

William & Lonsdale – Lives in The Law

Ep 77 Traci Chen

Voiceover: [00:00:05] This is William and Lonsdale, a podcast about the legal ecosystem and the fascinating people who make it tick. Today, your host, Michael Green, speaks with migration lawyer, principal and founder of Mason Chen Law Group, Traci Chen. Tracy herself migrated to Australia from China at two years old, and both her experience and that of her parents have significantly informed her career, particularly her understanding and empathy for her clients' journey to come to Australia. As you'll hear today, Traci is an innate entrepreneur. While studying law, she built and sold a successful solar panel business. She bought her first house at 19. And in the last five years, she has grown Mason Chen from a sole practice, Tracy in her home office, to a firm with 80 employees. Tracy uses social media to extraordinary effect to communicate with current and potential clients and grow her business. She has a quarter of a million followers on TikTok and even more on Instagram. She was an early adopter of TikTok, and even though she wasn't sure what exactly this new app was all about, she had an instinct that it could help her business. So like Tracy's approach to so many things along her journey, she dove in and figured it out along the way.

Traci Chen: [00:01:23] When I first started posting on the Internet, I was just doing it for fun. I was doing it to learn because I saw TikTok. There's lots of ads about it. I was just curious about it. I had no idea that people would actually look for legal advice or just information on on silly videos. That's what we called them, silly videos.

Michael Green: [00:02:08] Our guest this morning in Lives and the Law is Tracy Chen. Tracy is a principal of Mason Chen Law Group. Good morning, Traci.

Traci Chen: [00:02:17] Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Michael Green: [00:02:19] It's our pleasure. I've mentioned Mason Chen Law Group, Traci. Tell us a bit about it. You started it five years ago. What area of law do you work in? Have you got a particular business model, the firm, the staff, etcetera, etcetera? Just tell us about it so we've got a picture of Mason Chen.

Traci Chen: [00:02:36] So, yes, I started Mason Chen Law Group five years ago in the thick of COVID. During that time, offices were all closed. So I did start the business based on work from home. And till today, all the lawyers, all the admin staff, everyone still works from home. And we've just found that that model does work for us. We specialize in immigration law. We do all types of visas mainly, and we work with corporate immigration, general skilled migration, as well as short term visitor visas and student visas.

Michael Green: [00:03:08] And you say you're completely remote. To me, as someone who's been in the law fifty odd years and remote didn't exist, I find that strange. How do you run a firm remotely? How do you build a culture? How do you have everybody on the same page working together when we are in different cities, even different countries on occasions?

Traci Chen: [00:03:27] That's very true. And I have staff in across all states, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and I do have staff overseas as well. I think as the team gets bigger, there is other challenges. However, the model seem to work with us because in immigration law, it's very different. It's very fast paced. And also people want things to happen now. And so I've worked in law firms previously where it was face to face and people came into the office. Perhaps that's not fast paced enough for immigration. It's very interesting because people want their visa now. So sometimes when they call up for a booking with us, they want a booking consultation within the next couple of hours because they need the answer now. And so logistically, that really works for a remote firm because we're able to send them a Zoom meeting. They can just meet with us within the next couple of hours if there is availability and get their answers straight away and also start working on the matter straight away. So maybe it's the nature. I haven't really done other areas of law before, but it works really well for immigration.

Michael Green: [00:04:28] And these people who are ringing you, getting in touch, are they mainly overseas, mainly within Australia, a mixture?

Traci Chen: [00:04:34] I'd say mixture, but majority is probably here in Australia because obviously they have access to more information. They're already here on some sort of temporary visa and they're really looking for a more long term solution or

essentially a permanent solution to stay in Australia. We do have people from overseas, but I think that's a mixture of my content where it reaches and also just people onshore more well informed to get the information.

Michael Green: [00:04:58] You started in COVID. How I mean, was there a demand at the time? Were people who were looking for visas? Did COVID actually accentuate the demand?

Traci Chen: [00:05:07] Yeah. So what happened was during COVID, I was actually let go from my job at an immigration law firm because they were mainly doing corporate immigration. And obviously a lot of businesses, they didn't know what the future looked like. So they had people that already booked, already had visas to travel to Australia. And we had to tell those people that you have to turn back from the airport now because we don't know if we have a job here for you in Australia, and also borders are closing. So I lost my job during that time, and then I started posting on the Internet information. And it's very interesting. A lot of point people don't know this, but there was actually over 2,000,000 people stuck in Australia. So there was a demand, but that wasn't well known. Everybody was just thinking of people coming into Australia, not the ones that were just stuck here.

Michael Green: [00:05:49] Now you said posting on the Internet. You're assuming there'll be people on the Internet searching for answers to their immigration problems, and therefore, you're letting it be known that your firm, Mason Chen, can help them. Was that what you're doing?

Traci Chen: [00:06:04] When I first started posting on the Internet, I was working for another law firm at the time, and, no, I didn't know. I was just doing it for fun. I was doing it to learn because I saw TikTok. There's lots of ads about it. I was just curious about it. I had no idea that people would actually look for legal advice or just information on on silly videos. That's what we call them, silly videos. Yeah.

Michael Green: [00:06:29] Tracy, you jokingly used the phrase silly videos, but that makes sense to me as someone from a different generation who's not that au fait with social media. What social media did you use to get the word out there? Were you using Instagram? Were you using TikTok? Were you using all those other ones I don't know? What did you do?

