

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Caroline Neville: *President of Cosmetic Executive Women (UK)*

- 1942** Born in Lambeth, London
- 1962** Founded Caroline Neville Associates, a Public Relations and Marketing Agency specializing in fashion, beauty, luxury goods and lifestyle brands.
- 1986** Founded Interlink, an association of international PR agencies spanning Europe, the US and Japan. Still in place today.
- 1993** Her son, Dominic McCarthy, joined the Agency
- 1995** Made a Freeman of the City of London and Member of the Worshipful Company of Framework Knitters
- 1996** Appointed President of Cosmetic Executive Women (UK), a non-profit trade association of over 1000 executives in the beauty, cosmetics, fragrance, and related industries
- 2002** The Agency rebranded itself to become Neville McCarthy Associates and her son Dominic became Managing Director
- 2007** Her daughter, Louisa McCarthy, joined the Agency full time, now heading up the Fashion and Luxury brand division
- 2012** The Agency celebrated fifty years in business

I like to talk about the ‘founding mothers’ of the cosmetics industry. These are: Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden, who both became enormously rich and successful. Then came the legendary Mrs Estée Lauder and Mary Kay who was one of the first to do direct selling of beauty products.

Both Rubenstein and Arden have since been acquired. But it was women who started them and drove their success.

It’s still true to say that our industry is dominated by men at the top and, well, that’s not okay with the Board of CEW or with our membership. Maybe the men cottoned on to what a successful industry it is and decided that they wanted to run it.

Cosmetic Executive Women [CEW] was founded in the States in 1954 in order to bring together women who were working in the cosmetics industry at executive level. At first, it really just consisted of women chatting over white wine spritzers.

Fast-forward to now, and it’s a highly structured, powerful organisation with 6,000 members in the US, 1,000 members in the UK and around 600 in France.

I became the third president in 1996 and I’ve held the presidency since then. Our main role is to help bring women in the cosmetics industry through the ranks. Education, recognition and philanthropy: those are our main aims.

CEW is like the glue that holds the beauty industry together. When things took a down turn for people, we sent a note out to all our members saying that if they had lost their jobs or were under threat of redundancy, then they only had to let us know and we would extend their membership for free and give them free tickets to all mentoring and events so that they could network and seek new employment.

That's what the organisation is all about – giving a helping hand. I can't tell you how many glowing, thankful emails come in saying, "I've just got back into work after however many years. C.E.W has opened a new chapter for me." The women in our industry are very generous and like to give back whenever they can.

The work is endless: We have a team now, of five, and we all work flat out. We make our funds through membership, the selling of tickets and sponsorship. There's a constant stream of new brands that need profiles and connections... They have to have set up for themselves initially, but we try to help them whenever we can. If they only have one outlet and don't know where to go next, for instance, we try to introduce them to the relevant members who can help them. We also try to get them a mentor from our board or from within the membership.

The funny thing is, we've been doing this for ages. When I read about 'women's networks' today as if they're some new thing that's just landed from another planet, it makes me laugh.

The first office I had was above a Chinese restaurant in Soho. The smells from the restaurant would waft upstairs to the tiny, postage-stamp sized space I had. You pulled one of those slide-across walls and a table came down and the two of you sat facing the wall.

I had originally started up in business, on my own, from my parents' council house in Wandsworth. I would be having a bath, my mother would pick up the phone and she'd say, "Oh, you have to hang on, Caroline is in the bath." Not the most professional impression. So that had to end very quickly.

When I was in my first office, the journalist Ann Leslie wrote a series called 'The Deep Enders' on the people in swinging London who were really making it in commerce.

She came and interviewed in my tiny little office and when the piece went out, my business trebled. I had to take my cousin away from art school to join me. I had to quickly find new offices because there wasn't space in this two-seater shoebox that we had.

I felt the power of the press personally early on in my own career: It was a fantastic learning curve. I couldn't take all the clients that were offered to me. I had to be quite selective and to staff up. Also, remember, there were only a few of us running this type of specialist fashion agency in the 60s and we all knew and respected each other.

The second thing that happened to me was this. One of my first clients was a dress company called Marlborough Dresses. I did a photo-shoot for them and booked a model called Patty Boyd. She was a very pretty, toothy girl in the Shrimpton mould.

So I had this set of pictures of her in a pretty dress and a headscarf and the next day I see in the paper: Patty Boyd engaged to George Harrison. I thought, *Jesus Christ I've got these pictures.*

I guess I am a salesperson at heart because I got these pictures out to the newspapers, and remember this was before the internet so I had to deliver them all or post them, and suddenly they were everywhere. And everyone wanted that dress. That was the second time I felt the power of the press and knew how it could sell things.

I have a lot of energy. I drive people mad because I am such a perfectionist. I hate it when people say to me, "Well we did it like that last time." I always say, "Because we did it like that last time, that's one of the reasons to try something fresh. Let's always be open, let's see what we can do and push the boundaries. Don't over-promise, but let's see what we can do."

I always felt that I could sell anything once I understood it. And I enjoyed the business. It's given me a wonderful life. I've met and worked for some wonderful people and I've met some horrible people. I mean I've had some difficult, difficult clients. But you know what? You learn from that and it makes you stronger.

It has been tough at times but I am very single minded, though I can be moved from a position. I have a good, gut feeling about people and businesses. Sometimes, I've walked away from clients or opportunities because I just knew it wouldn't be right for me, or my lifestyle, because I had a husband and family in the background.

