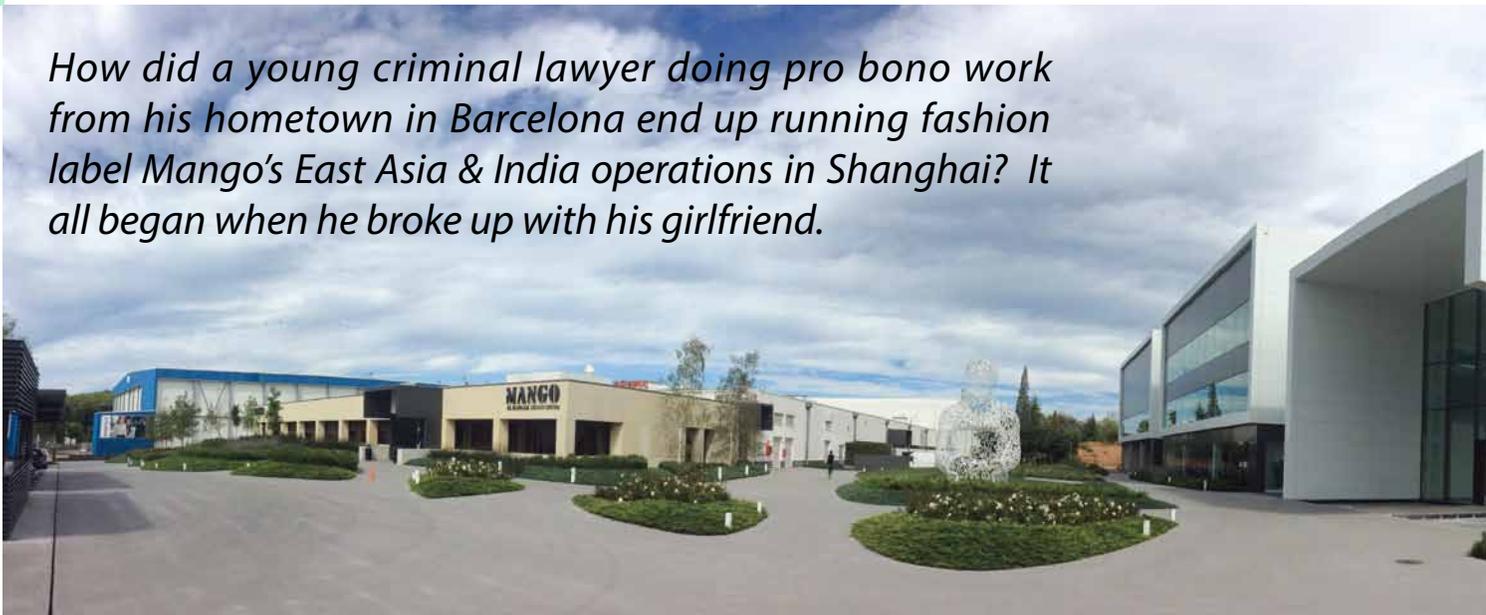


# From the Courtrooms of Barcelona to Shanghai

## ~Meet Mango's David Sancho Grau

■ By Charmaine N Clarke

*How did a young criminal lawyer doing pro bono work from his hometown in Barcelona end up running fashion label Mango's East Asia & India operations in Shanghai? It all began when he broke up with his girlfriend.*



One of the first things David Sancho Grau, Mango's CEO for East Asia & India, points out during a visit to the company's sprawling 8th floor office space in Shanghai is the wall covered with employees' photos. The people in the photos – from Greater China, Korea, India, Japan and Vietnam – are important to him. "Our photo wall is a reminder that companies are made up of human beings, they are our core asset. Plus, it's nice to feel like part of a family,"

he says with a smile.

The photos capture moments from formal events, as well as fun-filled staff parties whose themes are entirely chosen by employees. The wall, and the message it sends, sums up nicely the energy at Mango's office in the city's bustling Jingan District: youthful energy – and lots of enthusiasm. David's employees are, on average, 27 years old. That's the same age he was when he made a decision that completely changed his life. He decided he didn't want to be a lawyer anymore.

The decision wasn't an easy one. His parents had built a family firm specialising in real estate law and his two sisters had continued the business into its second generation. David never worked for the family business, instead doing *pro bono* criminal cases alongside one of his law school professors and then doing real estate law at an international firm in Barcelona. He knew deep down that he wasn't passionate about the job, but kept at it because it was what was expected of him. "I studied law because it



## David's China Business Tips



was a family tradition. But it was not my passion,” he says from a spacious meeting room in Mango’s Shanghai office. “I was supposed to be in Barcelona right now, probably married with kids, working as a lawyer with my mom, my dad and my sisters. But none of us live forever, we’re not immortals and there is a moment when you need to understand who you are, what you want in life.”