Traci Chen: [00:06:49] So at the beginning when I was working at the law firm, they were big on actually writing articles and putting them up as blog posts. So I was doing that, and that's a really a lot of law firms do that still today, and they are effective. But I started posting on TikTok. One, because I was just curious, but two, because it was a very shortened video. So I was something that would be in a blog post that's a thousand words, I shorten it to a thirty second video and I'd post it on TikTok, on Instagram, on Facebook. And it turns out the feedback that I get is that people do actually prefer that because they just wanna know the information now. They don't wanna have to go through a thousand words to find out what the answer is or how to get that visa.

Michael Green: [00:07:30] And so in doing this, did you create a following? And what was that following? What was the size of it?

Traci Chen: [00:07:36] At the beginning, it did grow pretty quickly. And I think within a matter of months, I was at 30,000 on TikTok, and then that just grew to over a 100,000. And today, we're at 250,000 on TikTok. And on Instagram, we're on our 270,000.

Michael Green: [00:07:52] I find it amazing. And just to complete this early snapshot of where you're at or how you got there a little bit, how many staff does the firm employ now?

Traci Chen: [00:08:00] So it's around 80.

Michael Green: [00:08:02] So from four or five years ago, basically using social media as your business development tool, you've grown to a firm that has 80 people.

Traci Chen: [00:08:12] Yeah, that's right.

Michael Green: [00:08:13] I find that amazing. Tracey, we've got to take it back to the start because obviously every story has a beginning. Tell us about your mom and dad. How they came to Australia, what their circumstances were, how you grew up.

Traci Chen: [00:08:29] So I was born in 1990. My dad came to Australia before I was born. So my mom found out she was pregnant with me and my dad had to come to Australia already. They didn't have much of a plan. Obviously, plan was to reunite in Australia. But when my dad came to Australia, he did get a bit of a shock. It was tough.

It was hard. English was not his first language. And he was studying his masters and then he did a PhD.

Michael Green: [00:08:56] In what discipline?

Traci Chen: [00:08:58] Organic chemistry. And that was in South Australia. And during that time to support himself, he did the odd jobs, you know, restaurant, dishwashing, and all of that just to make ends meet. And I think that for them to reunite, that was prolonged because my dad thought, oh, you know, it's really hard here. Stay in China for a little bit longer. Let me set up a little bit more here for you before you guys come. So it wasn't until I was turned two until we actually traveled to Australia, and I've met my dad for the first time.

Michael Green: [00:09:25] And your dad gets his PhD in organic chemistry. One would assume that leads to a job possibly in academia, but not for your dad.

Traci Chen: [00:09:33] No. So he did have a couple of odd jobs working in the university, but I think there was you know, I think it was a matter of the market as well. South Australia, the market was a bit smaller. Perhaps if he looked interstate, reflecting backward and now, maybe there would be more opportunities. However, due to funding as well, there was probably issues with funding as well for organic chemistry industry. So then he didn't end up working in that discipline. He ended up taking up odd factory jobs and only retired in the last I think it was last five years or something.

Michael Green: [00:10:07] So making this huge move coming from China, your mom comes two years later. I think she was a public servant in China before she came and then but she works in retail here. Do your parents look back and think on balance, was a good move or maybe on balance, might have been better if we stayed in China?

Traci Chen: [00:10:23] This is a very big question, and it's for so many other people of my mom's generation that came to Australia. They always reflect back and think, would they have done better if they stayed in China because China did develop later on? They were very worried that it wasn't, that's why everybody left. However, looking back all their friends now are generally quite successful. But I guess the biggest thing for them was one is being able to come to Australia, which is their look back is absolutely still and absolutely will be the best country in the world. But also China was subject to the

one child policy. So, know, they came to Australia and then six years later, also had my sister. And I think for them, there's not much that can compare to that.

Michael Green: [00:11:03] Following on with this the story of immigrants, what about language? So your mom and dad come from China, as I understand, the national language is Mandarin, and then there are regional languages as well. I'm assuming they don't come to Australia fluent in English. What about you girls, you and your sister? Are you getting English at home? Are you learning English as you grow up like your children probably are now? What about you and language for you? What language did you learn originally?

Traci Chen: [00:11:28] So when we first came to Australia, my mom definitely didn't know any English. My dad did because he was studying here. His command of English was much better than my mom. However, at home, we just spoke Chinese, and so I didn't know any English until I first went to kindergarten. I don't remember much, but I remember it being a little bit of a shock not understanding. But I think as children, we are resilient and we did learn very quickly. So that was the same as my sister. She had a bit more of influence from me because I'd bring home English and start talking a bit of English at home. But at home, because my parents didn't speak fluent English, we spoke Chinese.

Michael Green: [00:12:03] But you quickly picked up English through kindergarten. Your children are, and they're they're sponges. They're open to taking whatever's happening around them. So continuing on with your education, educated in Adelaide. Were you a good student? Did you enjoy school?

Traci Chen: [00:12:16] Yeah. Look, I went to public primary school, then I went to a Catholic high school, an all girls Catholic high school, and that was near my house at the time. And then during that time, again, I was just a little bit curious. So I did a couple of scholarship exams, entrance exams and got a scholarship at a prestigious girls school. And so I did, I think year 10 to 12 there. And then that's where I finished year 12 and got into law school.

Michael Green: [00:12:44] And in throughout this period, was law on your radar? Were you looking, thinking that's a career I'd like to follow?

Traci Chen: [00:12:51] I think growing up, you when your parents kinda talk about your future, they yes. Law is on the radar and medicine's on the radar. And I think for myself, I had to pick between the two. And I I was never good with, like, blood or gore or anything like that, so that's why I picked law.