Like many of the companies started by the 'founding mothers', mine has become a family business. I have always looked for the longer-term opportunity never just the immediate opportunity. I could have sold my business three times over but I never did because I enjoyed what I was doing and, frankly, I did not want to work for some huge organisation who would bring in rigid working practises. All the fun and the challenges would have gone for me.

Ninety-nine per cent of the people I employed were women and most of them were working mothers. Some would leave early to collect their children from school. I was a working mother too and I knew, and still know now, what they're up against.

I've tended to run the company in a very maternal way. I must have the biggest alumni of girls who've worked here and gone on to wonderful jobs all over the world, and I cared about them all and I still see many of them. Even more rewarding is that I am now seeing their daughters coming in to the

company for work-experience. Of course we have lots of young men working for us now, this was a major change that my son Dominic bought in.

I was always working for my living. I didn't come from a background of lots of money. I didn't have any security other than a secure family life but that was a real help - I was able to progress with a family atmosphere behind me.

Neither my husband or I went to university or had any private education. We felt, very early on, that the most important thing was to give our children the best education that we could in order for them to stand on their own two feet in the world. They were both educated at public school here, both were boarders, then they went to university in America. Some people were critical about that last step and asked, "Why there?" And my answer was, "Well, why not?"

I felt in the UK private school system you learned to play the game, in the USA you learn to play to win. Apart from which, the list of courses are much broader and I thought it was good for both of the children to live in a different country for a time. Of course we missed them but we were only a phone call away and we visited all the time. We also had good friends in the States who we could rely on to keep an eye on them.

We never worked on the basis of what we could leave them in a will, you have to equip them to make their own way in the world. Of course, they're our most prized possessions and that's how it should be.

There have been times when I've been extremely pressed for free time. I was managing director of the company till about ten years ago, and I was running CEW too.

You don't particularly want to take work home with you. My daughter refuses to discuss anything at the dinner table. If she comes for supper on a Friday night she will not talk about anything that happened at the office. My husband now refuses to talk about anything that happens at CEW. He loves it, but he wants it to be kept entirely separate from our home life. They are right of course but sometimes it's difficult.

Do you know what I've decided just recently? I will be longer accept any appointments at eight thirty in the morning. I have had it. Somebody asked me recently and I said, "My office doesn't open till 9.30 and I'm not rolling in till ten."

I still go to evening events that are relevant to the business but I make a speedy exit. It's important that I should know what's going on but you have to get things into perspective. It's not going to be my whole focus. You have to concentrate, and you have to devote yourself to the business in work hours, but it's not going to be my whole at this stage in my life.

I insist that my staff leave the office on time. I think that by getting out, seeing things and experiencing life, they are better employees. I also think

they should take their proper holidays and they shouldn't take their bloody blackberries with them – they should just switch off.

In our work, you need to have a great general knowledge. You need to know your history too, because history affects everything. And your brain needs to be reasonably clear. So having a healthy life outside of your work is, in fact, beneficial to your work.

There's such a lot of overload in young people's lives today. I don't want to see a young, healthy woman saying she's so stressed that she can't think straight. I think that's terrible. I've spoken to CEW members who have tears in their eyes because they can't juggle their children and their small company. They have to make some lifestyle choices, and some of them are difficult. It's not an easy time now, but you cannot juggle everything.

My husband has always kept my feet on the ground. I had a very, very busy life. When you go home, what you want is some warmth and some comfort. I always needed the house to be in good shape. If I came home and it was all over the place, I would have found it quite difficult. I had to come home into quiet and peace.

If my feet are aching, I love to come home, put them up and have my husband rub them. And he really does that, still, if I've had a stressful day.

I've been married now for forty-eight years. People say it's an achievement, but it's been about give and take. The business that I started afforded us a very, very nice lifestyle. We've worked together as partners and we're compatible. My marriage is still the most important thing to me, along with the children.

The children have now grown up but the people I now feel responsible for are the CEW (UK) members. I have a lot of young women who I speak to regularly in order to help them forward. My door has always been open to them.

I also don't want the beauty industry to be viewed as being just about lipstick and lycra and fluffiness. Because it isn't. It puts 17 billion pounds into the British economy.

Women today get bombarded with pictures of celebrities. And that's fine. It has its place. But really and truly, I think that the beauty industry is about something more profound.

Women are going to be in work for longer than ever before. I'm seventy. I'm out there and working full time. I know lots of women who are in the same position, they are working longer because they enjoy it or they need a little more cash.

So I'm surrounded, in this office, by women in their twenties and thirties. I don't want to compete with them. But I want to go out every day, feeling confident about the way I look and to face whatever comes along.

It doesn't matter if my hair is greyer or I have more wrinkles on my face. Why shouldn't I feel confident? Why shouldn't I try to look as good as I can for my age? We're going to have to deal with that, as lots more women stay in the workplace. We should be pleased that we have experienced wise role models amongst us.

Every week, now, I have young men asking to join CEW. They can't, at the moment, the CEW (UK) board won't allow male members until there are more women in top jobs. I think I'm the lone voice for male membership. I'd love to have all the male heads of companies join because if they do, they have to sign up for bringing women through the ranks. But either way, it is wonderful how many men now want to hear the secrets of *women's* success in our industry.