

Inspiration:

It began at the kitchen table, in a shared apartment of an old house in James Bay, Victoria. With a stack of sketches, a sewing machine, some material, and a deep well of inspiration, Laura Bemister launched Muse Clothing Company. Ten years later, powered by hard work and creative thinking, her company continues to expand. Laura Bemister is a petite, energetic, self-assured woman in her early 40s with a sparkly enthusiasm, a great big smile, and a ready laugh. Optimistic, cheerful and driven, she epitomizes the enthusiastic self-starter.

Her interest in fashion can be traced back to when she was just five years old. One day her mother asked if she liked her new dress and Laura replied that she liked the colour, but not the design. By seven, Laura was creating detailed drawings of gowns of her own. Raised with her two brothers in Kingfisher, a rural hamlet on Mable Lake in the North Okanagan, Laura was a creative child, who spent a lot of unstructured time outdoors. Later, she studied acting for film and television at the Vancouver Film School, and worked in the hospitality industry.

Carrying her dream of being a dress designer with her, she moved to Bamfield on the west coast of Vancouver Island where she helped her mother open a gift shop. Enthralled by the coastal landscape, she learned how to paint, dabbled in tee-shirt design and came up with the name for her future clothing company. She decided to move to Victoria, and her mother encouraged her by telling her, "You are going to be a dress designer sweetheart and your Muse Clothing Company is going to be very successful."

Laura's resolve gelled and her vision for her company came into focus when she was working in Victoria's design district at the *Union Pacific Coffee Shop*. One day, a customer, who had become a friend, asked her what it was she wanted to do with her life, telling her that whatever it was she had all the ingredients to be successful at it. Laura recalls that when he posed the question, "What is the trunk of your tree?" she knew she could not wait any longer.

Getting Started:

Laura purchased a workbook entitled, *Creating Your Business: Success By Design* from the Women's Enterprise Centre in Victoria. She worked through all the exercises in this book, and learned what she could about the garment industry, and the local market.

Funding her start-up was another challenge. Material needed to be sourced and purchased, a pattern maker hired to help her ready her designs for manufacturing, and then there are the ongoing manufacturing and marketing costs, including the hiring of photographers and models. Laura started putting all her available time and her tips as a server into the business. She is also quick to acknowledge the help and support of family and friends. Her father and his partner, and a few family friends, invested in her company, her friends modelled for her in the initial stages of the business, and her father continues to help her update the website. She has also found the Victoria business community to be friendly, and eager to support the development of local products. The hard work continues, and Laura still puts in some hours as a server, but she is proud of the fact that she is now out of debt, and owns all her own stock.

The Dresses:

Muse dresses are made of a bamboo cotton blend and are now manufactured in Vancouver. The bamboo makes the material soft and breathable and the cotton makes it strong. Nine years after purchasing them, women are still wearing them, and Laura hasn't had a single complaint or return.

She characterizes the look of her dresses as "classy". They feature simple classic lines, with no frills, zippers and fiddly bits. She currently has 20 different designs in 10 different colours, and all of her dresses are comfortable and eminently versatile. They can be dressed up with boots, scarves, and tights for a sophisticated, formal look, or dressed down with sandals for a trip to the market.

Laura's sense of design is inspired by the natural environment and the West Coast lifestyle she embraces. Similarly, her typical clients are active, self-aware west coast women: women who are intelligent and independent-thinking, who value the natural environment, and like to shop locally - women, who, like Laura, are interested in building community. Laura sees her own creative impulse as motivated by "the desire to integrate spirit into life, and to free the self".

To Laura, women's fashion is about celebrating the self, and about celebrating being female. Ultimately, however, it is about transformation. Laura loves the transformation that occurs when a woman tries on one of her dresses and feels comfortable and confident in it. She is proud that her dresses fit so beautifully and is always inspired when she sees how the simple lines and the gem-tones of one of her dresses bring out the natural beauty of the woman wearing the dress.

As she says on her Facebook page, "It fills my heart to see women walk away from me feeling beautiful in their own skin. It's part of my bliss." If her company were to have a slogan, Laura says, it would be "Feel beautiful".

Marketing Strategies:

Laura's approach to marketing began with the dynamic concept of drawing on the inspiration of muses - not the nine muses in Greek mythology, though coincidentally Laura launched nine designs in her first year - but women she knows. Laura's friends were the inspiration and models for her first designs, and she named the dresses after them. She continues to design dresses with specific women in mind, marketing the dresses by name.

On her website you click on the image of the model wearing a dress you like to "find your muse" or style then choose your color. Laura began selling her dresses through house party sales, advertising events by word of mouth.

Her sales grew steadily, and as her designs and stock increased, she put design aside for a while to focus her energies on marketing, with the intent of expanding into boutiques.

This proved to be a challenge. She met with some success in Victoria, Vancouver, and Montreal, but when she hired two sales agents to sell her dresses to boutiques in smaller communities in BC, they returned to say they could not sell them.

At first, Laura was discouraged. This setback, however, led to some difficult soul searching that helped her improve her business. Laura learned that valuing her successes and maintaining perspective are key to weathering the ups and downs of a business where progress sometimes feels like it is two steps forward, one step back. She had to remind herself that it is a tough economy, and that she has many happy clients and a great product. And, as a friend pointed out to her, a realistic indication of her progress is the fact that her sales are growing each year.

Ultimately, Laura decided that selling her dresses online and direct selling to individual, and groups of women is a better way for her to market her dresses and is more in line with her philosophy of personalized service, and the fostering of community.

She continues to refine her group sales approach, which she now calls parlour parties. In typical Laura style, these are fun events. Clients are able to see her dresses in all styles and colours. Laura has found that clients enjoy the experience, and usually find something they love. Many bring her new clients. As one recent customer told her, "I don't like shopping, but this is so wonderful. I love this!"

Expansion:

Her sales strategy is to expand by partnering with “Ambassadors” who will introduce her dress line to new clients, and promote her website.

Meanwhile, Laura continues to gain exposure. She recently relocated to Vancouver and is now also selling her own scarves, and does not rule out expanding into other fashion items in the future.

Secrets to Success:

Laura has learned to trust her business instincts. She compares growing her business to a spider web in which the many inter-dependent strands constitute the strength of the web. Though she still works part-time in the hospitality industry, every day she works diligently on some aspect of her company.

Laura is continually sharpening her skills to improve and grow her business, and has come to believe that the simplest thing is almost always the right thing. She looks at what works and thinks of how she can make it even better, and she keeps the focus on what she can do to meet the needs of her clients. She also believes in hiring people she trusts and then letting them do what they do best to help promote her business.

For example, she loves to be part of the artistic collaboration involved in a fashion shoot, where she joins photographers, choreographers and models to produce something creative. One thing is for certain, Muse Clothing Company will continue to be muse-driven.

“I will always do this!”, says Laura, who loves the hard work involved in her business, and who draws inspiration, not only from the memory of her first Muse, her mother, but daily from the world around her, and from her friends. Laura continues to find Muses to inspire her creations, and is clearly becoming one herself.