Minutes
16th Meeting of the OAMI Users Group
Alicante, 16 March 2009, 09.30

At the invitation of the President of the Office dated 22 January, 2009, the sixteenth meeting of the OAMI Users’ Group was held on 16 March 2009. The President of the Office had invited the following non-governmental organizations with which the Office co-operates: AIM, AIPPI, APRAM, BEDA, BUSINESSEUROPE, CEFIC, CNIPA, ECTA, EFPIA, EURATEX, FEMIPI, FICPI, GRUR, ICC, ICSID, INTA, LES, MARQUES, UNION. The European Commission was also invited to send representatives.

Representatives from the following organizations attended the meeting: AIM, APRAM, BUSINESSEUROPE, CNIPA, ECTA, EFPIA, FICPI, GRUR, ICC, INTA, MARQUES, UNION, and the European Commission. The list of participants is attached to these Minutes.

Simultaneous translation was provided from and into the following languages of the Office: Spanish, German, English and French. The Office noted all interventions made and recorded them on tape. These Minutes are confined to a summary of the results of the meeting.

The Office distributed the following working documents in advance of the meeting: draft agenda for the 16th meeting: Minutes of the 15th meeting, observations from NGOs.

It was agreed during the meeting that both the minutes of the meeting and copies of the presentations would be posted on OHIM website.

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE OFFICE

1. The President of the Office welcomed all attendees.

2. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

2. The President of the Office confirmed the agenda that was submitted previously to the meeting.

3. ADOPTION OF THE MINUTES OF THE 15th MEETING

3. The President of the Office took note that in the absence of any comments, the Minutes of the 15th Meeting of the OAMI Users’ Group were adopted as contained in the working document handed to participants prior to the meeting.

4. CURRENT STATUS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE IN GENERAL

4. Mr de Boer gave a short overview of the Office results and activities in 2008. For 2008, although volumes of CTM applications started off the year above the level of 2007, by the end of the year there was a slight falling off, so that the year ended with some 87,500 applications compared with 88,500 for 2007.
5. As for 2009, Mr. de Boer mentioned that despite being too early to give any firm indications of trends for this year, the Office has seen an 18% decrease in CTM applications in January and February compared with the year before.

6. As far as processing times are concerned, there has been an acceleration in the examination of the CTM, mainly getting close to the target of applications being registered in 26 weeks in 2008. Mr. de Boer also explained that this was not the case for oppositions where only for 20% of cases the notification of the decision was taking less than 17 weeks as from the end of the adversarial part of proceedings.

7. As regards designs, the total number of design applications in 2008 was 18751 which implies a total number of 72750 designs.

8. Finally, as far as quality of decisions, the figures showed that 95% of decisions on classification complied with the criteria defined by the OHIM, 99% of the decisions on absolute grounds complied with the criteria, 96% of RCD publications and 84% of opposition decisions complied with the qualitative criteria.

9. Last 26/02, OHIM launched its new internal trade mark management information system, “Euromarc++”. The three new developed modules, examination, opposition and registry, are integrated with some 25 other systems which had to be modified as well.

The start up of this complete and important system experienced some dysfunction, affecting internal operations as well as some (external) customer services, such as CTM Download, which included erroneously sent letters and certificates, less frequent CTM online refreshments and deterioration in respect of timeliness standards.

The Office is making all possible efforts to correct this dysfunction and return to the normal situation. The users are and will be informed of the situation through the web site.

5. CHINA

10. The representative of DG Trade, Mr. Ravillard recalled, in his introduction, that China was a key trading partner for the EU (biggest source of imports into the EU) and that, among trade issues, IPR was a top priority for the EU. He then described the IPR situation in China stressing that the lack of effective IPR protection and enforcement was the main concern for European companies despite Chinese efforts. He also mentioned the customs statistics for 2007 showing that about 58% of infringing products intercepted at the EUs borders came from China.

11. As to the main weaknesses of the IP environment in China, he referred in particular to: weak deterrence; complexity of the administrative structure; burdensome judicial procedures; lack of resources; and problems at local level. He presented the EUs response to these problems.

12. Firstly, the EU has established a structured dialogue with China to try to solve IPR issues. He mentioned some limited progress obtained in this context: improvements in the new Patent Law; more staff allocated to the Chinese Trademark Office; some positive court decisions; agreement to work towards a bilateral agreement on geographical indications; some steps in Beijing Silk Market; adoption of a joint Customs Action Plan.

