



Kevin HANSON ('93)

After graduating from law school in the early 1990s, Kevin Hanson spent a year doing family law and general litigation before switching gears to a career in corporate communications. Today his consulting practice focuses largely on environmental communications and issues management for natural-resource and manufacturing-sector clients. *Nexus* caught up with him in Vancouver, where he lives with his partner of six years, and maintains an active west coast lifestyle—biking, hiking and running marathons.

Can you tell us a bit about your background, before law school?

I'm originally from Alberta, a farm boy in fact. I did my first degree in journalism at Carleton. Then I worked in corporate communications in Calgary for a year and a bit before I started law school.

What stands out for you about your time in law school?

I suppose the first thing that comes to mind is a number of really good friends. But in professional terms, I think law school equips you with some very solid analytical and advocacy skills, and provides good insight into some very fundamental issues like rights, conflicting entitlements, and the regulation of behaviour. Things that have a huge impact on our lives and livelihoods. And I think those insights can be applied in a whole range of professional pursuits.

When did you first develop an interest in the environment?

My career focus on the environment was more about an interest in communications and advocacy – advocacy in the sense of public opinion and stakeholder relations, and influencing government action. Environmental issues just happen to be among the ones that professional communicators most commonly deal with in BC.

What made you decide to leave the practice of law?

I think mainly because I generally prefer collaboration to conflict. I also missed some of the more creative aspects of the work I'd done before law school. And I think there's a better likelihood of doing well in the field I'm in now, without having to make the same lifestyle sacrifices that seem to be common among lawyers.

What did you do after leaving practice?

I found my way back into the field of corporate communications, and eventually towards the more specialized environmental-related work that I do a lot of now. I spent about a year doing various contract work, including some in the forest industry. Then I became communications manager, and later director, at the Forest Alliance of BC, a group largely funded by the forest industry, with a mandate to counter the allegations of environmental activist groups. That was an interesting organization, and my first introduction to dealing with environmental activism. It was a great opportunity, and gave me exposure to a lot of aspects of how environmental issues play out. Everything from highly specific on-the-ground campaigns here in BC – protests and blockades over this valley or that section of coast – through to dealing with buyers' associations in Europe, and even negotiations at the UN over a global convention on forest management.

After three years there, I moved to the Vancouver office of Optimum Public Relations, which is part of the Cossette Communication Group. I continued to focus on resource-sector clients and environmental issues there. I still do some work in association with Optimum, but I set up my own consulting practice in 2004 and that's what I dedicate most of my time and effort to now.

What's your main focus been, since becoming an independent consultant?

At one time, I did a lot of work on corporate environmental reports, which were considered fairly cutting edge not very long ago. Today, I'm often involved with broader reporting on sustainability, although environmental issues still tend to be the biggest part of that mix. I've worked, for example, with one of Canada's largest manufacturers for a number of years now on the development of a sustainability-reporting framework for its BC operations. And it's a fascinating exercise. It involves looking at big, complex operations and figuring out what sort of disclosure will best enable stakeholders to assess the net impact.

What sort of changes have you seen in the way environmental activism is carried out?

Here in BC at least, we've seen a huge shift over the last decade or so. In the 90s, the critics of the BC forest industry were still largely relying on the traditional protests and street

theatre. We see much less of that today, and a lot of environmental groups have come inside the tent. That's not to say they've been co-opted, but I think they're finding there's value in working more directly and constructively with corporations to influence procurement policies and on-the-ground practices. There's a willingness now on both sides of the debate to have real dialogue, and to look for shared solutions. The land-use agreement that was eventually reached for the Central Coast region of BC is a good example of that. That was a campaign that started with blockades, but ended with a negotiated settlement.

What's the role of a professional communicator in dealing with environmental issues?

If you're working on the corporate side, it involves understanding the technical and business realities that influence environmental performance, and the often tremendously complex trade-offs that are involved. Then it's about finding ways of articulating information and positions that support your client's objectives, and that will be as persuasive as possible from the standpoint of the relevant audiences. And of course, you can't stray from the truth.

How does your legal background and training fit into all this?

I think the role I've described is really an advocate's role. And there are a lot of similarities in terms of some of the fundamental processes and objectives. But I'm dealing with a broader audience and I'm not restricted to making my case in terms of precedents and legalities.

Where do you see your career heading in the next 10 years; will you continue to focus on the environment?

I see myself continuing to work as a professional communicator and an advocate. Whether environmental work will remain the focal point for me that it has been over the past number of years I'm not sure. I find myself increasingly interested in broad economic policy and trends, and challenges like productivity. So I can see myself shifting in that direction – working perhaps for a think tank – but I believe I'll continue to carry out the same sort of role I do now.

Do you have any advice for students or recent graduates who do not want to pursue a traditional legal career, but who want to make use of their law degree?

The first thing I would say is not to underestimate the value of a law degree outside practice, or to feel you've taken a misstep if you don't practice. It's got a lot of cachet in the corporate world, and I think it's a real credibility enhancer, maybe particularly for consultants. I think too there are probably a large number of connections between legal training and various non-legal pursuits. The advocacy connection I make between the world of law and what I do is just one example. So if you think practicing law isn't where you want to head, I'd suggest focusing on the particular aspects of legal training or work that most appeal to you, and giving some thought to different applications for them – especially ones that may line up with your previous education or experience. ■

Alumni wishing to get in touch with Kevin are invited to contact him through his web site at www.kevinhanson.ca