West Marine’s **Pam Fields** takes the lead in rebranding **West Marine**, revolutionizing the boating supplies retailer with new product offerings and flagship experiential stores

*By Melissa Anders*

Pam Fields thrives on change, so it may be surprising that she has worked for the same company for nearly two decades. But as senior vice president and general counsel of West Marine, Fields continues to redefine herself and the aquatics industry.

“What I like about West Marine and the in-house position is that issues are different every day,” she says. “There is always some other challenge that needs to be solved and each requires different skill sets, some creativity, and collaboration with my business partners.”

Fields grew up on Long Island and got her law degree from Fordham University in New York City. She practiced corporate and real estate law in Manhattan and later moved to California, where she and her husband started a film production company. Fields did the legal work for the production company. Her husband is a writer and won an Emmy Award for a documentary on his grandfather, comedian W.C. Fields.

After a while they moved to Northern California, where she eventually joined West Marine as a temporary employee in the real estate department. She progressed to the tax department, and then became director of legal affairs in 2000. After establishing the legal department, she became West Marine’s first general counsel.

The department has grown to include an associate counsel, paralegal, and members of the internal audit, risk management, compliance, and asset protection teams. Fields describes her management style as high level.

“I expect a lot from my team because I expect a lot from myself,” she says. “I like to work with self-starters, people who don’t need a lot of direction. I’m there to support them when they run into problems.”

The company is transitioning from a core boat business to a broader aquatics outfitter through a few key initiatives—e-commerce, store optimization, and merchandise expansion. It continues to cater to traditional boaters while reaching out to new customers through expanded product offerings such as kayaks, fishing and diving supplies, personal electronics, apparel, footwear, accessories, and “anything that makes you feel a connection to the water,” Fields says. West Marine is focusing on a more diverse customer base without leaving its core boaters behind.

Retailers must evolve or else they won’t survive, according to Fields. The company invested in e-commerce websites with enhanced functionality and content to help customers make informed choices. It also expanded its product offerings both in stores and online, where the West Marine team created an inviting and interactive experience in many of key market stores.

In a recreational industry, retailers must compete for consumers’ time.

“Boating is great—it’s a passion. Our customers have this passion that you can’t capture with most other industries or most other retailers,” Fields says. “It’s this emotional connection to being on or around the water.” She adds that most of West Marine’s associates are boaters or otherwise enjoy activities recreating on the water.

However, millennials may want something different, according to Fields. So the company now offers products like stand-up paddle boards that still allow users to connect with the water but in a shorter time period.

“You have to come to the realization that people may not have a lot of time to spend a full day on the water in a boat,” she explains. “So we’re trying to appeal to broader demographics.”

Through its store optimization and merchandise expansion strategies, West Marine is also consolidating smaller traditional stores into larger experience-focused stores.
PAM FIELDS GIVES BACK BY GETTING INVOLVED IN HER COMMUNITY

Last year, Pam Fields joined the board of Community Bridges, a nonprofit umbrella organization for ten family programs in Santa Cruz County in California. These programs generally serve family, child, and adult needs, including Meals on Wheels, Child Development Division, and community resource centers.

Fields joined for personal and professional reasons. Personally, she was inspired to advocate for seniors after dealing with frustrating paperwork and red tape to help her ninety-eight-year-old mother obtain Veterans Affairs benefits. Professionally, it gives her an outside perspective and glimpse into the role and challenges of a board member, which she says helps her be more effective in her management role when supporting West Marine’s board.

featuring interactive “worlds” of products, which ranges from paddle sports to diving supplies. The new stores are around 25,000 square feet or more compared to the smaller 8,000–10,000-square-foot stores. The largest flagship is a 50,000-square-foot spot in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Fields says she views her role as primarily wearing the hat of a business leader who also happens to be a legal adviser. This dual role demands advocating and providing support for the company’s strategic initiatives and helping to drive change where it’s necessary.

“I try not to be a typical lawyer where you say no to every initiative because there may be a high degree of risk,” she says. “The value of having in-house counsel is not to say no to every new initiative, it’s to say yes, we can do this, and here’s what we have to consider to mitigate that risk.”

West Marine is testing out a new dive program at a few of its stores. It’s carrying additional diving products and partnering with a third party to provide dive training to customers. It also is in the process of rolling out a new ship-from-store program that will allow it to ship items from many of its 270 stores directly to the customer’s designated location instead of making them wait if the local store or distribution center is out of stock.

In May 2015, West Marine announced the launch of the BlueFuture Fund, a nonprofit program through the Community Foundation Santa Cruz County to support youth boating, marine conservation, and sustainable fisheries.

“I’m excited to see that the culmination of all our initiatives is working,” Fields says. “We’re seeing good results; and our customers and associates alike are excited.”

The favorable reception to these initiatives motivates Fields to keep going. “I like this change; it energizes me. And I look forward to new changes and strategies on which we’ll focus to complete our brand transition to a broader water-life outfitter.”

“Pam is a smart, strategic attorney who provides invaluable direction and leadership to West Marine, Inc.—she is a pleasure to work with.”

– Ian C. Ballon and Susan Heller, Greenberg Traurig LLP

Congratulations to our client and friend Pam Fields on this recognition of your success both in the legal profession and as a driving force in business.

We applaud you for all of your great work for West Marine, Inc.

– From Ian Ballon, Susan Heller and all the attorneys of Greenberg Traurig

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Greenberg Traurig is a global law firm, recognized for our innovative use of technology to enhance legal services.

Pam Fields is a Partner and Resident of Greenberg Traurig, LLP in the firm’s Los Angeles office.

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