13. Secondly, he pointed out that the dialogue was supported by a technical co-operation programme (IPR2) of 16m € for the period 2007-2011. IPR2 activities include: legal framework; capacity building; access to information; legal procedures; and support to right holders. He underlined that IPR2 was implemented by the European Patent Office together with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce with the involvement of OHIM for the trademark and design-related parts of
the project, and EU Member States. He mentioned some activities undertaken under IPR2 notably the comparative study by OHIM with the Chinese Trademark Office to assess how the latter is managing the trademark registration and opposition procedures.

14. He also indicated that OHIM had an important role to play in design protection and referred to the OHIM contribution to the joint comments submitted by the EU to China with regard to the implementing provisions of the new Chinese Patent Law. He welcomed the strengthening of the IP expertise of the EU in Beijing with the appointment of a new colleague from OHIM (Jesus Romero Fernandez).

15. Mr. Ravillard ended his presentation by giving some indications as to the next steps of EU-China co-operation on IPR, in particular the EU-China IP Dialogue to be held in Brussels on 16-17 April 2009 and in which OHIM would participate. To conclude, he recalled that the EU was ready to help solve IPR problems of European businesses in China through the structured dialogue and/or IPR2. He insisted that the industry was invited to make more use of IPR2 opportunities and said that any proposals for activities would be welcome.

6. ALTERATIONS TO CTM FEES

16. Mr. Lawrence gave a short overview of the alteration to CTM fees and passed the floor to the Commission representative, Mr. Eichenberg, who explained both the purpose and timing of the alterations to the CTM Fees.

17. Mr. Eichenberg commented that the written procedure to get the Draft Regulation formally adopted by the COM will be launched very soon such that adoption may be expected to occur well before Easter. The good news for users is therefore that the new fees will be available earlier than originally envisaged, i.e. clearly before the 1 July. In fact it shall not take longer than a month after the date of adoption to have the new fees becoming effective. The fees for obtaining a Community trade mark are indeed going to drop significantly. Instead of EUR 1750 businesses will in future have to pay only EUR 1050 for a CTM filed on paper which corresponds to a 40% decrease. Those using electronic means will only be charged an application fee of EUR 900 in place of the total amount of EUR 1600 to be paid at present. Moreover, the individual fee for international trade mark applications and registrations designating the European Community will go down from EUR 1450 to EUR 870.

7. COOPERATION FUND

18. Mr. Lawrence explained that the amount of money dedicated to the cooperation fund requires clear control mechanisms. The OHIM is keen to emphasize that the use of the fund could imply a total change of the user experiences in dealing with IP offices in Europe. The OHIM would like to focus on funding products, tools that will simplify the interaction between users and IP offices. The OHIM is proposing a management board composed by a small group of people (grant experts, user representatives) appointed by the Office to advise the President on the use of these funds. This group is expected to define a vision of what an ideal office should do in terms of services rendered to users. From that vision the group is expected to invite projects to be launched.

19. Ms. Marijnissen from INTA asked about the group of people and the selection procedure. Mr. Lawrence explained that the idea is to compose a group of 3 or 4 people to steer and ensure that the projects submitted and funded are beneficial to the users. As regards the concrete appointment Mr. Lawrence explained that the OHIM is looking for a person with EU experience at senior level and persons from various parts of the business community involved in trade marks.
20. Mr. Pereira Da Cruz from ECTA asked about the total amount. Mr. Lawrence clarified that the amount of 50 million euros is for a period of 5 years. The purpose of the fund is not to distribute cash to national offices it is intended to share funds to develop tools for common benefit to the users Europe wide.

21. Ms. Franklin from AIM informed that AIM has proposals to be submitted to the OHIM which was welcomed by Mr. Lawrence.

22. Mr. de Boer stressed the issue of transparency.

23. Ms. Slezynska from INTA asked about the possible coexistence between the cooperation fund and the transfer of part of the renewal income to national offices. Mr. Lawrence explained that the fund is a step between now and the renewal income “diverted” to national offices.

8. TRADE MARK STUDY

24. Mr. Eichenberg explained to the audience both the purpose and state of play of the study. The intended study is only part of a global evaluation of the overall functioning of the trade mark system in Europe as a whole including national regimes which is already ongoing. The aim of this exercise is to identify potential areas for improvement, strengthening and further development of this overall system to the benefit of users.

