opportunity to become known as an expert on a subject. These opportunities can lead to more opportunities outside of the specific organization. Also make sure that you publicize what you are doing on the web and within other organizations.

Of course, in this economy, it is hard to justify spending money on a number of different organizations. Again, that is why it is important to prioritize. But you should not be afraid to contact them and ask if there are any special discounts or help available for lawyers at small firms or small businesses that would like to become involved but just cannot handle all the dues or the travel expenses. For instance, the ABA has different packages right now to accommodate lawyers who are being affected by the bad economy, in order to try to keep members involved in these tough times. Remember, though, you cannot do everything. You really need to look at what your leadership responsibilities are within organizations and devote your time accordingly.

**Q: We have talked a couple of times already about building your reputation and your web presence. What things do you recommend people do to start to build a reputation, and when do you recommend they start?**

**A:** I addressed building my reputation by building a very strong online presence. A strong online presence is not something that happens overnight and does require a lot of work. For instance, I started blogging when I first started the law firm and still blog consistently. Some of the tools that I use are search engine optimization software and programs. Try to think about how you can get your name out in a lot of different ways so that search engines will hit on you and your website very frequently. One tool that I use specifically is AdWords®. I go in there and tweak them every so often to ensure that I have the words I want to have associated with my firm website when searchers start looking for someone like me.

One thing I do want to make clear is you do not have to wait until you are a solo practitioner or in a small firm to begin building your reputation. You should, right now, regardless of where you are, start thinking about your freestanding resume. When I say your freestanding resume, I'm referring to you as a person, not you affiliated with the firm. Even right out of school, you can already be thinking about how you are spending your nonworking hours and how you can use that time to build your reputation, whether it is being involved in organizations, starting to write and

submit articles to various publications, keeping a blog, anything along those lines where you can point to it down the road for future clients or employers to show that you are committed and involved in the law community. Even if you are affected by the economy and having to look outside of the law for a job right now, you still can work on building your professional resume, as your resume is more than just the job that you have at any given time. Doing this is worthwhile regardless of what type of firm you are currently in or where you find yourself in life.

**Q: You mentioned that there is a lot of support that the ABA can give. What kind of support do you see out there, and what are some other options for people thinking about a solo practice?**

**A:** The ABA is doing a better job of developing programs and assistance for the small practitioner. However, the ABA is really about your professional development, not so much about the business of running a firm. That is where organizations like consultants and coaches step in. My consulting business, Prinz Law Management Consulting, provides a starting point for people who want to go out on their own and really do not know where to start. Running a solo practice is about running a business. When I started, there was no one I could turn to to ask advice about which vendors to use and where to put my money. The main goal is to look for somebody who can help you prioritize how it is you are spending your money and your time. I really feel like I could have saved so much money if I had somebody to just bounce ideas off of and get advice from someone who had already been there. The point of my consulting business is to provide specifics like cost and vendors, what the different options are and what it is you really need like an IT system and insurance. The idea is to save people money by advising them on how to spend their resources on developing their business.

**Q: Kristie, thank you so much for your time. I like to end all of my interviews with one piece of advice that you would like to pass on to attorneys who might be reading this column. What's your favorite piece of advice that you would like to pass on?**

**A:** A career is a series of steps that are built over a period of time. Where you are right now is not an end point. It is important to keep the goal in mind as you focus your activities, your money, and your time. ♦