His moment of clarity came when his relationship with his then girlfriend ended. The breakup made him think

**Q: What’s your advice for someone in Europe thinking about moving to China as the next step in his career? For example, a young man in Barcelona?**

I would ask him, why not China? What’s holding you back? What’s the worst thing that could happen? That you don’t like it here and you go back to Barcelona?

**Q: What can a foreigner do to gain the respect of his Chinese team?**

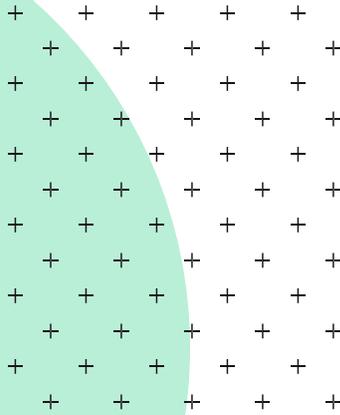
Being given a title doesn’t mean you own it. It took time for me to really gain the respect of my team members. It had nothing to do with my title. At the time I wasn’t even ready for the role; I had to grow. When your team members start voluntarily, genuinely and affectionately referring to you as ‘boss’, that’s the moment when you know that you have really gained their respect. But it takes time and you have to lead by example. It means putting in the really hard work, showing your passion for what you are all working towards, and being there for them. This isn’t easy, and it’s something I’m still learning.

**Q: How does someone reinvent himself once he is given a new role, how does he step up to the plate?**

You have to remember that even though your role or title may be different, you just have to remain a professional. Anything you do, try to do your best; that’s something that you should learn from the very beginning. Your mind-set has to be that you will always give it your best effort.

**Q: What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned over the years, both in Barcelona and in China, in terms of your professional career and the direction it has taken?**

The most important lesson I’ve learned is that regardless of your professional role or title, the important thing is to always remind yourself that you are still the same person. Whether I’m a lawyer, or whatever position I’m holding, I’m still David. My wish and hope is that my role does not overcome my persona; that I always understand who I am first as a human being. The role has to come after, not before.



about what he needed to be truly happy. He knew real estate law wasn't it. "This period of reflection helped me to really break the rules and say, 'I'm going to switch my path; I want to try the corporate world'. And it was right around that time that Mango made me an offer. I didn't know anything about fashion and I didn't even know then that it was so related to real estate," he says.

David became Mango's Legal Director in 2005 and within nine months he was appointed Director of the company's Real Estate Department, with the task of travelling to 40 countries across the globe to decide on new store locations. By 2010 he was a member of Mango's Executive Committee and promoted to Vice President of International Expansion, working with what he describes as an amazing team of commercial people to open thousands of stores. But it wasn't enough. He needed a new challenge. "I wanted to 'drive the car' not just be 'sitting in the passenger seat,'" he explains with a mischievous grin. "I was enjoying my role in the company's global expansion but I really wanted to have a macro view of the business. And that's when China came into the picture."

In 2011, he volunteered to relocate and become Mango's Greater China CEO. A large part of his decision came from his initial impression of the country, formed during his first visit in October 2006. That's when he spent a month in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai trying to understand if China was somewhere

“ I wanted to  
‘drive the car’ not  
just be ‘sitting  
in the passenger  
seat’.





Members of Mango's very youthful staff at their Shanghai office.

Mango could successfully do business. He was impressed with the energy and the work ethic; and blown away by the feeling that “everything is possible” in China. Today, he still believes this. But he does have a word of caution for those who are new to the country: check your ego at the door and be ready to learn. He learned this lesson the hard way. “When I came here in 2011, I had a hard landing,” he says, drawing on an economics term. Like others before him he thought he could do things in China just the way he did them back home. “One of the biggest lessons I had is that I’m here to learn. I’m here to adapt. I’m happy enough and lucky enough that the Chinese have accepted me. But I’m not here to change things – I’m here to learn from them, to embrace them and to add any value that

I can to really make this society and this environment better,” he says. He didn’t always think this way. In his younger days, he says, he was “less patient” and thought he had all the answers. His experience during the CEIBS Global EMBA 2012 Class taught him otherwise. Many of his classmates were first-generation entrepreneurs in their early 40s. Their humility and optimism about China’s future changed him and the way he saw the country. “They were embracing the future with so much hope, and so much positive energy because they could see themselves changing, the evolution they had experienced as the country evolved was clear. In Europe we hadn’t had this transition. At least I didn’t experience it myself,” he says. “So that was a way to understand that everything here in China

was different. The people, their attitude, the way that people were confronting the future; and that just changed the way I think and see things.”

