



‘If you want to change something, you have to do it together’ – World Spirits Alliance CEO Helen Medina speaks to Global Drinks Intel – Part I



By Olly Wehring — 24 February 2026 — 9 Min Read
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Earlier this month, *Global Drinks Intel* editor Olly Wehring met up with the CEO of the World Spirits Alliance, Helen Medina, to hear more about her nearly-two years at the head of the trade association.

What’s the history of the World Spirits Alliance?

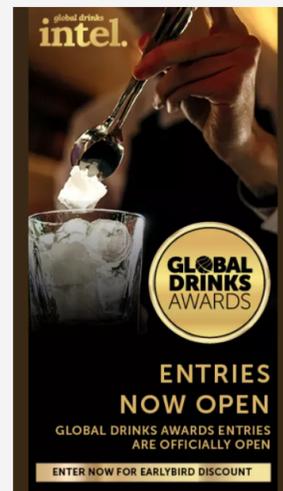
The organisation’s been around as a loose alliance for around 20 years, after the distilling community agreed it should meet up annually to exchange ideas. These meetings took place in Geneva.

In about 2019, the arrangement was formalised as a trade association in Belgium that was run through SpiritsEurope, which coordinated the national trade associations and the member companies involved. The annual meetings continued in Geneva every July, along with a cocktail hour to which policymakers were invited.

I was hired to be the WSA’s first formal CEO in 2024. One of my first tasks was to make the WSA a Geneva-based organisation. Today, the WSA has around 34 members in total.



— Helen Medina joined the World Spirits Alliance as its first CEO in April 2024 having spent the previous seven years with Nestlé as the group’s senior public affairs, government & multilateral relations manager



Which policymakers are your main focus?

In Geneva, it's the World Health Organization while in New York, it's the United Nations. Among the issues we engage over are market access, illicit trade in alcohol and alcohol-related health.

Does your remit on health not clash with that of the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD)?

It actually works quite well: We're a partner with IARD – they represent beer, wine and spirits while I coordinate the spirits side. There's also the World Brewing Alliance, based in Washington DC, then there's the International Federation of Wines & Spirits (FIVS), which concentrates on the wine side.

Among the three of us, we share the conversations that need to be had at different levels and with different government officials.

Is the WSA a lobbying organisation?

We're advocates for our industry.

What's the difference?

It's around education, such as sharing with government officials what our members are doing to reduce the harmful use of alcohol, or the reasons why we believe the illicit trade of alcohol should be tackled, or highlighting that if the tax levels on alcohol are set too high, then that invites crime.

What's the WSA's funding model?

We're funded by both national trade associations and our member companies, who have government relations teams of their own that have representatives on our steering committee.

Does the WSA have the commensurate membership of its industry to speak on behalf of the industry?

I think so. The spirits industry's very consolidated at the big, globally trading level. We're very much representative of those organisations. When it comes to the national trade associations, they're very important in their respective regions. We don't talk about the things DISCUS or SpiritsEurope have a lead on, for example.

I come from a trade association background and I understand the need to be the industry's voice. We're not getting into the SMEs, but then we're also not talking about national issues. We have the big, broad conversations. Besides, a lot of the trade associations are interested in making sure they understand where the conversation is at a global level, as it may eventually impact them at a local level.

Are there any notable absences?

We're pretty comfortable with what we have right now. I don't have a remit that needs to go out and get new members. Our current members are the people who've been engaging in Geneva every year for 20 years.

What kind of conversations are you having at the moment and with whom?

We're busy making sure we understand what the WHO is thinking, now that the US has pulled out. What are their priorities when it comes to alcohol policy?

Alongside IARD, we have a supporting role in making sure we're following things and engaging with the governments that are more open to speaking to us about what is happening at the WHO.

For example, there's a conversation going on in the WHO right now about there being no safe level of drinking alcohol. We're following that, but more immediate is a conversation within the WHO about the commercial determinants of health. There are some who believe there are commercial factors that can determine an individual's health in a negative way, which can sideline the private sector. We're really concerned about this, because our industry is a legitimate actor in tackling the harmful use of alcohol. We do a lot in this space; we're the ones talking to consumers. It's not the health authorities that have that connection with consumers.

And yet, above everything else, the brand owners' MO is to grow.

Yes, but not to cause harm, nor to make their brands look bad. That's just bad business. They all want their brands to be drunk carefully, considerately and mindfully. They don't want their brands to be tarnished.

If you want to change something, you have to do it together. If I were on the other side, I would want to work with these guys and see if I could do even more with them, rather than shun them and have a whole part of the business community that I won't work with – that just doesn't work.



Global Drinks Intel editor Olyb Wehring (left) met with Helen Medina at Wine Paris earlier this month

The illicit trade in alcohol isn't an area that the industry seems to be particularly interested in talking about.

I don't know about that. There's a lot to be said about it, at least in the policy-making space, because it's a problem. From our side, we're working with the Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade (TRACIT) and we'll be sharing a report from them into the illicit trade in alcohol soon.

We want governments to understand that this practice invites crime and that they're not getting tax from it.

Do you think governments understand this?

Yes, I do. In fact, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) has a whole programme now that looks at illicit trade, so it's become an important area for them. There's a growing interest in this space from governments.

