



Accustomed to Trade

Peter Quinter specializes in representing importers and exporters.

While the typical lawyer's office is filled with books and paper, Peter Quinter's downtown Miami digs are brimming with merchandise, ranging from footwear to electronics. "I deal with cargo," he says of his legal specialty. "That's the business I'm in."

In 2016, the U.S. imported more than \$2.2 trillion in goods and exported \$1.5 trillion worth of merchandise. Dozens of U.S. government agencies monitor the flow of goods across the nation's borders to ensure compliance with U.S. laws and regulations.

Peter Quinter was able to get a shipment of auto parts seized by U.S. Customs at JaxPort returned to his client.

Occasionally, those agencies stop shipments that don't comply with the law. Some violations can result in monetary penalties — or jail time. That's where Quinter comes in, working to help importers and exporters settle disputes with the government and get back to business.

"The typical client is someone who's sick with a legal problem," he says. "They're not coming to me for their wellness check-up — 80% are coming in with a cough or headache. So I'm a legal doctor. I'm a problem-solver."

For one client, the problem was an abundance of bug parts in containers of rice from India. Bug fragments, in fact, are present in almost all food. While they're unavoidable to a certain degree, there are acceptable levels of contamination — and the Food and Drug Administration seizes food shipments that exceed those limits.

Quinter says his client had three options in dealing with the excess insect parts: Destroy the containers of rice, export them, or "reformulate" the product. "We proposed to sift the insect parts out of the rice," says Quinter. "The FDA said yes, and the rice eventually made its way to the shelves of local supermarkets."

Over the years, Quinter, 52, has been solving the legal problems of importers and exporters of everything from jewelry to wood flooring to airplane parts to coconut water. It's affected the way he looks at the world. At a restaurant, for example, as Quinter's dining companions peruse the menu, Quinter typically is looking on the underside of his dinner plate to see where it was manufactured.

Quinter happened into customs law after earning his law degree from American University in 1989. Though he'd planned on staying in Washington, D.C., the Coral Springs High grad returned to Miami because his father was dying of cancer. A chance encounter at the hospital with one of his dad's close

"I love what I do. I meet thousands of lawyers and represent law firms, and most lawyers are not that happy with their profession. I don't know why. I think if they did customs and trade they'd be delighted."

— Peter Quinter

friends, a Miami immigration judge, led him to apply for a position with the U.S. Customs Service in Miami, where he landed his first job as an attorney in the Office of Chief Counsel.

Quinter spent almost five years there, before moving over to Becker & Poliakoff. In 2012, he joined GrayRobinson, where he chairs the firm's customs and international trade law group and serves as the go-to lawyer for everyone from cigar importers who've run afoul of the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and

Trade Bureau to seafood importers and exporters grappling with shipments detained by the FDA.

Quinter says that the FDA, to its credit, has a sophisticated detection system for tracking and testing "high-risk" shipments among the billions of pounds of seafood imported to the U.S. each year to ensure it's not adulterated or mislabeled. But for the importer whose shipment of fresh fish is flagged and subjected to special testing, a two- to four-day delay in delivering the product can mean disaster.

"Let's say you distribute that fish before the FDA results come back: That's illegal. You get a penalty for three times the value of that shipment. If that shipment is \$50,000, you bought yourself a \$150,000 fine. After you get the fine, you hire me to reduce the fine."

While penalty and seizure cases are his bread and butter — he says he's handled more government seizure cases than any other lawyer in the U.S. — another small portion of his practice involves defending "Made in the USA" claims by U.S. exporters who come under scrutiny by

the Federal Trade Commission. He's also litigated cases on behalf of importers and customs brokers involving tariff classification, avoidance of anti-dumping duties, customs fraud and other matters.

Quinter, who competes in triathlons and hikes the Appalachian Trail in his spare time, credits much of his success to his early years with the government and his fluency in what he calls "government-speak."

"It's knowing the mission, policies and procedures of a particular agency, then knowing whom to talk to at a particular agency and most importantly, knowing what to say and how to say it in the jargon of that particular bureaucratic agency to assist my client in achieving whatever it was the client hired me to do," says Quinter.

He suspects he's also effective because he puts a human face on his cases: "Oftentimes, I'll bring the client with me to Washington, so the government doesn't just see a piece of paper. They actually understand it affects people's livelihoods." 

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