

# Keep the Party Going

Karen Sheehan, Tupperware Brands' first female general counsel, reveals how the iconic brand stays relevant by expanding its portfolio, evolving products, and staying committed to empowering women

BY PORCSHE N. MORAN

In the 1950s, Tupperware founder Earl Tupper hired businesswoman Brownie Wise to be the vice president of his home products company. At the time, she was one of the few women in the United States who held an executive position. Almost seventy years later, Karen Sheehan is stepping into the role of Tupperware Brands' first female general counsel. Although colorful plastic bowls with airtight seals might be the first things that come to mind when people think of Tupperware, the corporation's foundation is its commitment to enlighten, educate, and empower women around the world. Women make up more than 90 percent of Tupperware's global sales force, which consists of more than three million independent business owners.

"It is an exciting and an unusual opportunity to work for a company like this," Sheehan says. "What is striking to me is that the iconic household products are only half of the Tupperware story. The other part is the opportunity for people, largely women, to realize their dreams of entrepreneurship, financial independence, self-respect, and self-empowerment."

Sheehan joined Tupperware Brands in December 2014 as the vice president and deputy general counsel. The board of directors promoted her to senior vice president, general counsel, and secretary on January 1, 2017. In that role, Sheehan, a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center, manages Tupperware's global law department. She supervises a team of six in-house lawyers at the company's corporate headquarters in Orlando, Florida, and in Europe, and she also indirectly oversees seventeen other Tupperware lawyers who work across the company's offices in North America, South America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region.

"Over 90 percent of our sales are outside of the United States," Sheehan says. "Since I started at Tupperware Brands, I've traveled several times to Singapore, India, Europe, Brazil, and Mexico. I want to be in the room with the legal staff and the regional presidents in these countries to hear their goals and challenges. I want them to know that I care and that I am in the same boat rowing along with them."



KAREN SHEEHAN  
SVP, GENERAL  
COUNSEL, SECRETARY  
TUPPERWARE BRANDS  
ORLANDO, FL

“I stand on the shoulders of the generations of women before me. If I can pay it forward by working for a company that empowers women all over the world, who maybe don’t have the opportunities that I have, that is fantastic.”

KAREN SHEEHAN

To that end, Sheehan takes a servant leadership approach to management. As general counsel, she says she focuses on meeting the needs of the lawyers in her department. Sheehan has an open-door policy and schedules biweekly, one-on-one meetings with each of her lawyers to keep the lines of communication open.

“Each lawyer has my undivided attention during their meetings,” Sheehan says. “They set the agenda. They can update me on whatever they want to update me on. They can ask me questions. I want to make sure that they feel supported as a group and as individuals. Only through me serving them will the legal department be effective in meeting the company’s objectives.”

Aside from her hands-on work with Tupperware’s legal team, Sheehan stresses that gaining knowledge of every aspect of Tupperware Brands is vital, especially coming from previous positions in the pharmaceutical and consumer packaged goods industries. She interacts with the organization’s top executives, including the heads of every area of the corporation, from human resources to finance, and IT to public relations.

“It is critically important to me that I spend my days trying to understand what the drivers are for each of the different functions in the company,” Sheehan says. “If I gave legal advice in a vacuum—without understanding the company culture, the people, and the strategy and vision for where the company wanted to go—my advice would be generic and irrelevant.”

Tupperware reported \$2.2 billion in sales in 2016. Over the years, it has expanded its product lines to include cookware,

ovenware, culinary tools, and more. The company has also acquired six beauty and personal care brands: Avroy Shlain, BeautiControl, Fuller, NaturCare, Nutrimetics, and Nuvo.

“The table legs of the Tupperware organization are the great quality products, the group demonstration selling, and the strong culture of supporting people and building relationships,” Sheehan says. “This has been our platform to grow internationally, increase the variety of products, and stay innovative.”

In another effort to help empower women, Tupperware also emphasizes social responsibility through its involvement in philanthropic initiatives that support global health issues, disaster relief, and women’s and children’s causes. The company established the Tupperware Brands Foundation to set aside resources for organizations around the world that help women and girls. Its W.H.O. (Women Helping Others) Foundation aids community-focused charities for overlooked women, children, and families. Tupperware Brands is also a partner with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and UN Women, the United Nations agency for gender equality and women’s empowerment. Sheehan has provided legal advice and guidance in these efforts.

“I stand on the shoulders of the generations of women before me,” she says. “I feel lucky that I am in a generation that is treated with much more equality than past generations. If I can pay it forward by working for a company that empowers women all over the world, who maybe don’t have the opportunities that I have, that is fantastic.” ■