Check back on *Global Drinks Intel* later this week for part two of our interview with Medina, in which we discuss the WSA's position on the taxation of alcohol and the relationship between the spirits industry and its peers in beer and wine.

'Today, there are more voices that are speaking against free trade' – Philippe Schaus, president of World Spirits Alliance & CEO of Moët Hennessy, speaks to Global Drinks Intel, from July 2024



By **Olly Wehring**

Olly has been reporting on the beverage industry as a B2B Journalist since 2005. He spent 18 years at Just Drinks, 16 of which as managing editor. Since joining Global Drinks Intel in 2022, he's interviewed the CEOs for brand owners including AB InBev, Campari Group, Carlsberg, Heineken and Suntory Global Spirits and has a bulging contacts book from across beverage alcohol worldwide.

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‘The industry is under pressure. And it’s not just spirits, it’s food and beverage generally’ – World Spirits Alliance CEO Helen Medina speaks to Global Drinks Intel – Part II

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In the second part of this week’s interview with the CEO of the World Spirits Alliance, Helen Medina, considers the organisation’s definition of success, her career and experience prior to starting in her current role and her view on spirits as a relative newcomer to the industry.

[Head here for the first part of the interview](#)

What’s your background prior to becoming the WSA’s CEO?

When I was working at Nestlé in the US, I was also at the US Council for International Business, which is an arm of the International Chamber of Commerce. The council is a trade association in New York that engages with international organisations such as the UN and the WTO on behalf of US business interests. I was with them for about eight years and got to know how to engage with multilateral agencies quite well.

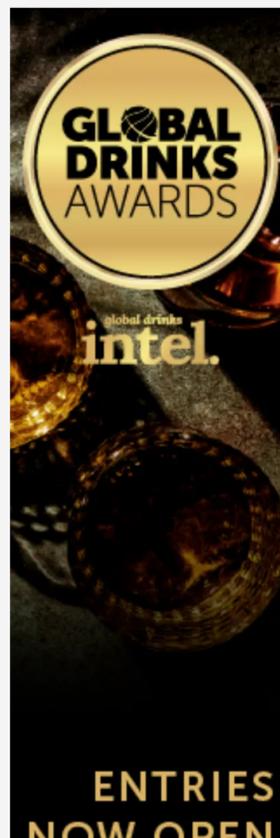
Nestlé thought I’d be useful in the global team to bring this knowledge to them, so I was in Nestlé’s global affairs team covering external engagement for about seven-and-a-half years.

When the WSA opportunity came about, it seemed right because not only did I have good knowledge of how a trade association works, I also had good knowledge of how a big multinational company makes decisions. Having had hard and complex conversations about food and drinks at Nestlé, I’m a natural fit for the World Spirits Association.

How beneficial do you feel it’s been that you didn’t have a spirits industry background?

I feel it’s been beneficial because I came to the industry fresh while bringing outside knowledge in.

At the US Council for International Business, my members were from a broad range of industries such as chemical, food, soft drinks. I haven’t been tied to one industry, so I can bring knowledge of what other industries do and how they do it. I’m not emotionally tied to one industry.





— Helen Medina joined the World Spirits Alliance as its first CEO in April 2024 having spent the previous seven years with Nestlé as the group's senior public affairs, government & multilateral relations manager



What's the organisation's definition of success?

That would be something like having an open conversation that doesn't immediately say: "You're bad, because you're spirit alcohol." We want to be on an equal footing with beer and wine when it comes to the treatment of alcohol.

We're running a campaign called 'Measure What Matters' (below), where we take a standard drink approach, based on national guidelines. If a standard drink has the same alcohol content, whether it's beer, spirits or wine, then why not tax on that concept? Why are we different?

The WSA is there to make sure that the reputation of spirits is fully understood – It's about heritage, culture, provenance and being part of the ecosystem of an economy. That's the conversation that I want to have with policymakers.

There hasn't been anyone having those conversations in Geneva for the industry before.



Do you feel the spirits industry gets on well with its peers in brewing and wine?

At the global level, we all work together in many ways. We're not competing with each other at that level. From my perspective, we get along pretty well.

What's surprised you – both positively and negatively – about the spirits industry?

Let me start with the positives! It's an amazing industry that's very well coordinated. They're really good with their messaging, and it's a fun industry!

I suppose the only thing that's disappointed me is that they didn't set up the WSA as a formal trade association before. They should have done this a long time ago – the issues they're facing have been around for a while, right?

Why do you think it's been accelerated now?

Because the industry is under pressure. And it's not just spirits; it's food and beverage generally.

Women appear to be represented quite poorly in spirits at senior executive levels.

There are women in the industry that are doing interesting things, like master distillers. But, speaking personally, I do want to cover this issue more broadly – it's an important thing to highlight, as a woman.

It's not my main remit, but I'm a brown, short woman: I'm a minority! It's pretty impressive that I'm here, right? I would say so.

Can you self-design your remit to include equality?

I think I'd like to. But, I've only been here for a year and a half and have been setting up this trade association – There's a lot to do.





Global Drinks Intel editor Olly Wehring (left) met with Helen Medina at Wine Paris earlier this month

What's your message to the spirits industry?

Just, continue to work together. Make sure you're working hard on your networks and band together with others in the industry.

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