Michael Green: [00:13:07] So years ten, eleven and 12, you won a scholarship to a prestigious high school in Adelaide. Was that a good experience? Did that help you on your journey towards law or medicine?

Traci Chen: [00:13:20] Upon reflection, now that I'm older looking back on it, I don't know if that was the best decision for me because when I did go to this school, I was pretty pretty out of place. So I didn't have, you know, parents like them or whatever they had, I didn't have that. And I think that did knock my confidence a little bit. I regressed a little bit. I don't know if I stayed at the other school, what I would have done and what path I would have followed. I'm still certain I would have ended up doing law of medicine or something along those lines. But I just think that, yeah, I changed a lot during those years because I was just so I felt so out of place.

Michael Green: [00:13:58] But still got good enough marks to get into law school?

Traci Chen: [00:14:01] Yes. Yes.

Michael Green: [00:14:02] And it was Flinders University, you went to in Adelaide?

Traci Chen: [00:14:05] Yes.

Michael Green: [00:14:06] Seven years. Now I'm assuming it's a four or five year course, and I'm assuming you took seven years because you were not full time because you had jobs to help support yourself.

Traci Chen: [00:14:17] That's right. So it did take longer. The people that I started with were not the people I graduated with. During that time, because you're in university, you're a little bit older, I looked to other things. And during that time, I was working different jobs, but then I got myself into starting a business. During that time, panels and that industry was really booming. And so I started working in a solar panel firm, but then that firm relocated to another state. So then I just decided to start my own solar panel

business. And that's why during that time, it took me so long to finish my law degree because I was essentially studying part time.

Michael Green: [00:14:56] I mean, it's very easy to say I started my own solar panel business, but starting a business isn't that easy. There's a lot of cost involved. There's a lot of knowledge of knowing an industry and then also knowing how to run a business. What did you do?

Traci Chen: [00:15:10] You know, I was like 21 or 22 at the time. So looking back on it, I was very young and it was my first business, my first proper business essentially. I worked in the industry a little bit, so I was able to understand what resources we needed. So I saved a bit of money through all the years that I worked. And so I used that first pool of money to buy the solar panels and buy the stock that I needed. And then I had a team that did the marketing. I was doing the marketing previously at the previous solar panel business. So I was able to kind of build a small little team there.

Michael Green: [00:15:46] You employed people?

Traci Chen: [00:15:47] Yes. I did. Yes. Did. Yes.

Michael Green: [00:15:49] And went through all of the hassle of paying PAYE tax, etcetera, etcetera?

Traci Chen: [00:15:53] Yes. Worked all that out. Yes. And, you know, you you learn more as you go, obviously. I probably made a few mistakes there as well, but then I worked with electricians and installers as contractors.

Michael Green: [00:16:05] And did you have a base you worked from? Did you go on rent premises?

Traci Chen: [00:16:09] I worked from home.

Michael Green: [00:16:11] And so what about the solar panels? They stayed with the manufacturer until you picked them up and took them to the job.

Traci Chen: [00:16:16] That's right. Yeah. And I think that's why that was able to work because you can just kind of order on demand. Because of the nature of the industry, there was just so many different suppliers, and they're very flexible with you. So when you got a job in, they already had the stock, you just order it and the solar and this solar installers would just pick it up.

Michael Green: [00:16:32] Interesting that you're doing that at age 21, 22, Tracy. You didn't stay with it though. You you after a period, you sold it. Why did you do that?

Traci Chen: [00:16:41] I just wanted to try something different at the time. I I was finishing my law degree and I did enjoy it. I started working as a paralegal in a law firm towards the end of my law degree. And I thought, okay. I really think I can make a career out of this.

Michael Green: [00:16:54] Were there lessons you learned in running a business as opposed to a legal practice, which were helpful to you and and you still apply today?

Traci Chen: [00:17:02] Yeah. Very much so. I think it's the people piece that's the most important because when you run a business and as your business grows, employees and your team members are so important. And so again, I made some mistakes probably in my solar panel business with the way I dealt with people or handled personnel problems. And so I took those lessons with me into growing the business now and hopefully that is helping the culture now.

Michael Green: [00:17:28] It's all about people. You sell the business and then for the last two years of your degree, you work as a paralegal. Was that a strategic decision thinking about your future? I want to get into a practice, see what the practice of the law is like as opposed to the study of it to help me with my future. Was that why you did it?

Traci Chen: [00:17:48] Yeah. And absolutely. And I heard that it's just not easy to finish a law degree and get a law job, a lawyer job. So I really wanted to kind of have that experience prior and get my foot in the door prior.

Michael Green: [00:17:59] And so what did you do? This as a paralegal, was it a couple of days a week or five days a week?

Traci Chen: [00:18:04] No. It was a couple of days a week and I was just assisting the principal in it was immigration when we first started. I think I did a little bit of commercial, a little bit of conveyancing, and I yeah. Just shadowed the principal, helped drafting applications. Pretty sure I attended court a couple of times as well, so I really got some good experience there.

Michael Green: [00:18:24] So the firm you worked with as a paralegal was Dockin Aid Legal, a Vietnamese principal named Peter Do, and he had lots of Vietnamese clients who had a need for immigration law or migration law.

Traci Chen: [00:18:37] Yeah. That's right. And during that time, he gave me a lot of those files to look after, and I don't think I did any immigration prior to that. I didn't even do immigration as an elective in university. So I thought, okay, this is interesting. But as soon as I did start working on the files, it was something that I understood very clearly and I could empathize with the clients as well because I know my family had been through the same thing. So I understood what the application meant to them, the information we needed to collect, and all the things that we needed to do and needed to do properly.