25. The Commission started this global assessment already in 2008 with the launch of a trade mark survey within the framework of the European Business Test Panel where it could get direct feedback from businesses in Europe. The results of this survey are available on the Commission web page as well as on that of the Office.

26. As a second and major step, the EU Commission intends to assess the overall functioning of the system in more detail by commissioning a study. The Commission hopes to be able to proceed with this as soon as possible but it should be borne in mind that the tender procedures at the Commission are quite complex. Mr. Eichenberg further explained that the Commission is currently reflecting on whether it should better go for 2-3 smaller studies instead of a big one, but this has not been decided yet. The results should be available as soon as possible, i.e. preferably early in 2010. The scope of “the study” shall be broad and look into the performance of national trade mark systems and the major drivers for using them, the relation between the Community and the national systems including the contributions of Member States to the overall functioning of the CTM system, in particular in the enforcement area, and the potential for enhanced cooperation between OHIM and NPTOs. Moreover, it should analyse key areas of the CTM regime as such and submit recommendations for improvements to increase the effectiveness, efficiency and added value. Users shall be comprehensively consulted on all this, and the Commission might even carry out a wider and more specific user survey on its own for that purpose.

27. Mr. Polo from APRAM asked about the state of play of a study that was launched in 2007, has not yet started and should bring results in 2010. Mr. Polo was concerned about the main drivers of such study. Which impact will it have on the regulations? On which concrete points of both national and CTM systems will the study be focused? Mr. Eichenberg agreed with Mr. Polo that the impact on the regulations is of interest to the users and will be tackled by the Commission through the study. The Commission intends to keep users’ associations involved in the study.

28. Mr. Geoffray from APRAM raised the issue of users’ involvement in the study. Mr. Geoffray was particularly interested by the role of NGOs within this exercise. Mr. Eichenberg
explained that either the Commission or the contractor will consult NGOs who are also free to submit suggestions to the Commission.

29. Mr. George from CNIPA asked a question regarding the examination on absolute grounds by delegating such task to national offices. Will this question be dealt with by the Commission? Mr. Eichenberg replied that such issue could be considered.

30. Ms. Franklin commented that the NGOs should be involved from the earlier stage of the study in order to be able to make suggestions to any survey or analytical work that might be performed. As regards the contact points, Mr. Eichenberg confirmed that the contact point for NGOs should be the Commission itself.

9. E BUSINESS

31. Mr. Rubio gave an overview on the state of the different E business projects already launched by the Office as well as on new tools to be launched by the OHIM like E filing RCD, E payment for renewal, CTM watch, Oppo tool which is expected by the end of 2009 and which will allow to manage and exchange electronically all documents of the opposition procedure, the electronic tool for recordals, TM View, Euroclass.

32. Mr. Rubio also presented the prototypes under production by the OHIM Lab: decision template generator, examiners support tool, common security model (registration tool prior to interaction with the OHIM), common payment platform, common online platform (to access electronically and dynamically to the Bulletin), platform for online services (to replace MYPAGE) and finally Exchange Platform (document exchange platform between the parties without OHIM intervention). The projects of the Lab will be converted into concrete tools for the benefit of the users.

33. As regards the changes in CTM online because of the launching of the back office tool (EM ++) Mr. Rubio explained how the information is published in CTM online (moving from statuses to tasks and milestones) and the impact of the tool on the way the information of the concrete files is provided.

34. Mr. Polo from APRAM congratulated the Office for its efforts in providing the users with new tools to improve the registration process. Mr. Polo requested if the presentation will be made available to all users. As regards the Oppo tool, Mr. Polo requested some clarification on the functionalities and launching date of the tool. How will the Office interfere in the exchange of communication between the parties to set the deadlines? Finally, regarding the database for examination on absolute grounds, Mr. Polo suggested that external users are given access to such tool. Mr. Rubio informed that the presentation would be made available to the attendees after the meeting. As for the launching into force this should be expected end 2009 or beginning 2010. As regards the OHIM intervention, the Office will control when the information is exchanged by the parties, the deadlines will be defined automatically or controlled by the Office. As regards the absolute grounds, the tool is not a database since examiners go to several different tools. What will be made available is an automatic collection of all database results. The strategy of the Office is that any internal tool is made available for the users.

35. Ms. Sobczyk from CNIPA referred to the drawbacks of MY PAGE and more specifically to the difficulties encountered by Polish practitioners. Mr. Rubio explained that OHIM is currently working on an updated version of MY PAGE.

