

If The Shoe Fits...

...it can help you climb that corporate ladder, says this shining success

By Chris Daniel

PENNY SIMMONS' business Penny Loafers Shoe Shine Company has buffed the footwear of Prime Minister Paul Martin, news broadcaster Peter Mansbridge and almost every top dog of Canada's big banks. They've all perched atop her big, comfy leather chairs, where for \$6 their shoes are pampered complete with a cleaning concoction Simmons keeps secret.

In Toronto's underground retail maze PATH, where Simmons operates her three locations (Fairmont Royal York, First Canadian Place and Toronto-Dominion Centre, where her location is about to move beside the upscale eatery Bymark), her success story has almost become folklore: Harry Rosen {copy: do you think we need a descriptor} gave Simmons, a self-described "not so good" broker with Nesbitt Thomson Bongard, her break by allowing her into his store to polish shoes, then sans charge. "Three months later, I was like the relative who wouldn't go home," says Simmons.

This summer, Penny Loafers toasted its 10 anniversary and Simmons her 50th birthday. Over the years, Simmons has learned much about entrepreneurship: dealing with difficult, often fickle landlords; keeping ahead of sneaky comers, including one recently warned by Simmons' lawyer to stop copying the Penny Loafers identity; and finding new revenue streams, such as servicing events like the Bell Celebrity Golf Classic. Her success afforded Simmons to purchase her own home several years ago.

Above all, however, this single woman has learned about men (and, yes, most of her customers are guys). "I can often guess a man's profession just by looking at his shoes," she says. In the corporate world, she says shoes can distinguish the real deals from the pretenders; the wrong pair can even slip up a suit's ascent of the corporate ladder.

The most dapper footwear, she says, is hands-down shell cordovan, a tanned burgundy which uses leather taken from horse hide (most leathers are made from cow hides). "These guys represent a very elitist group," says Simmons. "They know they're wearing shell cordovan and wear it proudly." That's in part because an Allen-Edmonds shell cordovan, for instance, costs \$600—a good \$200 more than other quality dress shoes. Another smart-looking style is the Hastings, a more modern shoe made from one piece of leather, meaning it has no seams. "It suggests



someone who is youthful, a little different," she says, although it is also typical of divorcees looking for rebirth.

Too often, however, she says young stockbroker-types wear Prada shoes with ultra pointy tips that scream 'Look at me' but don't really suggest a man of substance. These guys are typically young, or trying to seem younger, "and own a hot car," says Simmons. Others mistakenly think they can get away with wearing a cheap pair of shoes, or footwear ripped at the seams and marked up from wear and tear. On many occasions, embarrassed junior executives have been ordered by their bosses to Penny Loafers. Shoddy footwear "is a sign that you don't care, but also of arrogance," says Simmons, who says if a man's shoes are messy chances are he's careless with other aspects of his life. "Like palm pilots and cell phones, clean shoes are a power accessory." ■