He has learned from his past so today David’s advice for other foreigners who may be thinking of making China a part of their next career move is: the first step is all about knowing what you want. Foreigners who live and work in China for many years, he adds, tend to be in the country because they have a reason to be here. “When you decide to move to China, something is inside you that is really pushing you to do something out of the box; because it’s not like moving to

France or London, or somewhere close to your country. You’re going to be really pushed outside your comfort zone,” he says. “That’s why it’s so important to figure out what you want. What’s your dream? What are you really passionate about? Because I’ve discovered that it’s very difficult to get anywhere if you don’t follow your passion.”

For now, his primary passion is Mango. His initial task in 2011 had been to manage the company’s China operations; but three years after he arrived they asked him to add on East Asia and India. He’s proud that his team has grown with him as his responsibilities

have grown. Locals make up about 98% of his youthful 80-member team in Shanghai and David believes very strongly in grooming home-grown talent to become the next generation of Mango’s leaders in China. “I’m always in the stores because that’s where business happens between us and our customers,” he says. “But it’s also very important for me to be in the stores because every day when I wake up I remember that I have 25 and 26-year-old store managers who are opening stores in Chengdu, which is 3,000 km away. And the only way that I can gain their respect is by travelling there myself from time to time, being



“*It’s very difficult to get anywhere if you don’t follow your passion.*”



with them, understanding what's going on, how they feel, what they need."

He needs a strong team around him to handle the fast-changing China market where Mango has set itself apart from other fashion brands by optimising the franchise model that has served the company well over the last 30 years and is now doing particularly well in China. "The added value of our business in China is that while most international fast fashion brands manage their stores directly, MANGO offers highly competent players franchising opportunities in the market. China is our main growth model now and this is because with the franchise model we can access knowledge – through our Chinese partners – that as Europeans we wouldn't be able to access," he explains. In 2017, Mango plans to open a number of stores (up to 1,000 square meters in size) all across China. At the same time, it is taking full advantage of the country's booming e-commerce market (which it first entered in 2009) and the general ease of online transactions because of platforms such as WeChat and Alipay. "Our physical stores are influenced by changes in the real estate market; but if a store near you closes don't panic, just

shop online," says David with a laugh. "We have a Tmall store, and our online sales are booming. The market keeps growing a lot, particularly because of 11.11 (China's massive single's day sale event)."

The other thing David is passionate about is CEIBS. He describes his relationship with his alma mater as a "love story" and says the word that immediately comes to mind when he hears the name CEIBS is "family". His Global EMBA classmates and professors, he says, helped him through his "hard landing" and taught him so much about doing business in China. "That was my family during those two years of GEMBA; they really helped me even beyond the classroom. And that was really helpful. I'm still in China because of CEIBS. So it's a story I like to share," he says. The 22-year-old school, he adds, is unmatched in the depth of China knowledge it can provide, something that is very valuable for foreigners and Chinese alike. He has also benefited from the relationships he has built over the years, and the opportunities for on-going learning. "Several times each year the school offers the opportunity – it's not pushing us to go – to keep learning for free, to meet other peers. That's really amazing," he says. The last

event he attended on campus before our interview was the March 11 Alumni Reunion for Global EMBA and MBA. During the event, he was presented with the Networking Ambassador Award, in recognition of all he has done to build bridges in and outside of the CEIBS community. "When people ask me why I chose CEIBS for my EMBA I have a clear answer: because it's where you will learn about the real China," he says. "Plus it's not that you finish studying and that's it, the relationship is over. An amazing part of the programme is that you feel as if you are part of a huge, supportive community. It's still a relatively young school so we still feel that it's like a small family. I'm happy to see the school pursuing its own globalisation efforts with its campuses in Accra and Zurich because it is the only school that can offer such China depth. At the same time, it offers global breadth to our Chinese classmates, and achieving that balance is an impressive feat."

A few weeks after our interview, David joined a GEMBA study tour to Israel, alongside students of the current class. It was yet another opportunity for continued learning with CEIBS, as well as a chance to have a look at a potential market. The trip was just another one on David's extensive travel itinerary. He typically spends 200 days a year on the road for Mango business. With such a hectic schedule, he hasn't yet managed to find a girlfriend to replace the one whose loss triggered his career change. He jokingly suggests the answer may be in artificial intelligence (AI) – only a 'digital' girlfriend could possibly keep up with him!