Michael Green: [00:19:12] Were you supervised in this or were you really learning yourself as you went along?

Traci Chen: [00:19:16] I think, you know, in a smaller firm, you're always thrown in the deep end. Yeah. And so that was a really good learning curve for me.

Michael Green: [00:19:23] To learn about the regulatory side of it because I assume there are a lot of regulations you have to comply with in migration law.

Traci Chen: [00:19:30] That's right. And the different types of visas as well. So we started off with, like, employer corporate visas, and then we really pivoted to business visas, which today don't even exist anymore.

Michael Green: [00:19:41] We're gonna learn a lot this morning about migration law, Tracey, which is good. You come to Melbourne, you work two years at Neville and Co doing immigration law, you then move on to a bigger immigration firm, TSS Immigration.

When you say a bigger immigration firm, what sort of work do they do that a firm like Neville and Co didn't do?

Traci Chen: [00:20:00] So Neville and Co is a boutique law firm. They specialize in property and commercial in Melbourne, and they've been around for a very long time. And so through their commercial and property work, they had a lot of contacts for people that are buying property from overseas that wanted to immigrate to Australia as well. So for them, we were looking at business investor visas, and that's what I mainly did while I was at Neville and Co. However, we knew that investor visas were changing, and then I was really interested in corporate immigration as well. So there are a lot of immigration law firms like Neil and Chase that handle large corporate accounts where large Australian businesses regularly hire people from overseas to work within the Australian business.

Michael Green: [00:20:46] And so all this time, you're improving your knowledge of immigration law. You're getting a larger perspective on it. You're getting a far greater knowledge and database yourself about this this area, and it continues on. But then you finish with Newell and Chase at around the time COVID starts.

Traci Chen: [00:21:04] Yeah. So when I started, Newell and Chase had already acquired TSS Immigration, and I was working with the TSS immigration firm. And we're handling corporate immigration, so we're doing business for chefs, yeah, other trades. And then that was at the beginning of twenty twenty. And then that's when everything started yeah. Everything started changing during that time. I remember we had to work out how to work from home because we weren't allowed to go into the office. We had to work out the laptop situation, the network situation, and start working from home. Then we will all change to part time, and then I was let go in May.

Michael Green: [00:21:39] Because you were the last person in. You were the first person out effectively.

Traci Chen: [00:21:43] I was still in probation, so it was pretty easier.

Michael Green: [00:21:45] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But soon thereafter, this is a difficult thread to follow for me, Tracey. You go you're living in Geelong. Your partner,

he's a doctor working in a hospital down there, and so you get a a job with a Geelong firm, Coulter Roche, doing immigration?

Traci Chen: [00:22:04] Yes. So I had met someone at Coulter Roche, I think earlier on in the year as well, and they had always been interested in starting an immigration arm as well. They do a lot of corporate, commercial, property law, and I think they're the second largest law firm in Geelong. I've been around for ages as well. And so when I reached out to them, they were very interested in it. They'd always been getting referrals for immigration, but they always had to refer the workout. However, again, was during COVID during that time, so I was offered a part time role three days a week. I was working Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Michael Green: [00:22:37] At the same time, a strange business called Scrubber Duck comes up. What is Scrubber Duck? How did it come into being? What did it do?

Traci Chen: [00:22:47] Yes. Gosh, sometimes I forget about that. So during that time it was COVID and my husband, who's a doctor, could not get medical scrubs. So he needed medical scrubs because he would like wear a shirt and pants to work. But because of COVID, everybody was scared. He just wanted scrubs that we can come home and like drench in like boiling water and leave it outside. So we're just looking for scrubs And the usual suppliers that he usually buy from, they said, there was like, I don't know. It was like a three month wait to get scrubs. And I thought, wow, that is a long time and it can't be that hard to get scrubs. So then because I was working part time at that firm, I had a bit of time on my hands. So I did some research into how to get scrubs, and I just looked on, you know, Chinese manufacturers and suppliers. And I've thought, okay. Well, maybe I can start a ecommerce business selling scrubs. And during that time, that's when there was a real fashion change in scrubs. So with medical scrubs, there was like, you know, the the traditional looking ones that you wear at a theater, but now they're really trendy. So now they have, like, different materials. They're like the the pants are like different styles and there's all these different patterns and designs. It's it's a whole new thing.

Traci Chen: [00:23:56] It's really blown up in the last, I reckon, five, six years medical scrubs. And so I had the time. So I was like, okay. I wanna try and import some scrubs and sell them. I knew I had to market them somehow. And again again, was during

COVID, so you didn't have a lot of the traditional forms of marketing, whether it'd be, you know, going to different places to, you know, show your product or anything like that. And again, that's when I saw TikTok on the internet. Oh, I saw a TikTok on TV and I thought it was very interesting. So I started watching videos of TikTok and how to start a TikTok account. And they said, you need to practice. You need to be very good at making these videos because you need to make videos every single day. And I didn't have the scrubs at the time. So I was like, okay, I'm gonna make videos every single day. And they said, you need to talk about something you'd know a lot about because it just flows and it just makes the whole process easier. And so I thought, well, okay. Well, the only thing I know is migration law. So I'm just gonna get in front of the camera and talk about migration I had absolutely no intention of trying to market it. It was just going on there to practice my self confidence.

