

Top Female Entrepreneurs Offer Words of Wisdom and Insight into Self-employment

Women's Enterprise Centre attended a panel discussion held by [Women's Executive Network](#), in Vancouver on June 12th. Over one hundred women gathered to hear the wisdom and inspiration of three exceptional female entrepreneurs. As part of the Women's Executive Network breakfast series, a panel discussion explored the pitfalls and rewards of launching a business as a woman.

Sandra Wilson, founder of Robeez Footwear Ltd., Laura Hansen, owner of Image Group Inc. and Sherrin Western, founder of Shervin Communications Inc. gathered to share their stories and insights into the world of self-employment.

Sandra Wilson recognized a unique niche market in 1994 and started her company Robeez Footwear Ltd. in her home basement. Robeez is now the worldwide leader in leather soft-soled baby-booties, selling in over 7000 stores. Wilson has been acknowledged with Rotman's Canadian Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Award and BCIT's Distinguished Alumni Award - to name a couple. In September 2006, Wilson made headlines when she sold Robeez to The Stride Rite Corporation for \$30.5 million.

"One of the great benefits of being an entrepreneur is that you have control of your own destiny. The more effort and hard-work you put into it, the further that you can go. I never dreamed that we would build Robeez to the level that we did," says Wilson. "We really maintained focus on one product, even though we had many opportunities to branch out. We realized we had a winner with the booties and had to capitalize on that winner."

Laura Hansen is the sole owner and President of Image Group Inc, one of Canada's largest firms in the industry with 20 staff and annual sales exceeding \$7 million. She has also been ranked 50th in the latest Profit Magazine Top 100 Women Entrepreneurs.

When asked about the key to her success, Hansen offered some words of wisdom. "The most important thing was that we stayed true to the industry we were in. You have to focus on what you're doing and stay with it. Improve on your product and customer service, because it's the small things at the end of the day that make your company successful."

Hansen added that although self-employment is difficult, there are many advantages. "You get to set the hours your work, the dress code and the mood of the office. It's the control you have; being in charge of your day, your destiny, and even where you want to be in five years. It's really a great thing!"

Sherrin Western, founder of Shervin Communications has grown her company with her husband Kevin Western from a home-based business in 1992 to one of the top 25 design firms in the province. The accelerated growth of Shervin Communications and Western's focus on giving back to the community has lead Western to receive its most recent award as 2006 Small Business of the Year at the Burnaby Business Excellence Award.

“What really helped me as an entrepreneur was not having a clue about what was in front of me,” laughs Western. “I think if we knew we would have quit. It takes blind passion and dedication to push you through the hard-times. All too often people see opportunities, but the bottom line is that you need to love what you do. You have to love it or the 18 hours a day won’t feel good and having no vacations won’t feel good. For long term internal happiness you need to love what you do.”

When asked for words of advice to future entrepreneurs, these three successful women all offered the same guidance: network, network and network!

Western sums-up their sentiments. “Relationships are the key to everything you do. Network to build real relationships that will last, have people who remind you why you’re doing what you do and have people who believe in you, even when you don’t.”

Women’s Enterprise Centre serves women across the province from its offices in Kelowna, Vancouver and Victoria. For more information call 1-800-643-7014 or visit www.womensenterprise.ca.