36. Mr. Tretter provided the audience with an overview of the new usability methodology put in place by the Office in order to involve the users from the very beginning of the concept,
development and production of new E business tools. Mr. Tretter showed concrete examples of the recent usability test regarding filing CTM goods & services.

37. Mr. Sanz de Acedo explained the programme put in place by the OHIM to train paralegals on the use of the different E business tools.

38. Mr. Schaeffer from GRUR emphasized that there are still problems faced by paralegals without entering into details on concrete difficulties. Mr. Vanaecken explained the problems faced by the users as a result of the launching of the new CTM E filing tool (Internet Explorer version and Acrobat Reader for pdfs).

10. THE COMMUNITY TRADE MARK

39. Mr. Lawrence informed the attendees on the trends for national searches. Since January 2009 there is a reduction in the total amount of searches. There is a growing gap between the search reports requested and paid for which creates some problems for the Office.

40. Ms. Eberle from ICC raised the issue of the speed of proceedings as announced in the Service Charter. According to ICC these objectives have not been met. Mr. Di Carlo replied by providing the results achieved in 2008 against the established time standards and insisted on the Office’s commitment to reach 2009 objectives and certainly in being transparent as regards progress against them.

41. As regards the delay in opposition procedures, Mr. Geoffray from APRAM explained that the delays in notifying the observations from one party to another have not improved. Concrete examples were provided. Such delays impact on the relations with agents’ clients. Whereas the decision-taking process seems to be quicker, a lot of progress needs to be done as regards notification of observations from the parties. Ms. Schmidt replied that such cases should not happen and users should immediately contact either the Information Centre to get information on the state of the file or the Complaints Unit in case of delays.

42. Mr. Overath from UNION raised the issue of legalisation of documents both for trade marks and designs. Additional information for legalization outside Spain was requested by UNION. Mr. Di Carlo explained that some countries require the legalization of certified copies issued by the Office. The EU Commission issued a procedure so that the Head of EU Commission Representation in Spain is entitled to legalize such documents. Some countries are still unhappy with such solution and request further authentification by their embassy in Spain. The OHIM together with the EU Commission will look into the matter in order to simplify the system. Mr. Stone from MARQUES insisted on the fact that the issue comes up more than expected. Ms. Franklin explained that the problem is serious since many companies are registering national to circumvent the issue since legalisation of documents is quicker going national.

43. Mr. Höhfeld from MARQUES referred to the issue of class headings as indicated by the NGO in the paper submitted prior to the meeting and attached as annex to the agenda. Mr. O’Reilly requested the views of the other NGOs if any. Mr. Geoffray from APRAM confirmed that the APRAM is not in favour of the system put in place by the OHIM since this creates legal uncertainty. APRAM therefore agrees with MARQUES’ position. AIM indicated that this might be an issue for the study. According to CNIPA representative there is a strong support from the UK practitioners to MARQUES’ position. UNION also supports MARQUES. INTA has no formal position on the issue. Mr. O’Reilly explained that such practice exists from 1996. There is no clear solution to the issue since there is no agreement with national offices on this point. One important issue would be the impact of the change on the
Community trade marks on the register since their scope of protection would be affected. As regards the legal uncertainty, Mr. O’Reilly has doubts on such uncertainty since no Court case seems to confirm this. Mr. Höhfeld proposed an in-depth discussion, MARQUES was not questioned about existing decisions in order to analyse the issue. Mr. Höhfeld referred to several cases where the issue was directly dealt with and asked again what OHIM is concretely doing to solve this? Mr. O’Reilly confirmed that the only option is discussion and that the risk on existing registrations is relevant.

44. As regards the issue of acquired distinctiveness, Mr. O’Reilly referred to the Glaverbel case. This case has not changed OHIM practice with regard to prove distinctiveness. The meaning of the whole Community still creates difficulties. In OHIM guidelines, it is stated that instead of looking at countries, markets should be considered.

45. On the issue of opposition Ms. Schmidt agreed with the position stated by INTA. Related opposition proceedings should be handled together by the same examiner.

46. On the question of OHIM database on similarity of goods. Such database will primarily give instructions to examiners on what is similar or dissimilar in order to ensure consistency in opposition and cancellation cases. That is being implemented in IT terms by the development of a tool to feed and search a database. The OHIM is not going to load into the database every single comparison. The OHIM will put in place a system to ensure that what is inserted in the database is relevant for further cases. On the external side, the philosophy of the Office is to make it available to our users. Once the tool – that will be put in place internally in September 09 - has been tested and loaded, it will be made available to external users.