Michael Green: [00:24:54] And so, Tracy, just to educate me on TikTok, you make a short video, I think you said maybe fifteen or thirty seconds, and just put it out there, and it's a question of whether someone looks at it or not. I mean, if I go on to TikTok, why would I have picked up Tracy Chen's video on migration law? How would I have done it? Am I because I want an answer to my visa question, I'm searching immigration law visa, and up comes Tracy Chen.

Traci Chen: [00:25:20] Yeah. So it's very interesting. So with TikTok, when I first started, you can so the the actual application itself is very good. You can film in there. So you open up the application. You film in there.

Michael Green: [00:25:33] Just for me again, on your phone?

Traci Chen: [00:25:35] Yes. On my phone. Yep. I I open it up, and then you fill, and then you edit in there, and then you post. You So don't need to do anything. You don't need to jump out of different applications. It's all one stop shop. So it makes it easier as well. Obviously, at the beginning, it takes you a bit longer because you gotta fiddle around and work out how to use it. But once you've figured it out, it's really easy and it's a real streamlined process. So you do it and you post it. And you might put a little bit of stuff in the caption to do with immigration so the video knows that you're talking about Australian immigration. And during that time, I was, and I'm pretty sure, the first person to talk about Australian immigration law on there. No one really knows how the

algorithm works. So the the app has an algorithm, and it feeds viewers videos that they want to see. What I've heard from people is that they'll just be talking to a friend and have their phone there and start talking about immigration. And literally, they'll go to their phone, open up TikTok, and my video will be the first one to come up. So I think it's listening to us. That's the first thing. And then when you watch the video, when it sees that you've watched one of my videos, it will load that it likes my videos and it likes Australian immigration, so it'll just keep feeding those those videos to you. And then also, yes, thirdly, you can go into the app, and then you can search videos about Australian immigration or whatever.

Michael Green: [00:26:46] But you've gotta keep making videos. I mean, it's no good, I guess, if you make one, and next week and the week after and the month after, it's still the same old video. So there's a expectation upon you to keep providing new content.

Traci Chen: [00:26:59] Absolutely. And I don't do as much these days because I have, like, a business to run. But back then, I was doing videos, like, maybe at the beginning one day a one day one a day, and then, like, I was doing, three a day.

Michael Green: [00:27:10] Three a day? Yeah. And you started doing this while you were with Coulter Roach? Yes. How long were you with Coulter Roach for?

Traci Chen: [00:27:19] About a year, I think. And so when I was at Coulter Roach, they had referrals from their existing clients. I was good, so I started doing that work. But they also said, you know, you need to bring in your own work, which is very normal for a lot of law firms. So I was just kinda like, okay. Well, I'm I'm on TikTok, so let's just see how it goes. There was no funnel or anything though. It was just me on TikTok. And then maybe if the person was interested, maybe they could search me, and then I'll come up as Calderoach. And that yeah. That was happening. So people were searching me and then they call in that Calderoach. And it started, you know, kind of getting quite busy and kind of blowing up.

Michael Green: [00:27:55] Yeah. And then how long after this did you open Mason Chen?

Traci Chen: [00:28:00] I was there for a while. So, you know, the leads were coming in. I was getting work and all of that stuff. You know, it was just very busy time. And so I just decided it was time for to open my own law firm

Michael Green: [00:28:10] Yeah.

Traci Chen: [00:28:10] In June 2021. So it's about a year I was there.

Michael Green: [00:28:14] Yeah. On your own, you you didn't have a partner, a legal partner?

Traci Chen: [00:28:17] No. It was on my own.

Michael Green: [00:28:18] Entirely on your own, from home? Yes. Even today, with a busy firm employing 80 people, still from home?

Traci Chen: [00:28:28] Yes. That is

Michael Green: [00:28:29] You've got an office at home you go to to do your work? It's different, Traci.

Traci Chen: [00:28:34] Yep. And so does every other employee. Yeah.

Michael Green: [00:28:36] Okay. So you start your own firm on your own using your only business development tool at the time, I'm assuming, is TikTok. How quickly did it start to grow? I mean, were you within a week or so, were you all of a sudden having people sending you instructions online?

Traci Chen: [00:28:53] So when I first started, I had worked in a number of law firms, but I don't think I had a lot of experience on how to actually open a law firm and start a law firm and run a law firm, all the compliance stuff behind it. So I did reach out to a lot of law firms that work in this area, and I sought advice on everything that I needed to do to set my law firm up properly. And then I worked till today from now until then I've worked with another law firm just continuing to get that advice because Sorry.

Michael Green: [00:29:19] Tracey, advice on what? On on the business side of of running a firm or on the regulatory side complying with the regulations by the law institute, etcetera?

Traci Chen: [00:29:28] Both. Both. Because I am the only well, I I'm not the only principal now and that's something we'll talk about later. But back then, I was the only principal. Yeah. So, like, I didn't really have anyone to reach out to to find the information. And it's it's very scary because, you know, with the law, it's so heavily regulated, and I wanna make sure that we did things correctly. So I worked with, like, numerous law firms, and that was really that senior or that partnership that I had to ensure that site.

Michael Green: [00:29:53] So you engaged a law firm to advise you, and you're their client?

Traci Chen: [00:29:57] Yeah.

Michael Green: [00:29:57] And so and they're giving you advice on, yeah, the things you need to do to properly structure and run a a legal firm.

Traci Chen: [00:30:05] Yes. That's right. Even with posting TikToks on social media, I was worried about how that goes. Like, because you're talking, it's not supposed to be legal advice. It's just supposed to be information. But even the disclaimers on there, all the things I had on there, I made sure I sought the right advice around it.

