

General Counsel for Coca-Cola delivers 30th Edith House Lecture

Serving as this year's Edith House Lecturer was General Counsel for Coca-Cola North America Leslie M. Turner. During her presentation, titled "Winning or Winning With Integrity? A Lawyer's Role in the Corporate World," Turner explored how businesses today must have a "social license to operate" and discussed the idea that to obtain this license corporate lawyers must go beyond advising on what a company can do and look at what they should do.

"Businesses don't operate in markets, they operate in communities – real live places with real live people," Turner said. "Businesses need the approval and acceptance of real live consumers who buy their products."

This is why, Turner said, branding and marketing can only go so far in helping a company be successful.

"We have learned that one of the reasons that consumers choose a company, or that our consumers choose our company, has a lot to do with how they feel about us as a company and as a corporate citizen," Turner said.

"For The Coca-Cola Company, for any company – whether you are operating in the U.S. or around the world – having a social license to operate means being a good steward of [your] consumers' and [your] communities' well being and operating morally, ethically and with integrity."

Not only is this stewardship beneficial to the people directly impacted by the company's decisions, but it can also be good for the organization's bottom line.

For example, Turner noted that last October, *Newsweek* reported that companies that actively manage environmental matters actually outperform those that do not.

"Being mindful of your social license to operate sometimes makes plain old good business sense," she said.

Also increasing the need for businesses to be mindful of their social perception is the "age of transparency" that has been ushered in by the reach of digital connections, Turner stated.

"There isn't much that goes on in the world today that isn't known instantly," she added. "We have an explosion of information accessible at the touch of a finger and available in the palm of our hands, in everybody's hands. ... [It's] quickly analyzed and sometimes blown out of proportion and distorted, and thoughtful discussion about it might be the one thing that gets lost in the shuffle."

Turner said this is why it is so important for lawyers to look at what a company should do, not just at what is or is not legal.

"Gaining and retaining a social license to operate requires in-house counsel to assess, to be cognizant of [and] to counsel on more than the letter of the law," Turner said.

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Watch Turner's lecture online at www.law.uga.edu/multimedia-gallery-recent-events.



Photo by John Disney/Daily Report

She gave several recent examples of companies whose social license to operate was threatened by decisions they made on issues such as labor standards and water usage and pointed out that while the lawyers in each case had certainly performed their professional obligations, the companies still had difficulties or challenges in their ability to reach their business goals due to negative consumer reactions.

"As lawyers we have to be business partners and counselors. We have to understand what gets in the way of people wanting to receive or access our products, develop the best way to solve conflicts and understand how businesses make money," Turner said. "But as counselors I believe that we have an obligation to advise our business colleagues on the importance of not simply winning, but winning with integrity."

To achieve this, Turner said, lawyers must have an unwavering, laser focus on what the company should do. They need to take into consideration the needs, interests and concerns of the company's consumers, as well as of the communities in which the business operates, and then advise on the best course of action.

"[A]dvising on what a company should do is the difference between being a lawyer and a counselor. It's showing leadership and being a partner with the business. Raising your hand can cause scrutiny, and it is not always the most comfortable space to be in. But being a counselor can make a palpable difference in how a company operates and how it is perceived."

This type of leadership, Turner said, takes tremendous courage and requires lawyers to stand up to the "win by any means necessary mentality," which can be found in a variety of environments.

"[It] really doesn't matter if you are in-house or private practice or your own practice or government, I believe that as lawyers – because of the principals that we represent and the ethics that we have – that we have the opportunity, and sometimes the unique one, to call out and question ... 'Are we standing for integrity?'"

The Edith House Lecture Series is hosted annually by the Women Law Students Association in honor of one of the first female graduates of Georgia Law. House, a native of Winder, Ga., was co-valedictorian of the law class of 1925, the first class with women graduates.