47. Mr. Höhfeld asked about examiners being bound by the tool. Mr. O’Reilly insisted that it is necessary that examiners are bound by the database. Mr. Stone pointed out that similarity of goods might change from one country to another and can also evolve over time. Therefore the binding effect might have a negative impact on the decision itself. Mr. O’Reilly replied insisting on the need of consistency. Even if markets change, and goods evolve, the tool should remain binding for examiners provided it is updated. The tool is not intended to be simply a reference tool.

48. As far as use is concerned, Ms. Franklin from AIM asked if OHIM has any intention of changing the rules on use. Mr. O’Reilly confirmed that the OHIM has no intention to change its practice.

49. As regards renewals, Mr. O’Reilly confirmed that the OHIM sends the reminder six months before. The renewal only takes place when the mark has expired. An early payment at the beginning of the 6 months period does not exclude a possible withdrawal of the CTM that might impact on the renewal. The OHIM does not notify people if they have not paid after the expiry. The OHIM only notifies at the expiration of the grace period. The OHIM has no intention to submit such reminders.

11. THE COMMUNITY DESIGN

50. Mr. Stone from MARQUES expressed the interest of MARQUES for transparency. Following the reply provided by the OHIM, there seems to be a difference of interpretation between OHIM and MARQUES. Some design applications made in good faith have been rejected by the OHIM and this information is not made available to users. MARQUES would like OHIM to help users understand OHIMs view with regard to the publication of some rejected applications. MARQUES considers that there are ways around so that some basic information is available giving academics and other people the opportunity to contact the applicant to understand why the application was rejected. Mr. Rodinger replied that the reply provided in writing is intended to get feedback from other NGOs. The issue should also be
discussed at the next Liaison Meeting. The OHIM commits itself to think about the issue and look for possible work around solutions.

51. With respect to the Locarno Classification, Mr. Stone explained the situation: namely that Locarno classifies by what it does whereas a design classifies by what they look like. No action is required from OHIM.

52. Finally, as far as erroneous dates in official publication of RCDs, Mr. Overath explained that UNION has pointed out several cases of errors with regard to deferred publications. Mr. Rodinger explained that OHIM had not been aware of such errors. Once aware of them (last quarter of 2008) OHIM immediately proceeded to correct them. No more errors should occur. The problem is solved.

12. THE BOARDS OF APPEAL

53. Mr. Maier pointed out that 2008 was a very busy year. Despite a reduction of 7% in the total number of cases filed before the Boards, the Boards have made more decisions than in 2007 (1866 compared to 1776).


55. As regards the confirmation rate of decisions of the first instance in the Office, it was 82% in ex parte cases and 66% in inter partes cases. Confirmation of Boards’ decisions in the CFI has gone down slightly. In total, 74% of decisions of the Boards were confirmed by the CFI in their entirety.

56. A new IT system has been launched for the Boards which implies some time to get adapted to the new tools. Some time will be needed to get back to the normal speed of decision making. It is expected that if the system responds to the expectations, things will be back to normal by the end of May.

57. There will be a change in the members of the Boards as two new nominees will take up their duties during the year to replace outgoing members.

13. MISCELLANEOUS

58. Mr. Di Carlo updated the attendees on the NGO’s observer status in OHIM Administrative Board meetings by explaining the criteria taken into account to select the NGOs (participation at Users Group meetings, size of the NGOs, large representation of CTM/RCD users) The participation will be covered by the rules of procedure of the Administrative Board (art. 4 of the Rules of Procedure has been modified). According to the rules, NGOs representatives can intervene in the meeting after the members of the Board have concluded the discussion on each agenda item. This of course applies only to items in the agenda which are not confidential. Each NGO can only be represented by one person. The next meeting of the administrative board will be held on the 4th and 5th of May 2009.

59. Mr. Sanz de Acedo gave a short summary of the complaints filed in 2008. 196 complaints in 2008, more than 95% dealt with within 15 working days. Main concerns: opposition files, CTM E filing, CTM classification and limitations, fee payment and opposition decision delays.

60. Mr. Lawrence informed the audience about the visit from a consulting firm mandated by the EU Commission to evaluate the role of EU agencies and therefore OHIM. Some
NGOs might be contacted following OHIM indications of the contact persons from all NGOs participating at the OAMI Users’ Group.
OAMI Users Group, 16 March 2009
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