Michael Green: [00:30:20] And and you brought up something there that I'd never thought of, but professional indemnity insurance. Did it create an issue with your insurer about doing the TikToks and and therefore possibly you might open yourself up to liability for something?

Traci Chen: [00:30:34] So far, no. That never came up as something with my indemnity insurance.

Michael Green: [00:30:38] They they accept you as a normal firm and you haven't got a higher premium No. Because of the TikToks.

Traci Chen: [00:30:43] No. I have brought up the TikToks with them and they never brought it up, so maybe I'll bring it up with them again.

Michael Green: [00:30:48] As long as they know about it, it's got you're fine as you know. It also was interesting to me, you'd said in in your notes or in our notes that prior to our conversation that the demographic of your clients is basically mid twenties to 40, mid forties. I'm assuming that makes them more comfortable with working in this way, working online and not having face to face contact.

Traci Chen: [00:31:09] That's exactly right. And I think that's, again, why it has worked and why the business has grown because that's just what they're used to. I talked to someone about this today. So these days, people are on their phone all the times and they want instant notifications, instant gratification. And so if you're waiting because lawyers are busy, my lawyers are busy. And so they don't have time to have a meeting face to face with someone, maybe until for another week. But what people want is they want the information now. So when building my business, that was actually a really important component of my business. So when someone comes in the flow, how they contact us, how they continue communications with us, it's set up in a way where they get really instant or really quick feedback and advice.

Michael Green: [00:31:58] How many IT people do you employ?

Traci Chen: [00:32:01] Right now, three.

Michael Green: [00:32:02] And three full time people working on IT the whole time?

Traci Chen: [00:32:04] Absolutely. Like, for example, there's so many things that we leverage off using technology and it helps the business a lot. Because we've got a big client base and things just need to be handled quicker, and it's not quick enough when someone gets to the manager or gets to whoever, then it gets to you. We know need to know straight away. Otherwise, the client won't be happy, and we set up systems around that.

Michael Green: [00:32:26] And you've made a comment about it's best for senior lawyers to be managing and overseeing junior lawyers. Is that difficult remotely when we're not I mean, if you wanna go back nearly sixty years, I was a junior lawyer, and I

went into my principal's office and sat opposite him as as I'm sitting opposite you now, and he told me things and taught me. Is it more difficult to do that remotely?

Traci Chen: [00:32:48] No. But I do like the older school way. I do like it, and I always do tell my current lawyers, I say, sometimes we do try and get them together and they don't wanna come. Like people just don't wanna do it these days. They just wanna stay at home because I know you should come for this training session in person, it's just different when it's in person. But no, the way they do it now is again, it's an instant thing, so maybe that helps because they're able to just go on their computer, video call them, and be, oh, hello. Hello, senior, and then get the answer straight away. I don't know what it's like for you. Did you have to, like, book a time or did it take some time? No. Okay.

Michael Green: [00:33:23] Just walk in the door and if he's free, he was free. If he wasn't, he wasn't. Yeah, okay. I mean, I must say, I think it's a different experience to deal with someone face to face over a desk than it is to deal with someone on a screen, and I would wonder whether, as a principal yourself, dealing with junior lawyers or other people you're employing, whether you might be missing some of the nuances of things and maybe difficulties they're having or by not having a face to face meeting.

Traci Chen: [00:33:48] I agree. And that's something that I do advocate for within the firm. I say, you know, we need to do more of these in person meetings and so that we can learn more about you, you can learn more. And it's just different when you're in person, you just get so much more information, but they don't like it. They're like, no. It's fine. We're just mean, I saw a TikTok the other day where this person was meeting with their manager and they refused to turn their video on. That's just it's generation. Yeah. And she was fighting back. She said, no. Does the me turning on the video affect the outcome of this meeting?

Michael Green: [00:34:19] So the manager couldn't see the person? Yeah. It was just audio?

Traci Chen: [00:34:24] Yeah. The manager had the video on and he said, I don't wanna start this meeting until you turn your video on. And she's like, well, does it affect the outcome of this meeting?

Michael Green: [00:34:31] Possibly does. Yes. Turn it on. Was this in a legal context or just a general business context?

Traci Chen: [00:34:36] No. It was a general business context. Yeah. But that's the, you know,

Michael Green: [00:34:40] That's what happens these days. So when and that being the case, when you're hiring people, number one, you're not hiring them face to face, you're hiring them online. What are you looking for in obviously, you want legal skills, but what other things do you want from people to work successfully in this environment?

Traci Chen: [00:34:57] I think that they definitely need to have good articulation and a good command of their speech when they're speaking to people. And that's something that I do look for. You you can tell in videos because you do are able to, you know, communicate with them and ask them the right questions. That's probably one of the most important things because as a lawyer, you need to speak confidently. Otherwise, the client does lose confidence in what you're saying. And then also knowledge of the law and, yeah, everything that's going on with the immigration area.

Michael Green: [00:35:24] Well, mentioning immigration area, it is very much a niche area in in law. Is it anything different about practising immigration as opposed to practising in commercial or personal injuries or crime or family or whatever?

Traci Chen: [00:35:37] I've done a little bit of work in conveyancing many moons ago. It is very different because when you do immigration law this is the way I see it. When you do immigration law, you lodge an application and it's assessed by a case officer, but also the requirements and the regulatory thing is one thing, but it's still at the discretion of the case officer. So depending on how they view the documents or what's happening in the political climate, it can actually affect the decision or the case.

Michael Green: [00:36:05] And I was wondering about the political climate, really. I mean, at the moment, there's a major debate in Australia about immigration. One of the instances we're seeing is in relation to the ISIS brides and their children, should they be allowed back in? That must have a big impact upon immigration law politics.

