

Walking tall

From international trade to startup support, Fredericton's Laura O'Brien has perfected the art of the deal — and does it in style

By Victoria Dekker

Laura O'Brien has a confession: she might think stiletto, but she's most comfortable in flats. Don't let her footwear fool you. The founder and chief strategist behind Fredericton-based business consulting firm Think Stiletto is as razor-sharp in the board room as the pointiest pair of heels.

O'Brien is a well-known female business leader in the Fredericton area. Her resume is impressive: six different roles (from management to marketing) with Cadillac Fairview; manager of Fredericton's research and technology-based Knowledge Park; and president of the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce.

O'Brien launched Think Stiletto in 2010. The firm is a labour of her love of working in government relations, advocacy and tech. Ready to make a change after 20 years in the field, she wasn't particularly interested in moving to another local company and she wanted to stay in New Brunswick. Launching her own firm just made sense, she says, "I took all the things I really liked and started a business with them."

Today, Think Stiletto specializes in innovation, commercialization and international partnership development. The group — whose clients include Community Business Development Corporations, Biopolynet, the Province of New Brunswick and the Mentra Co-operative — operates as a consortium of consultants across the country, working with groups to identify new markets, support business expansion, export-readiness, strategy and analysis.

This past August, O'Brien was handed the Startup Canada Woman Entrepreneur Award, a distinction that's awarded annually to business leaders who exemplify the spirit of Canadian entrepreneurship. A bit taken aback by the news at first, O'Brien says she originally made a few 'shallow pool' remarks about having been selected, but was quickly corrected by her colleagues into embracing the honour.

"We do that too much as women. We need to embrace these things. It's humbling, because you don't really think that what you're doing is extraordinary until you start to talk about it and say 'wow, we are doing some really cool things. I guess this is a little different from what other people are doing.'"

O'Brien recognizes the value of strong female leadership. A member of an informal social group of women business professionals known in local circles as "The Sisterhood," O'Brien and her friends are committed to enriching economic growth and prosperity in the region.

"When you build your networks, you really create long-lasting friendships. ...As a result, you end up being drawn to very like-minded people who are very engaged in the community and the political landscape."

While she values the support of the status-quo challenging, forward-thinking women in her circle, O'Brien says she's less inclined to call herself a feminist.

"I don't believe we should just look to women for guidance and inspiration. I think there are a lot of strong men who embrace and cherish strong women," O'Brien says. "I've had as many male mentors in my career as I have women. I think it's important to have both. It's not about being the best female, it's about being the best person."

The feminine energy of her business gives it a certain edge, though, she says. While 'Stiletto' references her shoe fetish, the word has a double meaning: dagger.

"What we're really trying to do is help people look beyond the obvious solutions and obvious choice and think about their businesses differently," she said. "... If people can't handle pink, they can't handle me. We want to work with people who don't want the safe route and think about things differently and better."



Laura O'Brien
founder and chief strategist
Think Stiletto

Poetry prowess

Since O'Brien was 12, she's kept a private poetry journal. Scribbling down stanzas offers her a creative, therapeutic outlet. Cocooning with a pen and paper helps her recharge, she says. "It's important to pause and reflect, because it allows us to think sharper and clearer, both in work and in life."

Shoe fanatic

While her favourite soles are made by Michael Kors, O'Brien says she's long-coveted Carrie Bradshaw's go-to stilettos — Manolo Blahniks. She'll probably never buy herself a pair, though. Averaging about \$1,500, they aren't particularly practical.

Wanderlust

O'Brien's passion for working in international development was sparked by a slightly self-serving motive: she loves to travel. She's trotted much of Europe, North and South America, and stocked up on plenty of Italian boots on her last trip.