Traci Chen: [00:36:22] Yeah. And and I think that's a purely political thing because I think I mean, I don't understand too much about what's going on there, but my understanding is there were citizens, and then they gave up their citizenship. I'm not sure. But if you are an Australian citizen, you have a right to return unless they create another law to not allow them to come in.

Michael Green: [00:36:40] But as I understand it, and that's very low bar where I what I understand, they do change the law when it suits them.

Traci Chen: [00:36:47] Yeah. And so I think I saw a question out there. It's like, why aren't they changing the law now then?

Michael Green: [00:36:51] And that that sort of thing does happen, doesn't it? If they if they and particularly, I guess, if they think, to use a political term, if they're going to be wedged by the opposition, well, then we'll change the law so the opposition can't use that against us.

Traci Chen: [00:37:04] Yeah. And so I don't really like, with with other areas of immigration, they do change the law overnight, and it's a big change.

Michael Green: [00:37:12] And so do you have to keep up to date by reading the newspapers or watching watching news broadcasts? Is there also a service that provides the legislation and the changes to the legislation to you regularly?

Traci Chen: [00:37:26] That's very interesting because it depends on what it is. So sometimes if it's a big change, obviously, there's news about it. And then we have our professional bodies, which will obviously send us information about it and send us where to read. But there's small changes into, like, other areas of immigration visas where they would just change it in the policy or change it in the legislation, and you don't know. And then only when I look back on it because when you're reviewing something, you look back on it, you're like, hold on. That's not what I said three months ago, and I dig up what happened three months ago, and it's changed. So they don't always tell you. That's And what makes immigration law so hard.

Voiceover: [00:38:04] William And Lonsdale is brought to you by Greenslist, one of the leading multidisciplinary barristers lists in Australia. Greenslist believe in promoting

conversation around the ideas and issues that shape not only our legal system, but our wider community.

Michael Green: [00:38:25] And so someone's come to you, they want advice, they want to get a particular visa. We're communicating online. You send documents. I'm the client. You send me documents online. I read them. I sign them online, I'm assuming. I send them back to you. You then lodge them with the relevant government department. For me, the client, how does it finish?

Traci Chen: [00:38:45] So depending on what type of visa and what type of application we are doing. So there is applications that are relevant to visas that affect the visa application later. So we might do that part first, get a result, then move on to the next part. And this is all online. So probably another reason why this remote firm works. Everything is online. And then there's different types of visas, and this is what makes it really hard about immigration. So there is types of visas where you can lodge and you can get a result, or there's types of visas where you first have to lodge an expression of interest, then wait for an invitation, then lodge the visa. And unfortunately for us, we have no control over both those situations. So when we could lodge a visa and the current processing time is two months, but then after two months, it's blown out to twenty four months. And during that twenty four months, we're still managing everything and we have

Michael Green: [00:39:33] Managing my expectations.

Traci Chen: [00:39:35] Yeah. Yes. And the application. And we have no control over it because it could be delayed by, again, political things or it just could be delayed because there's a lot of visas and they don't have enough case officers. I heard, like, a couple months ago that just last year alone, 9,480,000 visas were lodged to Australia.

Michael Green: [00:39:54] That's amazing. We we certainly couldn't have the staff. You would think public service staff to deal with that. I mean, see, therefore, a lot of it must be dealt with by algorithms and artificial intelligence and other things when you're talking 9,000,000 in a year.

Traci Chen: [00:40:06] No. I mean, I don't think so because all the visa decisions we get is assessed by case officer. Haven't got the case officer name at bottom. So that's

why the the processing time is blowing out to twenty four months. I've got visas for business visa is different. I launched in 2016. I assume I'm good result. And then parent visas, they're saying they're taking up to twelve to sixteen years

Michael Green: [00:40:24] To come. What's a parent visa?

Traci Chen: [00:40:26] So, like, there's again, like so if you are Australian citizen, your siblings are Australian citizens, you can sponsor your parent to come to Australia. But that's a combination of a couple of things like, you know, just how many spots there are. And so they're taking a twelve to sixteen years to process.

Michael Green: [00:40:41] Twelve to sixteen years?

Traci Chen: [00:40:43] And there's a remaining relative visa. When people ask me how long it's taken, I've never seen one approved in my life. I think they take like fifty years to process.

Michael Green: [00:40:51] Quite amazing, Tracey. I mean, to me, it's an area of the law that very few of us would know anything about apart from specialists like yourself. Tracy, is there such a thing as a typical person who's applying for a visa to come to Australia? Is it a student? Is it a person with particular skills that Australia needs? A nurse? Someone who works in agriculture? Is there anything typical like that, or is it really just as broad as us human beings are?

Traci Chen: [00:41:26] So there is lots of different types of visas, but the ones for permanent visas that probably happen the most are your skilled visas and employer sponsored visas. And that's because Australia does want that talent. I hear from employers all the time that they can't find the right people to do their job. And so a lot of people from overseas are coming in to do those jobs essentially. They do range from like Again, probably like early twenties to 40. Now it does stop around forty, forty five because for the main visas, the cap is 45. So you can't migrate to Australia permanently if you're over 45, but for other visas like partner visas and stuff like that. But for your skilled migration, your working people, it's like early twenties. The people that come on their early twenties usually come on student visas. So they may have completed a degree overseas or not, and they're coming to Australia to complete that degree. Some come to Australia just to study, and they thought they were gonna go back. Some

maybe have the intention to stay here permanently or some come here and they just fall in love with the country and they don't wanna go back to their home country.

Traci Chen: [00:42:34] And Australia does have a pathway for people to stay here and live permanently, but it's only two main ones. So when people ask me, are there any other ways? I say, no, there's just two main ones. They just want skilled workers. So people who have finished their degree, they're supposed to go home because when in your student visa application, the whole thing talks about what you're coming to study and then why is this gonna help you at home. But they are eligible to apply for a work visa once they graduate and that usually lasts anywhere between two to four years. So they stay here and work and they get that experience, which is great. But during that time, they can do their application, do their documentation to get a visa to stay in Australia long term. And these people are educated. So we're talking about degrees that are engineering, medical, health care, IT. And so if they are able to find a job here, they potentially can have the right profile to migrate to Australia permanently.

Michael Green: [00:43:27] So it's really about skills that Australia needs.

Traci Chen: [00:43:30] And that changes all the time. So right now it is nurses and teachers, But, you know, five years ago, it was like IT and accounting. But now accounting, you know, people in the industry would know it's like dead. That's what they say. Not to say people don't still get invited, but it's not at the same rate as teachers and nurses.

Voiceover: [00:43:48] Lives in Law is proudly sponsored by City Maps Illustrated. Their recent publication, The Melbourne Map, is a celebration of our wonderful city. This stunning, hand illustration, which took more than three years to create, is available as an art print, jigsaw puzzle, and calendar. The perfect acquisition for your home, office, or corporate gifting.

Michael Green: [00:44:16] Can I go back to Mason Chin? So just tell us right now, you started off on your own and then you, after a few months, got an IT person, and now you've got 80 people in the firm. How many lawyers?

Traci Chen: [00:44:28] There's around 25.

Michael Green: [00:44:29] 25 lawyers?

Traci Chen: [00:44:30] Yeah. Principals? Partners? So with principals, there is another five now.

Michael Green: [00:44:34] And so what's the structure? There are five of you all working in migration law?

Traci Chen: [00:44:38] Yes. We only do migration law.

Michael Green: [00:44:40] Yeah. Five of you. And then another in in some sort of a hierarchical structure, another 20 odd p 20 odd lawyers Yeah. Below the principles.

Traci Chen: [00:44:49] Yeah. We have, like, senior associates, then we have lawyers, Yeah. And your lawyers and junior lawyers. And they kind of manage each of their teams. So the junior lawyer will work on the case, work with their paralegals, and then send the work into the senior to review.

Michael Green: [00:45:02] Back to TikTok because, of course, as a the dinosaur that I am, it amazes me about TikTok being a major part of a legal firm. You can't have the time to keep doing TikTok posts all the time. Someone else in the firm does them now?

Traci Chen: [00:45:14] No. No. I do do them. But the other lawyers, we do regularly get them to do videos as well. Uh-huh. So they have their face on there as well. But because the way that these applications are built these days, it only takes five minutes to do a video. If you're if you know what you're doing and you have a lot of experience. People think it takes a long time that, oh, I don't wanna do it. It takes hours. It's gotta get ready, all that stuff. No. You can just turn the video on. You can turn a filter on so that you look better too, and then you just film it and then you just post it. That's it. Five minutes is all it'll take. And my video is actually featured in the LIV practice management course when they do it. My videos come up. Yeah. When they talk about the marketing segment.

Michael Green: [00:45:49] And the many other are many other firms now using social media as a business development tool?

Traci Chen: [00:45:53] Yes. Absolutely. Yes. And I I follow some lawyers, and I I really like what they do. Immigration, there's a lot of migration agents and lawyers that do it. But other areas, like, I watch employment law now. I watch, like, family law. It's all very interesting because no one really knows about it. No one really talks about it. And so just to go on and watch a thirty second video, like, it's just so interesting. And then when you when you need that person, you're like, well, I'm gonna go to that person because I know them. I heard in marketing that you need to see someone or something seven times before you purchase from them. And so if you're just watching their videos over the years when you need that, you you'll probably go to them.

Michael Green: [00:46:28] Tracy, one point I haven't followed up on, and I should have, of course, was the business of Scrubber Duck. How could I forget it with a name like that? What happened to Scrubber Duck?

Traci Chen: [00:46:39] So it we we did alright. Like, it was selling. We had our, you know, channel going. We had our own little thing going on. But then I just got too busy with the law firm, I and thought I can't do this. And I had hired someone to help me, but like you have to really be within the business to actually grow and you can't just have someone growing it for you. Just doesn't quite work that way. Anyway, so I had a lot of scrubs left over. So I reached out to, like, a business broker. I said, have this business. This is how it's doing. I really wanna sell it. I think it's within a matter of months, they find a buyer for it. So I sold the business. Yeah.

Michael Green: [00:47:12] So you you've gone out of that. And and that brings me to the fact that I think people listening to this conversation would pick up the fact that you're not adverse to taking a risk. I mean, as a student starting a solar panel business, you're still a student with Scrubba Duck. Or no, you're a young solicitor. What about the future? Can you see yourself taking other challenges, maybe inside the law or even outside the law?

Traci Chen: [00:47:35] I have thought about this before. And at the very moment, I can just see myself continuing to grow the business to become a global powerhouse in immigration. I think with immigration law, there isn't many law firms that are kinda like synonymous with immigration. And so I wanna become that law firm.

Michael Green: [00:47:52] Tracy, I have no doubt you will. What you've done so far in your young life has been quite amazing and really interesting to listen to. Thank you for coming in this morning and telling us about it.

Traci Chen: [00:48:04] Thank you so much for having me.